

STOLEN HEARTS

JAGGER COLE

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A DARK BEST FRIEND'S OLDER BROTHER MAFIA
ROMANCE

DARK HEARTS

BOOK FIVE

JAGGER COLE

Stolen Hearts

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Eat Your Young - Hozier

Bath Salts - Highly Suspect

Hurt Feelings - Mac Miller

Watching from a Distance - David Ramirez

Paris - The Chainsmokers

Always Been You - Jessie Murph

Home - HAIM

Part Time Lovers - Hazlett

What If I Love You - Gatlin

The Way - Manchester Orchestra

Believe - Mumford & Sons

But You - Alexandra Savior

Lovesong - The Cure

Girls Just Want to Have Fun - Cyndi Lauper

She's Always a Woman - Billy Joel

Wrecking Ball - Miley Cyrus

(I've Had) The Time Of My Life - Bill Medley, Jennifer
Warnes

Do It Now - Madi Diaz

Wake Me - Bleachers

Hearts Like Ours - The Naked And Famous

Time After Time - Lennon Stella

Dreams - The Cranberries

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TRIGGER WARNING

This book contains darker themes and graphic depictions of past trauma, including mentions of PTSD and SA. While these scenes were written to create a more vivid, in-depth story, they may be triggering to some readers. Please read with that in mind.

CALLIE

A CRUSH IS LIKE A DISEASE.

A cancer. A malignant growth that twists through and poisons your very blood until there's not a breath you take or a thought you have that doesn't revolve around it.

Books, movies, pop songs... They lied to me my entire life. Because a crush isn't cute butterflies and blushing smiles. It's torture. It's pain. It's the sensation of a knife twisting violently in your heart every time they—the object of your obsessive affection—walks into the room. Or speaks. Or, worst of all, looks in your direction.

A crush drains the life out of you. It sucks the oxygen from your lungs and leaves you gasping for air they took with them. A crush lets the unspoken words dangle on your desperate lips, forever unsaid and turning to ash in your mouth.

A crush doesn't lift you up or give you wings.

A crush *crushes* you.

To dust.

Until there's nothing left.

Mine is a man who has been many different things. To his boss, he's a soldier who became second-in-command of the

Kildare Irish mafia family. To my two best friends, Neve and Eilish Kildare, he started as a bodyguard and became a figure who is effectively their older brother. To my family, he was once the enemy, and then became a friend.

But to me, Castle James started as a stranger and became my *everything*.

He's the reason I changed my outfit five times before dinner tonight. His is the face I think of when my favorite dumb, sappy love songs come on the radio. The hands I imagine in every dark, whimpering, shuddering fantasy.

Tonight, I was going to tell him *all* of that.

I have no idea *how*, of course. The amount of liquid courage it would have taken might have legit killed me, so maybe it's best that he was caught up with work and couldn't make it. But still, his absence...

Stings.

I frown into the glass in my hand, swirling the wine in the bottom of it and watching the lights of New York twinkle across the rim. I'm at the far end of the grounds of our family home—an English manor that sits sprawled atop a forty-story building overlooking Central Park South. Now, hours after dinner has finished, I'm perched on the edge of the roof. My bare feet kick at the lawn under them, and the early fall air pebbles my skin beneath the robe I'm wearing as I twist to gaze out at the city.

This is the other problem with crushes: they hurt when they're near you. But they hurt worse when they're *not*.

It's Sunday, and as she does every other week, my grandmother Dimitra hosted a family dinner tonight. Since my oldest brother Ares—who runs our family empire—married

Neve Kildare and joined our family to theirs, the Kildares have been included in the invitation as well. It's not like everyone from both families *always* comes to *every* dinner. I mean, life happens. And slowly but surely, my friends and my family have become enmeshed in their own storylines and as a result can't always make it.

Ares found his one and only in Neve. Neve's and her sister Eilish's uncle, Cillian Kildare, who currently runs the entire Kildare family, found Una. She and Cillian actually weren't here tonight either, as they're on a belated extended honeymoon in Ireland. Even my wild-man, agent-of-chaos brother, Hades, found love, with Elsa.

And now, we're down another one, now that Eilish—my best friend in the world—seems to be starting her own story with Gavan Tsarenko, the head of the powerful Reznikov Bratva. She also wasn't here for family dinner tonight.

But while I would have liked Eilish, Cillian, and Una to be here, they aren't the ones I truly missed. They're not the ones I pined for. They aren't the ones I had *plans* for tonight.

No, that honor goes to one man.

Castle.

Who didn't come tonight.

Fuck.

There are a million other reasons that I feel like the world is grinding me under its heel right now. In the last year, my family has almost gone to war twice—once with the Irish mafia, and more recently, with the Russian Bratva. These shakeups have almost taken two of my brothers and three of my best friends from me. In fact, the only reason we're *not* at

war with the Russians right now is that my very best friend in the world seems to be *dating* the head of the Reznikov Bratva.

But above all, the dread that I should be drowning in is the fact that in a few short weeks, when I turn twenty-one, I'll be forced to marry a disgusting pig of a man almost three times my age.

Such is the lot of mafia princesses.

In my case, I was promised to Luca Carveli when I was fourteen. My late father, Aeneas Drakos, sealed that fate for me when he and Luca signed a blood-marker—a mafia contract inked in literal blood that is as iron-clad as it gets. Dear old dad got control of a lucrative drug smuggling pipeline.

Luca got *me*...as soon as I turn twenty-one.

In the last few months, Ares has been hitting back as hard as he can trying to break the deal. But Luca has been completely unmoved by any of my brother's offers.

The clock is ticking. Loudly.

But, at least right now, that isn't the weight I feel stealing the air from my lungs.

That honor goes to *him*. My all-consuming crush. My darkest, forbidden fantasy.

Maybe it's the looming marriage to Luca. Maybe it's seeing all my friends and family finding love.

Maybe I just can't take it anymore. Maybe more than a year of my heart skipping a beat and a feeling somewhere between nausea and euphoria slamming into me every single time he walks into the room has pushed me to the limit.

Maybe *that's* why I was so determined to tell him tonight.

But now, thinking about it over my fourth or possibly fifth glass of wine, after a shower and changing for bed, all the bravado I was feeling earlier today is gone.

What the fuck did I think I was going to do? Tell the lethally gorgeous, six-foot-five, built like sin, twelve-years-older-than-me *god* of a man that I “have a crush” on him? That I can’t stop thinking about him? That he’s the subject of every single fantasy I have? That no other guy in the world even makes me flinch, because he’s all I can fixate on?

Yeah, *no*.

Because that would be supremely fucking pathetic, you dorkity-dork.

It’s not the first time I’ve said “today’s the day” to myself, six inches in front of a mirror. It won’t be the last, either. Probably. It’s just that tonight felt...I don’t know. Different. More real.

Like I might not *get* another chance.

Maybe all of this is because of the last grains of sand in my hourglass before I become the property of Luca Carveli are trickling down.

I exhale, draining the last of my glass as I stab my gaze out over Central Park.

“You’re too close to the edge.”

Fuck. Me.

My heart skips a beat. And it’s not just because someone’s just scared the absolute fuck out of me while I’m sitting forty stories above Central Park South.

It’s him.

My core tightens, and a shiver ripples down my spine as my bottom lip retreats between my teeth. Slowly, I turn, and another flame of something heated flickers deep inside me as my eyes lock onto his piercing blue ones.

The air seems to grow thin as it's sucked from my very lungs. It's like gravity itself becomes skewed, as if his sheer power has a profound effect on the laws of physics as he steps out of the dark pathway into the little clearing by the edge of the roof.

The blonde hair. The chiseled jaw. The superhero physique beneath dark jeans, a white t-shirt, and an open leather jacket. If you showed the average person a picture of this man and told them you were attracted to him, they'd assume it was because of his god-like, all-American looks.

And, I mean, it's not *not* that. But it's more what I see beneath it all that really does it for me.

I don't think he knows I see it. I don't think he's aware that *anyone* sees it, because the mask he wears is a very, very good one.

But I do. I've peeked between the seams and under the edges. And what I've seen...

Intrigues me. Ensnares me. It's possibly what's turned what should merely be a harmless physical attraction into something so deep it hurts.

It's the darkness I see under that hero facade.

That's my downfall. That's what's swallowed me whole.

"Callie."

I gulp, focusing on him and the moment, plastering a hopefully not-too-giddy smile on my face.

“I think you missed dinner.”

He smirks, which is so fucking completely unfair, because this man has a Brando smirk. And if you know...*you know*.

“Yup, seems that way.” His brow furrows. “Seriously, get off the edge, Callie. You’re too close.”

I roll my eyes. “You’d have had an aneurism ten years ago, when Hades and I used to do *cartwheels* on the edge when Ya-ya wasn’t looking.”

Ya-ya, as in my grandmother.

“Yeah, well, when you were ten—”

For some reason, the age thing makes me flinch. He already probably looks at me like I’m this fucking kid. Ten years ago, I literally *was*. Whereas with him, ten years ago, he was still older than I am now. An Army Ranger doing God-knows-what, out God-knows-where in the world.

And here I am talking about doing fucking cartwheels.

Jesus Christ, am I pathetic, or am I pathetic.

“I don’t think you were *drinking*.” His gorgeous blue eyes land darkly on the empty glass in my hand.

“Grape juice.”

He allows a tiny lift in one corner of his lips.

“I’m not going to rat you out, relax.”

Another nod to my age—as in he won’t rat me out to Ares, who seems to have a stick up his ass about me drinking before the age of twenty-one. The irony of him being the leader of a literal criminal empire and worrying about that seems to be lost on him.

“But I *do* need you to get off the ledge.”

I grin again. “Okay, fine.”

I hop off it and onto the grass, letting my bare feet curl into it. I love this spot on the roof because it really feels like you’re on the edge of the world. I can still see the lights of the main house glittering in the pool. But this spot is mostly obscured by trees and rose bushes.

My heart thuds a little louder in my ears.

I’m suddenly aware that, number one, I am drunker than I thought I was. And number two, I’m alone in a secluded rose garden on the edge of the world with the man who’s had my heart in his hands for over a year.

The early fall air pricks my skin again, and I am suddenly reminded of one last detail: I’ve come out here directly after my post-dinner shower, in nothing more than a robe and panties.

Just Castle and me.

Alone.

At the edge of the world.

“How was it?”

I blink, ripped from my floaty, swirly thoughts. “Hmm?”

I’m staring right at him, my eyes absolutely locked with his. Like I’m rooted to the spot and unable to look away, even if I wanted to.

“Dinner,” he growls quietly. “How was it? I had some shit for Cillian I had to wrap up.”

“Oh. Yeah. Yeah, it was good.”

He nods, bringing up a muscled arm and sipping what looks like whiskey—neat—from the glass in his hand.

“What are you doing here?”

In my head, that was supposed to sound cool and maybe a little sultry. Like a “So, what brings *you* around here, sailor?” Instead, it comes out like an accusation. I cringe.

“I mean—it’s great that you’re here.”

God fucking dammit.

“What I meant was—”

“I had some paperwork to give Ares on the West Side development project.” He says it with an easy smile, like he’s happy to put me out of my misery. “Thought I might catch him after dinner. But it looks like he and Neve have already gone home.”

“Yeah, probably.”

He nods, shifting his gaze out to the city as he takes another sip. “Shit, I’d never leave this roof if I’d grown up here.”

I grin. “Meh, it loses its appeal after a while.”

“There’s no way that’s true.”

“It’s not. Just trying to make you feel better.”

He grins, shaking his head as he takes another slow sip.

My heart thuds faster, and the alcohol courses through my veins together with the feeling that the last few grains of sand are about to drop through the hourglass.

That I’m running out of runway.

That soon, I’ll turn into a pumpkin forever.

And there won’t be any more chances to take.

I think that’s what ultimately does it: the feeling that this is the end. That I’m on the very brink. That this moment is *the*

moment.

Do or do not, Luke. There is no try.

My skin throbs with energy as I stare at Castle in profile against the lights of New York. I watch the way his eyes drag across the city skyline. The way his perfect lips sip from his glass, and the way his jaw and throat ripple as he swallows.

“Can I get a sip of that?”

He was gorgeous enough in profile. When he turns to look me in the eye, it’s almost more than I can take. Like I’m a mere mortal who has no business looking directly into a god’s face.

His brows furrow. “You sort of...look like you’ve had enough for tonight.”

“And you sort of don’t look like my dad.”

His brow cocks. One corner of his lips smirks, just a little.

“Here.”

He passes me the glass. I resist the urge to bite my lip when my fingers brush his. I turn to look out over the city. Not to take in the view.

To gather my courage.

To tell myself I can do this. That I’m not still the kid sister of the men he happens to do business with. That I’m not still the little friend of the girls he once played bodyguard to.

That I’m a woman now, with adult needs and urges.

Urges that all revolve around him.

It’s now or never.

I bring the glass to my lips. The thought was to down the whole thing in one gulp, but—real talk—whiskey is *not* my

drink. I only get half of it down before the fire roars in my gut and burns the corners of my eyes.

“*Easy, Callie.*”

He reaches for the glass back, but I turn away from him, facing the city lights square on as I throw back my head and gulp down the last of the liquid courage. Behind me, Castle whistles low as I set the empty glass down on the edge of the roof.

“What on earth possessed you to do—”

“This.”

I don’t think. I just do. My hands drop to the sash at the waist of my robe. And then in one motion, I’m turning, tugging, and letting the entire silky thing fall to the grass at my feet.

And then, for the first time ever, I’m standing in front of a man in just my panties.

Castle’s a seasoned wartime veteran, and I feel a sense of pride that I actually manage to stun him. His eyes harden to stone. His jaw grinds as his gaze slips slowly from my face, over my breasts, my nipples puckered in the evening air, across my tanned skin, and finally down between my legs.

I start to walk toward him, hearing nothing but the outrageously loud thudding of my own heart pounding in my ears. Castle starts to open his mouth. But before he can say anything, I close the final distance between us.

And suddenly, I’m touching a god.

He towers over me by well over a foot. But I move as if I’ve practiced this. I rise up onto my tiptoes as I grab the front of his t-shirt, yank him down to me, tilt my head to the side, and crush my lips to his.

And suddenly, it's as if I'm flying.

Reality blurs. My heart beats so hard against my chest, it must be tattooing the very skin of his. My pulse roars in my ears, drowning out everything else.

Nothing else matters. Nothing else is important except for the perfect way his lips sear to mine. The way they taste like whiskey and mint. The way the sheer power of him suddenly envelops me like a dark cloud as the bergamot and woody smell of him invades my every sense, almost bringing me to my knees.

The way I jolt with sheer desire when his hand suddenly comes up to wrap around my throat and my jaw as I lose myself in his kiss.

Until suddenly, the hand tightens. The arm muscles flex.

And suddenly, almost violently, he's shoving me away from him.

I gasp as he breaks the kiss. As the moment shatters into shards of glass at my bare feet. As his gorgeous eyes pierce into mine like twin steel blue blades.

"No," he snaps coldly.

I almost choke. My throat tightens, as if his strong fingers were still wrapped around it. The air leaves my lungs, and his all-consuming warmth leaves me as he steps away from me.

"That cannot, and *will not*, ever. Happen. Again."

I literally wince. As if every word is a backhand slap across the face.

"Castle—"

"Say. Fucking. *Yes*," he rasps. "Say yes, you understand."

“I’m sorry, I—”

I gasp, my eyes bulging wide as he surges against me, his hand grabbing my jaw tightly as he lifts my face to the roaring storm in his eyes and the glaring, cold look on his beautiful, beautiful face.

“This did not happen,” he growls. *“Do. You. Fucking. Under. Stand.”*

I nod, feeling the world turn to dust at my feet.

“Say it out fucking loud, Callie,” he hisses. *“I need to hear you fucking say it.”*

“Okay!” I choke. *“Yes, I understand.”*

His hand drops from my jaw as if my skin has burned him. He steps away from me, taking his heat and his power with him.

“Good.” His eyes hold mine, narrowing darkly as his mouth hardens. *“Good.”*

And then without another word, the man who holds my heart in his hands turns and storms out into the night.

Still holding it; leaving a trail of bloody drips in his wake as he disappears into the darkness.

I stole that kiss. And it wasn’t mine to take.

But the truth is, I only did it because he stole my heart first.

Neither was ours for the taking.

But both come with a no return policy.

Come what may.

CASTLE

MEMORY IS A MOTHERFUCKER.

It's cold and cruel. Because memory has the *ability* to soothe, comfort, and amuse. But instead, most of the time—at least in my experience—it torments and taunts instead.

My memories are filled with ghosts. With battles and bloodshed. With the faces of the brothers in arms I watched die in front of me. With rage, and pain, and scars no one ever sees—and even if they did, couldn't possibly understand.

With a grunt, I grit my teeth as my fist connects with the bag with a satisfying thud. *Jab jab duck dodge, jab left, jab right, hard left hook.* Sweat pours down my face and my bare chest, stinging my eyes. But I just shake it off. I just set my jaw a little tighter as I dodge the nonexistent counterpunch and then sink my right fist into the imaginary bastard's teeth.

Pushing myself to the absolute limit, especially with boxing, is my usual go-to for exorcising those demons of the past.

And I don't care what they say: *every* vet has demons they need to cut, burn, or scream out of their system.

When I first left the Rangers almost ten years ago, I had... *other* avenues of escape. Drugs. Drink. Women who didn't give a fuck about me besides my scars.

But then I found boxing. And *that* was the exorcism I'd been looking for. That was my channel to vent my fury and my pain. A physical release that cocaine, painkillers, and booze could only hope to imitate.

I grit my teeth, hurling one last volley of punches before I let out a roar and drop to my knees. My muscles ache and burn. My bare chest heaves as the sweat drips over the scars and the tattoos.

I may have gotten into boxing to escape the emotional battle wounds that followed me home. But that's not what I'm trying to escape today.

Today's exorcism is about something else entirely.

Something small, soft, innocent, and very, very forbidden.

Calliope Drakos.

My jaw tightens as the memory of last night slams into me all over again: the way her robe dropped to her feet. The way the glittering lights of the city glowed across her perfect, soft, tanned skin and curves. The way she clung to me so desperately. The way she stood on her tiptoes and tilted her head to the side.

The way she tasted.

The way she made the softest little sound in the world when I grabbed her by the throat.

But most heart-stopping of all—even more than seeing her disrobe in front of me—was the way she fucking looked at me with those big, bright blue eyes with so much yearning and hope. Like she thought I could save her.

My lips twist bitterly.

I'm no hero. Even if everyone thinks I am.

I exhale as I roughly shove my hands up my face and into my hair.

She tasted like cherries and sin.

And I need—*need*—to get that, and the memory of everything that happened on that rooftop last night, out of my system. Forever.

It's not that I've never noticed Callie before in that way. I mean it would be impossible *not* to. The big blue eyes that almost look supernatural against her dark lashes and tanned Mediterranean skin. The pouty lips and soft chin. The long dark hair down to the middle of her back, or the way she's so fucking tiny and petite, and yet *still* seems to be ninety-percent legs.

No, it's not that I haven't noticed Callie.

It's that I *can't* notice Callie. Not like...that.

Not when she's twelve fucking years younger than me, for Christ's sake. Not when she's Ares, Hades, Kratos, and Deimos' little sister. Not when she's best friends with Neve and Eilish, the women I basically see as my *own* little sisters.

I'm not blind. I've seen the way Callie looks at me. But I never thought much of it. She's a flirt. A tease. A party girl who grew up in wealth and privilege as the Greek Mafia princess she is, not to mention the baby of the family *and* the only girl, with four big brothers.

But even if none of that was the case: even if she wasn't who she was, and was age appropriate, and wasn't best friends with my little almost-sisters—even *then*?

There's still the inescapable fact that I'm *me*.

Broken. Haunted by the memories of the wars I fought in, not to mention the battles I bled in years before I was old enough to pick up a gun for my country. Damaged and supremely fucked up from a childhood I'd rather forget and an adolescence that almost destroyed me, before growing into a man under a foreign sun fighting foreign wars.

There's no place for a woman in any of that mess.

I'm about to get up and start exorcising my demons again with the practice bag when something fuzzy brushes up against my sweaty back. I turn, rolling my eyes at the tubby little black and white fur ball who looks up at me with a mix of boredom and begging.

"Well, color me fucking shocked," I mutter with a shake of my head. "You're hungry. *Again.*"

Bones, Una's cat, meows insistently as he butts his head into my side. With Cillian and Una finally taking a belated and extended honeymoon in Ireland, Bones got dumped on me back here at the Kildare family brownstone.

Ten years ago, when I first came to this house, my jaw was never off the ground. I grew up with jack *shit*, in a hovel of a basement apartment in Alphabet City, amongst the crackheads and worse.

Then Cillian found me after I got back from serving with the Rangers—half-broken, half-mad—and gave me a job I never asked for. Said job involved coming *here*, to the stunning, gilded brownstone on the Upper East Side, which would become my new home.

These days, it's a whole lot quieter.

When I first started as Neve and Eilish's bodyguard all those years ago, it was them, myself, and even occasionally Declan

Kildare, Neve and Eilish's father and Cillian's half-brother. After Declan was killed, Cillian moved to New York and into the brownstone as well.

Now, Neve is gone, living with Ares.

Cillian is gone too, living at his new place in Brooklyn with Una.

Even Eilish is half gone, spending a ton of time with Gavan Tsarenko—and that's a whole *other* thing I need to figure out how to deal with, even if I'm not technically her bodyguard anymore.

But that leaves this house decidedly quieter. Now, it's just me here rattling around in the huge old Kildare brownstone. And I'm not even a fucking Kildare.

Bones meows again.

"Okay, fine," I grumble, scooping him up as I stand and head out the door of the gym. In the kitchen, I plop a spoonful of wet food into Bones' bowl, followed by a sprinkling of the dry stuff on top, which is his favorite combo.

"You're a spoiled little shit, you know that, right?" I smirk as I lean against the fridge and open a bottle of water.

My phone buzzes.

"How's the old country?"

Cillian chuckles quietly. "It's Ireland. It's great. How's the home front?"

"All good here."

While he's been away, I've basically been running things over here for Cillian. Ten years ago, when he found me broken, closed-off, and emotionally dead, I first started as Neve and

Eilish's bodyguard. But as they got older, and had less need for me, I moved into other aspects of the Kildare empire.

Today, I'm basically Cillian's number two. And that's a responsibility I take very, very seriously.

"Liam McCarthy wanted to set up a meeting about some business expansion ideas he has for Boston."

The McCarthys are one of the Kildare vassal families, and strong allies.

"What are your thoughts?"

I arch a brow. "My thoughts are...for you to have a meeting with him when you get back."

Cillian chuckles. "I want to know what *your* thoughts on his idea are."

I pause before answering. "It's a solid strategy, I think. The area of Boston he's looking at is recently contested ground. It does border territory controlled by the Byrne family, but Liam is in talks with them, and they seem amicable."

"So would you okay the move?"

I nod slowly, sipping my water. "I think I would. Strategically, it's a very good idea. The Byrnes could be a powerful ally, and having the McCarthys in Boston shores up numbers and keeps the balance between Irish and Italian. Micky O'Sullivan's crew down in Southie might put up a stink about it, but he doesn't have the manpower or the resources to hang onto the territory Liam's looking at. Yeah, I'd recommend okaying his plan."

Cillian exhales slowly. "Okay. Make it happen."

My brows knit. "What?"

“Make it happen. Have a meet with Liam, loop in Colm Byrne if he’s available, and give it the stamp of approval.”

I open my mouth to say something, but then I shut it again.

“Anything else going on I should know about?”

I shake my head. “Nope, that’s the big one. Everything else I’ve just been handling on a case-by-case basis.” I frown again. “Look, I haven’t wanted to bother you on your honeymoon. But I can loop you in more on these smaller decisions—”

“Not necessary,” he growls quietly. “I trust you. And it’s good practice.”

I arch a brow. “For?”

“For when you take over as head of the Kildare family.”

I freeze. The kitchen goes pin-drop silent as I blink.

“Excuse me?”

Cillian chuckles deeply. “Yeah. Thought that might catch you off-guard.”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, well, funny joke.”

“You know I’ve never been a very funny man, Castle,” Cillian grunts. “And I can promise you, I haven’t been writing new material in Ireland. That wasn’t a joke.”

I go silent again for a few seconds.

“Cillian, what the fuck are you talking about?”

He exhales again. “I’m talking about *perspective*. Look, Castle, I’m forty-fucking-one years old. For the first time in my life, there’s a peace inside of me. That roaring in my head has—for *once*—finally shut the fuck up.”

I smile wryly. “Una?”

“Bingo,” he growls.

I more than most people know the sort of violence and darkness that swirls around inside Cillian. By most psychiatric evaluations, the man is literally a psychopath. But he’s capable of human interaction. And, clearly, of love.

“I’ve never known this sort of quiet in my fucked-up head, Castle,” he sighs. “And the organization is in a great place. We’re secure. We’re invested the right way. We’ve made good alliances. And on top of all that, Neve is living her own life now, with Ares. And Eilish…”

I grit my teeth. “Yeah, we need to have a serious conversation about Gavan fucking Tsarenko.”

Cillian chuckles. “You’re not a fan.”

“I’m more than slightly *wary* of a man who once stuck guns in all of our faces and whose lieutenant almost blew Eilish, Dimitra, and Callie to kingdom come.” I frown. “Do *you* trust him?”

“I’m not sure if I *like* him yet,” Cillian grunts. “But Eilish clearly does, and she’s a good judge of character. Believe me, though; if I didn’t *trust* him with my niece, he’d already have a slit throat.”

I nod grimly.

“Look, we’re not making this decision right now. But you’ve been a loyal and formidable number two for years, Castle. You know the ins and outs of our family and this empire, and you’re a strong, capable leader. If I’m going to retire, I can’t think of anyone else I’d want at the helm.”

I scowl. “What about bloodlines?”

“Overrated and usually disappointing, in my experience,” he snorts. “And besides, what bloodline? Neve has married into the Drakos family. Eilish sure looks like she’s going to be learning Russian at some point soon.”

“What about you and Una?”

Cillian pauses. For a second, I wonder if I’ve crossed a line.

“Look, Cil, I’m just saying—”

“Una and I probably won’t be having children, Castle,” he says quietly. “Not with the darkness that flows in my veins. And not with the childhoods both of us had. We have each other, and that’s enough for us.”

I take a slow breath. “Cillian, I’m not a Kildare—”

“You might as well be. You’re essentially a brother to Neve and Eilish. And you’re the closest thing to a nephew or a kid brother I’ll ever have.”

“*I have* always thought of you like a psycho uncle.”

He chuckles. “Well, there you go. Oh, I’m not making any of this public yet, by the way.”

I nod. “Understood.”

“And obviously, we need to have a longer conversation. But when I get back in a few weeks, I’d like us to sit down and really talk this through.”

I nod again, in a sort of stunned silence.

“By the way, Una says to not feed Bones so much. Eilish said he’s getting fat.”

“Hey, c’mon. He’s on a bulk. I’ve gotta have him in fighting shape before you get back.”

Cillian chuckles. “Take care, Castle. Say hi to my nieces for me.”

“Hi to Una. Later, Cil.” I glance at Bones as I hang up the phone. “Better enjoy, pal. That’s it until dinner.”

I hear the front door to the brownstone open and then slam shut, followed by the sound of footsteps. Suddenly, Eilish walks into the kitchen and jumps in surprise.

“Oh! Hey! Didn’t realize you were home!”

“Yeah, I—”

And that’s when the second person, the one who came in *with* Eilish, stumbles into the kitchen and comes to a dead stop. Her big blue eyes go wide as saucers, and her face turns a shade of crimson as her surprised gaze locks with mine.

Callie.

Callie, whose mouth I now know the taste of. Callie, whose body I’m suddenly well too aware of beneath the jean shorts and over-sized t-shirt she’s currently wearing.

I watch her throat work as she swallows. I watch her eyes drop down across my bare chest, watching the heat rise in her cheeks before she awkwardly rips her gaze away.

“Missed you last night at Sunday dinner, Blondie.” I pull my inappropriate thoughts away from Callie as my gaze shifts to Eilish.

Eilish snorts. “Bullshit. You weren’t there, either.”

I shrug. “I swung by late.” I turn and nod pointedly at Callie. “Caught *this* one a couple too many drinks deep.”

Callie’s face sizzles. I don’t look away. I pointedly meet her gaze dead-on, hoping she gets what I’m trying to convey

without words.

There. That's your out. Your excuse. Take it.

Because what happened last night has got to go away.

It has to. For about a hundred different reasons. And I'm giving her the means to do it. Right here and now, she can just explain it all away as being drunk. I mean, I don't know if she was, exactly. But I did taste alcohol on her lips.

"Isn't that right, Callie?" I say slowly, looking right at her.

She can say she had too many, and that'll be the end of it. I'll never bring it up again, and after she gets over the embarrassment or awkwardness or whatever, it'll just be a thing that never happened.

Eilish laughs, turning to glance at her friend, amusement dancing in her eyes. "Oh yeah?"

Say yes, I want to snarl right in her face. Say. Fucking. Yes. And this whole thing goes aw—

"No."

She's not averting her gaze. Sure, her face has a heat to it, creeping up her cheeks. But those big blue eyes with the long dark lashes don't even blink as they lock right on mine.

"I wasn't drunk."

My jaw ticks.

Goddammit.

Goddamn you.

"Wait, so, you're coming today, right?!"

I stare at Callie another half second before I frown and pull my gaze to Eilish.

“What?”

“Are you coming with us?”

My brow furrows. “Coming with you where?”

She rolls her eyes. “Oh my God, did you not see my texts?”

“Apparently not. I was working out and then on the phone with Cillian. Where exactly are we going?”

“Paris!” she blurts.

Wait. What?

“Excuse me?”

“We’re going to fucking PARIS!” she screams gleefully. “Remember how I was going to take the girls to the Metropolitan Museum of Art tonight for Elsa’s birthday? For the private tour of the Impressionist wing, and dinner?”

I nod, frowning.

“Well, they had to cancel it last minute this morning, which sucks. But *then* Gavan apparently knows the organizers of the Bijou Gala at the Musée d’Orsay in Paris, which is *tonight*, and he got us in! We’re leaving in like an hour on his private plane! That why we’re here, to raid my closet upstairs. C’mon! Get ready!”

I scowl. “But isn’t that like the most exclusive art fundraising gala thing in the world?”

“Totally. It books out a year in advance, and tickets are a hundred grand each.”

My brows lift. “And Gavan got exactly *who* into this thing?”

“All of us! Callie, me, Elsa, Nora, Nora’s friend Galina, Neve, Ares, Hades...and *you!*”

She's hyper, and gushing. And...glowing.

I groan to myself. As suspicious as I still am of Gavan and his motives...I've never seen Eilish like this. So happy. So...all of it.

But I'm sure as *shit* not letting her fly overseas with him without me there, too.

"Well? C'mon, Castle! You coming?"

My jaw grinds. My eyes dart for a second to Callie, where they lock with hers for a moment before I yank my gaze back to Eilish.

"Yeah," I nod. "Yeah, I'm coming."

"Eee!!!" she squeals, giving me a huge hug before she grabs Callie's hand and yanks her after her out of the kitchen.

That is, until they get to the doorway, when Callie stops and glances back at me. Our eyes lock once more, and I see her mouth open and then shut, before she sucks her lower lip between her teeth in a way that has fire roaring in my chest.

Then they're gone, leaving me standing there still trying to convince myself the reason I'm going to Paris is to protect Eilish.

CALLIE

CRUISING forty thousand feet above the Atlantic Ocean, I know my predominant thoughts *should* be on the fact that my best friend is obviously head over heels in love with a fearsome Bratva kingpin.

Like full-on, mushy, so sweet it might give you diabetes *in love*.

And yes, maybe I'm still a little worried when it comes to Gavan and his intentions for my friend. Especially since she's already confessed that their relationship started as something purely and completely sexual in nature.

But now? It's pretty clear just by looking at them that there's something much, much bigger going on between them. It's in the possessive way Gavan holds Eilish's waist or tangles his fingers in the back of her hair. In the way that even though he's invited us all on his insanely luxe private jet for this trip to freaking *Paris*—where he's even paying for the hotel rooms, apparently—he still always tends to Eilish first before seeing if anyone else needs anything.

There's danger in Gavan's eyes. But also a singular devotion to my friend.

It's sickeningly cute.

I tell myself that the devotion I see in Gavan's eyes is why I'm not sitting here worrying about Eilish. But the truth is, I'm not worrying about her because my thoughts are completely and utterly stuck on you-know-who.

You-know-who, who has fastidiously avoided even *looking* at me since we got in the cars Gavan sent to take us to the airport. Who hasn't even glanced at me once since we settled into our seats. The fucker's even sitting with his back to me, typing out what are probably work texts and emails on his phone.

It's pointed. It's purposeful.

It's cringeworthy embarrassing, the way I completely humiliated myself last night. The way I just...*threw* myself at him and kissed him like that.

Again, what the hell was I thinking? That this god of a man was going to take one look at some twenty-year old mafia princess and sweep her off her feet? The only thing last night accomplished was it made it abundantly clear to me how fucking stupid my little fantasies were. And even clearer how he thinks of me and views me.

I'm not something he would ever want. I'm Eilish's little friend. I'm Ares' kid sister.

That's it.

I groan, sinking into my seat as I replay the exchange in the kitchen of the Kildare family home this morning. Castle clearly was giving me an out. He laid that excuse right at my fucking feet, gift-wrapped and with a big bow on it and everything.

And I didn't take it. Knowingly and willingly, I straight up rejected that offer of a way out. For the last few hours, I've

been trying to figure out why the actual hell I didn't just suck it up and lean into the lie that I was wasted or something. That I was drunk and unaware of what I was doing.

It certainly would have made moving forward a fuck of a lot easier.

But deep in my heart I know, sitting here staring at the back of his head, why I didn't take the out.

Because I don't *want* to excuse what happened as a drunken mistake.

Because it wasn't.

And I want to hold on to that dream a little bit longer, even if it's clear my ridiculous schoolgirl fantasies about this man are definitely going to stay only that: fantasies.

Castle hits send on the email he was just hammering out. I watch him switch to his text messages, and then frown when I see his face tighten as he smiles at something. I lean forward a little—like a completely normal person and not a total psycho—to spy on his texts.

Instantly, I wish I hadn't.

He's texting a *woman*. A stunningly gorgeous woman with blonde hair and dark eyes named Loraine, from what I can see from my—totally normal and not-at-all-psycho—spying on his private texts. Loraine, who's got a million-dollar pearl-white smile and a cowboy hat on her head which doesn't even look stupid and try-hard, but actually looks super cute on her.

Fuck you, Loraine.

My mouth draws to a line as I watch him smile and text something back. Her brief reply makes my blood turn to fire.

It's a fucking heart emoji.

Die, Loraine. You fucking bitch.

Instantly, I wince, closing my eyes as I shake my head at myself.

Calm the fuck down, self.

I reach into my bag and pull out the orange prescription bottle, tapping out five milligrams of Ativan and swallowing it dry.

Take that, anxiety spike.

I settle back in my seat, glaring at the fucking emoji on Castle's phone screen as I wait for the anxiety meds to kick in. But as much as I want to shake it off and remind myself that *he isn't mine*, in any way, shape or form, I can't. Just like I couldn't take the easy out this morning.

Because after a year plus of mooning over this man and pining after him, that's impossible.

And that really, really fucking sucks.

Castle sends a heart emoji back to cunt-face bitch Loraine and then turns his phone off. His shoulders suddenly stiffen. Just before he turns to glance my way, I swivel my chair to re-join Ares and Neve's conversation with Elsa and Hades about the gala tonight.

But I can feel his eyes on me.

Or at least, I imagine I can.

My phone buzzes in my bag. When I pull it out, I see a text from Stavros.

STAVROS

Yo, what r u doing tonight?

I half turn, straining my eyes to the peripheral to see if Castle is looking at me. He is. At least, I think he is. It's tough to say without turning around and being awkwardly obvious. But I think he might be. So I make a big show of sending an especially gushy text back to Stavros, with my phone angled up, just in case Castle *is* looking this way. Pathetic? Yes. Makes me feel better? Also yes.

ME

Hey!!!

I follow it with a kissy face emoji and a sunglasses emoji for good measure.

ME

you won't believe this, but I'm on my way to PARIS, baby

STAVROS

Daaaaamn dude. Sick! What for?

ME

Your boss' lady's birthday

Ares is king, but in the hierarchy of our family, Hades is in charge of the boots-on-the-ground, enforcer-soldier types. Stavros Cirillo technically works for the Adamos family, one of our vassal families. But he reports directly to Hades as if he were a Drakos soldier.

I know him because I was pretty good friends with his younger brother, Tomas, who sadly was killed by Ezio Adamos to keep the new peace between Drakos and Kildare when Neve and Ares first got together.

In those early, uneasy days of our truce, Tomas and some of his friends took it upon themselves to exact vengeance on the Kildares for the death of Ezio's son, Jason Adamos, who'd been shot dead at the same meeting where my uncle Vasilis Drakos and Declan Kildare were also killed. When Tomas and his buddies fired at Neve and Eilish in reprisal for the death of their friend, Ares put his foot down and told Ezio to deal with it.

Ezio had Tomas and the two other men killed later that very day.

It shook me up for a while when it happened. Tomas and I had been reasonably good friends for years—nothing romantic or anything, just the same age and the same circles, but still. Since then, I've come to be friendly with Stavros, too.

It's not lost on me that the older Cirillo brother would like to be *more* than friends with me. He's not exactly subtle about it. But I haven't led him on in any way. Very early on, he flat out asked me on a date, and I refused. The reason I gave him, of course, was my betrothal to Luca Carveli.

The real reason, though, is that someone already had, and still has, my heart.

My phone buzzes again.

STAVROS

Well have fun. U wanna hang sometime when u get back?

ME

I would LOVE that!

More kissy face and sunglasses emojis.

I smirk to myself as I send it, imagining Castle shooting daggers at my phone the same way I was just glaring at his exchange with that Loraine bitch.

“Dom, how are you. Good, good. Listen, I wanted to check in on that warehouse space in Harlem we’d talked about.”

Goddammit.

I turn briefly, and my face falls when I realize Castle is facing completely away from me, in the middle of a phone call, and he missed the whole thing.

So much for making him jealous.

FOUR HOURS LATER, I’m officially on Team Gavan. Fuck the haters. Not only has he flown us in the most extravagant private jet in the world to *Paris* for the ridiculously cool Bijou Gala, and not only has he paid for everyone’s hotel suites—not just rooms, suites—overlooking the Seine River and the Eiffel Tower, but also, when we land we find a waiting fleet of gleaming silver Mercedes G-Wagons ready to take us *shopping* at the most exclusive private designer boutiques in Paris to find dresses for the gala.

Yup, consider my love officially bought.

It’s all cool enough that it momentarily pulls my thoughts away from how mortified I am about last night. Or from the blackness of picturing Castle with this fucking Loraine chick.

At least, it kind of does.

Eventually, we’re all at *Maison Vogue*, a stunning and incredible boutique in the 8th Arrondissement. Champagne is being passed around and I’m cracking up with Neve and Elsa

as Hades is getting fitted for a tuxedo when Eilish taps my arm. I turn, my mouth falling open at the stunning violet gown in her arms.

“This is the one, I can feel it.”

I gawk at the gorgeous dress. “It’s...*wow*.”

“Try it on! You’re going to look like a Roman Queen in this thing.”

“Dude, Greek.”

“I won’t tell Dimitra if you don’t.”

I grin as I take it from her hands. “Okay, let’s see how it looks.”

I knock back my champagne and head into one of the dressing rooms toward the back of the boutique. I hang the dress on its hanger on one of the hooks on the wall as I stare at it in admiration. The violet silk wraps around the neck, criss-crossing over the chest to wind around the small of the back before dropping straight to the ankles, with a huge slit up one side to mid-thigh.

It’s sexy, but elegant. And instantly, I freaking *want it*.

I quickly pull off the sundress I’ve been wearing all day and drape it on another one of the hooks. My bra follows before I turn to run my hands over the stunning gown.

The door to the dressing room flies open. I gasp, jolting as I whirl...

And come face-to-face, inches apart, with Castle, who’s holding a pair of tuxedo pants.

Our eyes lock as we both freeze. His huge frame blocks the view of the inside of the dressing room from any of our friends

and family back toward the front of the boutique. Stunned as I am, my hands still instinctively fly to cover my breasts as I drown in the dark blue pools of his eyes.

My heart thuds. My pulse simmers like fire right beneath the surface of my skin.

I let my hands fall.

Castle's jaw tightens and his eyes blaze pure fire as they drop to my chest, then lower, leaving me shivering heatedly before he drags his gaze back up to meet mine.

His eyes narrow to slits.

"Callie..."

"Castle—"

In one motion, he steps away from me and yanks the dressing room door shut.

Then he's gone.

But that look in his eyes stays with me.

CASTLE

THIS HAS TO STOP. Fucking. Happening. And by “this” I mean “me seeing Calliope Drakos nearly naked”.

Once was a mistake. Twice in under twenty-four hours is a serious problem.

I shouldn't know that her nipples are that shade of dark rose. I shouldn't know about the little scar on her hip, or what color panties she's wearing.

Or *was* wearing.

Currently, as I watch her swan across the floor of the Bijou Gala, I'm beginning to wonder how anyone could be wearing *anything* under that dress without it being glaringly obvious.

My teeth grind as I watch her lean against the bar on the main floor of the stunning Musée d'Orsay and order a cocktail from a handsome and far too attentive bartender. My eyes slide over the violet silk of her gown, which is doing fuck-all to drag my thoughts out of the land of hugely inappropriate thoughts.

The slit that goes all the way up on her thigh isn't helping. Neither is the fact that she's obviously not wearing a bra.

Which I *should not be noticing*.

“Try not to have too much fun or anything. It's a party.”

I turn toward Kratos, who's just appeared at my left elbow. The third Drakos brother after Ares and Hades, and before Deimos who lives in London, Kratos is by far the biggest of them all. I'm six-five, and he's got a few inches and probably thirty pounds of muscle on me. He's a quiet guy, and we've gotten along pretty well since Ares and Neve got together. Recently, I've been dragging him into the boxing ring for some sparring practice, so we've been hanging out a lot more often.

"I don't know what you're talking about. I'm having a blast," I mutter.

He snorts. "Please. You look like you're at a fucking funeral."

I shrug, glancing away casually as if randomly scanning the room, when in reality my eyes are zeroing back in on the bar, where that fucking bartender is smiling away as he chats up Callie.

He keeps that shit up and there WILL be a funeral here tonight.

I do my best to shake the weird thought from my head as I sip my drink. Yeah, that's really enough of that.

Pulling my attention back to Kratos, I lift a non-committal shoulder. "Nah, just...cautious."

"Of Gavan?"

I nod. Kratos shrugs.

"I get it. But, I dunno, man. A few months ago, yeah, I'd have said this was a trap of some kind. But I mean, look at him."

He nods past me to where the dark-haired, steel-eyed, heavily tattooed Russian kingpin is twirling Eilish across the floor to

the strains of the string ensemble as if they were a royal couple in a goddamn Disney movie.

I sigh, shaking my head. “You’re right. Just...”

“Just having some trouble letting go?”

I arch a brow at him. “When did you go all zen master?”

He chuckles. “I’m just saying I get it. End of an era, in a way.”

“I haven’t been bodyguard to either one of them in years, Kratos.”

He just rolls his eyes as he clinks his glass to mine. “Sure. Sure. Well, trap or not, Ya-ya is having a ball.”

Gavan’s initial invitation apparently included Cillian and Una. But they’re still honeymooning in Ireland, so Kratos came instead, with his grandmother as his date. When Kratos gestures with his chiseled jaw, I turn and grin. Currently, Dimitra looks like she’s having the time of her life, dressed like a golden age movie star, talking to a prince and princess. And I mean that literally.

That’s another aspect of Gavan I’m slowly learning more about: the man is *connected* in ways I did not realize. One of his buddies from school is Misha Tsavakov, head of the Bratva-affiliated Tsavakov empire, and husband to Princess Charlotte Bergendem of Luxlordia.

Both of them are currently cracking up at something the Drakos matriarch’s just said.

“Fifty bucks says that was her ‘how many Greeks does it take to screw in a lightbulb’ joke.”

I chuckle. “And exactly how many does it take?”

“Beats me, but there were forty in the Trojan Horse, and there weren’t any women to screw in *that*, so you do the math.”

I laugh as Kratos shakes his head. “All right, I’m going to go rescue the prince and princess before Ya-ya starts giving them a history lesson on the Peloponnesian War.” He claps a heavy, muscled hand on my shoulder. “Try to have some fun, brother.”

I nod as he navigates his way through the crowd. Then I turn to level another lethal glare at Callie. The bartender has been pulled away. Now, she’s chatting away in that very Callie way she has to two men in tuxedos who are easily twice her age.

This is one of the reasons I never once took Callie’s flirting seriously.

Because she’s a *flirt*.

Not in a crude way or anything. But she’s chatty, and friendly, and...well, loud...and she genuinely likes meeting new people. I’ve been around on more than a few occasions where she walks out of a bar annoyed that the guy she was talking to tried to make a move or get her number, when all she was trying to do was have a conversation.

It’s not that she flirts with everyone. It just comes across that way.

That said...

My eyes stab into the trio.

Right now, this girl is *fully* aware of what she’s doing. This isn’t innocent, overly chatty conversation. She’s biting her lip and smiling coquettishly at them both, even reaching out to slap their arms playfully and laugh a bit too loudly when they make whatever lame-ass joke they’ve just made.

And I fucking *hate* that it makes my goddamn blood boil.

This should be a good thing. I gave her “the out” back in the kitchen of her being drunk as an excuse for her actions last night. This is *my* out. I should be thrilled that the girl is on to her next prey.

Perfect. Fine. Whatever.

So why do I want to go over there and snap both of their necks?

Callie laughs again, draping a hand on one of the guys’ arms. Then as she pulls it away, suddenly her eyes raise, and her gaze lasers right in on me. My jaw tightens. Her lips purse, the bottom one sucked between her teeth as our eyes lock. Then she laughs again and looks back at her two pals.

Goddamn this fucking girl.

I’m not playing this game. I *cannot* play this game. Instead, I look away and pull out my phone, going back to the text conversation I was having with Loraine earlier on the plane. I raise the phone and snap a pic of the room before I send it to her.

ME

Three guesses where I am

She starts typing back immediately.

LORAINÉ

OMG!!! Are you fucking serious?! Is that the Bijou Gala??!

ME

Haha, yep. Got an offer I couldn't refuse. I'm even wearing a tux and everything

LORAINÉ

lol. Bullshit. Pics or it didn't happen

I grin as I swap to the camera and snap a selfie of me smirking at it before I send it her way.

LORAINÉ

LOVE IT! You look sharp! Bond. Castle Bond.

ME

There's a whole wing of Rodin and Degas sculptures here. Bryce woulda loved it. I know he always wanted to come to Paris

There's a pause before she starts typing again. I figured there would be. Today's a hard one for Loraine and Teagan. Bryce would've been thirty-eight today.

ME

Sorry. I didn't mean it like that

LORAINÉ

No no no, it's okay, Castle. We're celebrating a life over here, not mourning a death. I was just showing Teagan you in your tux. She says hi

I grin. A photo comes through of my dead best friend's widow, and the girl who lost her father when she was seven. It's insane to me how grown up she is now, at eighteen.

ME

Jesus h christ. Who the hell is that and what has she done with my little Tea?

LORAINÉ

lol. She grew up. They do that if you feed and water them, apparently

ME

Well stop feeding her

LORAINÉ

HAHA! Enjoy the gala, Castle. Miss ya! Raise one for Bryce tonight

ME

Will do. Miss you too. It's been too long

She sends another heart emoji. I smile before I slip my phone into my pocket and take a sip of my drink.

“So.”

I turn to find Callie standing right there behind me—hip cocked, face flushed with alcohol, and her eyes squinting at me.

“Yes?”

“So how long has it been?”

I frown. “Excuse me?”

“How long has it been since you saw your lady friend?”

“My...” I sigh in exasperation. “You know it’s rude to read other people’s private text messages.”

“Whatever,” she shrugs, still glaring at me, and obviously a few drinks in.

“How much have you had, Callie?”

“How much are you *still* not my dad, Castle?”

I look past her to bar. The two douchey-looking older European guys are talking and chuckling to themselves, casting lecherous looks her way.

“Who’re your new friends?”

“You first. Who’s Lorraine?”

I step closer to her, and her breath catches a little.

“Let’s be clear about something.”

“And what might that be?” she sasses back.

I shake my head. “You don’t get to play the jealous card.”

Her face burns hotly as she purses her lips. “I...I am *not*—”

“Because jealousy comes from a place of mistrust and from feeling as if you’ve been lied to or misled, and *none* of those things apply here. Are we clear on that?”

Her eyes flash with an emotion I can’t quite place. Then she swallows as she looks away.

“Look, Callie...” I exhale, which does nothing to alleviate the tension in my jaw. “Let’s hit the reset button. You were drunk last night—”

“No, I wasn’t.”

I glare at her. “Yes, you *were*. I’m giving you a parachute here. Fucking use it.”

“I was *drinking*,” she says pointedly. “Not drunk.”

My body stiffens as she steps toward me.

“*Callie—*”

“You kissed me back.”

She gasps as I grab her forearm and yank her close. I turn, my eyes scanning the gala and taking note of where every single one of our friends and family is as I lean into her.

“*No*, Callie, I did not.”

“You didn’t pull away.”

“I pushed *you* away.”

“Took you a hot second.”

She gasps again as my hand comes up to cup her jaw, tilting her eyes up to mine.

“You need to forget about last night, Callie. It didn’t happen. End. Of. Story.”

I drop my hand from her warm, soft skin and start to turn to leave.

“Do you not find me attractive?”

Keep walking. Just walk the fuck away.

I do not, in fact, keep walking. I stop and grit my teeth as I turn. “I find you to be twenty fucking years old, Callie,” I growl quietly.

Her throat bobs. She takes a step toward me.

“And?”

“And that’s it. You’re twenty. I’m almost thirty-three.”

“That’s your entire reason for walking away last night?”

I bark a cold laugh. “You’re joking, right?”

“I’m just saying. Look at how many guys your age are with girls my age in Hollywood.”

“Yeah, well, we’re not in Hollywood, and I’m neither famous nor a fucking predator,” I snap. “And that is *hardly* the only reason, and you know it.”

“What else?”

Yeah, she’s been drinking all right.

“Callie,” I hiss. “*Drop this. Now.*”

Her mouth purses, and her eyes do that supernatural thing where they almost glow from behind the dark lashes and against the tanned skin of her face.

“Fine. Whatever. I’m done. Goodnight, dickface.”

I roll my eyes at her bratty attitude and she turns on her heel.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“Back to the hotel. *Bye.*”

The hotel where Gavan got us all suites is right next door to the Musée d’Orsay. But Callie’s clearly been drinking, she’s clearly emotional, and I’m clearly way too much of a fucking hero for my own good.

“Fine. I’ll walk you.”

“No need.” She turns quickly, giving me a sneer. “My new friends already offered. Night!”

And with that, she waltzes back over to the bar, back to the two predator douchebags waiting for her. My blood pressure spikes at the way the two slimeballs eye her up and down and grin at her like a couple of wolves.

She does one more of her overly flirtatious laughs, hooks her arms through theirs so that she’s between them, and starts to

head out.

But not before she turns to me with this unreadable look in her eyes as they lock on mine. Then, they're walking out of the gala and into the Paris night.

It's clearly an attempt to rile me up, get me jealous, or whatever. It's yet another one of her stunts like she always pulls. The smart thing to do here is to ignore it. Let her go. Let her sashay out with those two dipshits and then sulk when her little plan doesn't work.

Because fuck that. I'm not playing these kinds of games—not with any woman, but especially not with Calliope Drakos.

For all the reasons.

Nope. Not playing.

I walk over to the bar and grab a whiskey. I manage one sip before I'm swearing to myself, slamming the glass down, and turning to march out the door after her.

CALLIE

“WELL, guys, it’s been fun, but it’s time for me to say good night.”

Pierre and Guy—my two new charming-in-that-creepy-way friends—glance at each other with crestfallen expressions as soon as we walk into the lobby of the Plaza Royale Hotel.

“*As-tu peur de devenir une citrouille?*”

Right. As if Guy doesn’t actually speak English. He obviously *does*, because he clearly understood everything I said while we were chatting at the bar tonight. Which means he’s purposefully pretending not to in order to...who even knows what. To be a creep, probably, because I’m getting *major* creep vibes from the pair of them.

Which is fine, because I actually have no interest in having a conversation for even another minute with either of them. Like, ever.

Pierre laughs in that schmarmy “I’m undressing you with my eyes while pretending to laugh” way. Gross.

“He was asking if you’re worried about turning into a pumpkin, *mon petite*.”

“Yeah. More like a statistic, but same thing.” I smile a plastic, polite but fake smile. “Thank you for walking me back to the hotel, and it was lovely chatting tonight.”

Even though the only reason we moved past “what’s your name” in the first place is...

I cringe.

Is that I’m pathetic and was trying to make Castle jealous. Which literally sounds even *more* pathetic and cringe every time I replay the plan in my head.

Also, it didn’t even work. And now I’m tired, a bit drunker than I want to be, and nothing sounds better than just going upstairs and crawling into my hotel bed.

Alone.

“Thanks again.”

I turn to leave. Pierre grabs my arm.

“What if we walk you the rest of the way to your room?”

Such a charmer.

I smile. “Oh, I think I can manage.”

“We could help you out of your party shoes, maybe run you a bath?”

Murder me horribly. Wear my skin. Yeah, for sure, that sounds *awesome*.

“Yeah, I’m...good.” I don’t smile this time. “And I’m leaving now. Good night.”

Mercifully, the two of them give up and turn for the door.

“Fucking cock-tease,” Guy tosses angrily over his shoulder.

“Nice English, fuck-face,” I mutter back, turning and stepping into the gilded elevator.

It rises to the floor second from the top, which is where the luxury suites are that Gavan treated us all to for our stay tonight. My phone dings in my bag. When I fish it out, my heart sinks at the short but cordial email that has just arrived in my inbox.

Goddammit.

Almost a year ago, Eilish, Neve, and I had the supremely insane idea to buy an old neighborhood Irish bar called The Banshee in the West Village that was up for sale and remake it as our own spot.

Well, to be fair, *I* had the supremely insane idea to do that. My friends just had the questionable judgement to sign on to the project with me. But despite the odds, we were actually doing really well with it. We renovated the space, hired staff, turned the cruddy old basement into this cool if small concert venue, and we even got all the way to a soft opening for family and friends.

Which is the night when a bomb planted by Leo Stavrin, a rogue employee of Gavan’s, blew our new bar to hell, injuring Ya-ya and me, almost killing Eilish, and *actually* killing Sean Farrell, a good friend of the Kildare family.

So now, we’re sort of back at square one with that whole thing.

Elsa’s been helping us to get all the contracts and permits for the new build sorted. But any reopening is a *long* ways off, which means I’ve also been trying to figure out what the heck I’m going to do with my life in the meantime.

For years, I wasn't really sure. I did an accelerated University program in the UK, and then when we moved back to New York, I finished up my undergrad early with some classes at NYU. Then opening the bar was like "my thing".

And then that was taken away.

So now, after a lot of talking myself in circles, I've decided to get my MBA. Except, as yet another rejection email proves, "deciding to get" and "actually getting" are two very different things.

Columbia University regrets to inform you...

I close the email and shove my phone into my bag again.

Fuck.

My keycard opens the door to my suite, and I exhale as I step into the air-conditioned darkness, ready to slip out of my dress, run a bath, and order something extravagant from room service.

I only make it two steps inside before I'm grabbed from behind.

I scream, but a gloved hand clamps over my mouth. I jab my elbows back, like Hades taught me to do. The first elbow connects with a man's torso, making him grunt. But the second is blocked, and suddenly, a leg sweeps my feet from underneath me.

I cry out, dropping to my knees before suddenly, the lights flick on, blinding me.

"Mmm...well look at you, my dear, all dressed up. For me, I hope?"

My heart drops into my stomach.

Dear God.

We've only met twice before: once when I was fourteen, and again when I turned eighteen. But even though I haven't seen Luca Carveli in two years, I'd know his raspy, Sicilian-accented voice anywhere. Shaking, my heart slamming in my chest, I raise my eyes to the older man in a dark suit sitting across the room in a big chair by the window. He grins a toothy, yellowed smile at me.

"Hello, Callie. Or *bonjour*, as the French say. Isn't that right?"

"*Si, Capo,*" the man behind me responds, still holding me tight, my arms twisted behind my back, his hand clamped over my mouth.

Another man in a dark suit steps into view, and my eyes widen at the sight of the pistol fitted with a silencer in his hand.

"I'm going to tell him to take his hand from your mouth now," Luca growls. "It would be foolish to scream. *Very* foolish. Do you understand me?"

I nod feverishly.

"*Bene,*" he grunts, raising his eyes to his man and giving the signal.

The hand drops from my mouth. I gasp, sucking in air as I tremble in fear. Luca grins salaciously at me as his eyes drop to my chest. When I follow his gaze down, my face pales to a sickly white.

My dress has slipped, probably while I was getting knocked to the ground, and one of my breasts has fallen out of the violet silk gown. I blanch, trying to yank an arm free to cover myself. But the man behind me is unyielding. Meanwhile, all three of them just stare hungrily at my bare tit.

Luca smiles dangerously. “You know, we are like Romeo and Juliet, you and I.”

My lips curl. “The fuck we are.”

He makes a tsking sound and shakes his head. “Just so you know, when you are my wife, I will not tolerate language like that.”

“Fuck—”

I gasp as Luca springs out of his chair with surprising agility and storms across the room toward me. I flinch, but there’s no avoiding the blow when his open hand slaps across my face.

“*Be silent,*” he snarls. I whimper as he grabs my chin and yanks my gaze up to his as he stands above me. “We are indeed like Shakespeare’s lovers, you and I. It would appear your family doesn’t want us to be together.”

There are a hundred things I want to scream at him. But the hit still stinging my face has the fear roaring in my ears like a freight train, and all I can do is nod pitifully.

Luca smiles at the submission.

“*Good. Good. You’ll make a quiet, obedient wife yet.*” His eyes darken as they drop back to my bare breast. “But Ares’ stall tactics are...disrespectful. I have a contract inked in fucking blood that promises you to me.” His lips curl menacingly as something dark flickers behind his hooded eyes. “And I think I would like to be sure that what I have been promised is what I will actually *get.*”

Any remaining color drains from my face as a horrible knot twists in my stomach.

“Wait—”

He ignores me as he glances at his men and gestures with his head.

To the bedroom door.

“NO! N—!!”

My words are cut off as the hand slams across my mouth again. I scream into it, twisting and writhing and trying to kick free. But the two men are much stronger and bigger, and before I know it, I’m being dragged across the floor and flung into the bedroom. I whirl to run, but Luca is right there with another hand across my face.

I cry out, sprawling to the side as he laughs mirthlessly and steps into the bedroom. The door slams shut behind him. It feels like a nail in a coffin.

“*Get up,*” he snarls.

“*Go fuck yourse—*”

I scream as he lunges and grabs a fistful of my hair. My scalp explodes in bolts of pain as he yanks hard, dragging me across the room and flinging me onto the bed. I scream, lashing out with my feet, but Luca grabs my ankle and twists it roughly to the side.

Pain lances up my leg, choking me as a sob wrenches from my throat.

“I think maybe your fucking brother is wasting my time, because my prize is no longer *pure,*” Luca hisses maliciously as he yanks off his suit jacket and storms toward the bed. “I think maybe tonight, I need to see if my blushing bride-to-be has had any other man *fuck* what is mine and mine alone to take.”

“*I haven’t!*” I sob. I hate that I’m even telling him something so personal. But I know what he wants to hear. And there’s a tiny part of me that hopes if maybe I can convince him, he’ll leave me alone.

“Please!” I sob. “Please! I haven’t! I swear—”

“You’d better pray there’s blood on my cock when I’m done, or it’ll come from the hole I put through your head.”

I go to scream again, but the air is forced from my lungs as Luca crawls over to me and settles his weight on top of me. He paws at my breasts, his horrible breath all over me as I kick and scream and try to scratch at his face. He slaps me again, and suddenly, my knee is bent under his middle.

Fuck. You. Asshole.

I kick out hard with every last bit of strength I have. My leg flexes, and suddenly, even with his weight, Luca is getting shoved backward off me. He slips off the foot of the bed, tumbles backward over his shoes and his jacket, and goes crashing into the mirror on the bedroom wall.

I don’t wait. I lurch from the bed and bolt for the door. But he’s back on me in a second, crashing into me and taking us both to the ground with me beneath him.

“*YOU LITTLE BITCH!*”

It’s dark, and I’m still dazed from the slap, so I don’t realize what the hot, sticky, coppery-smelling liquid that’s gushing all over my neck and my chest is until my eyes adjust.

Oh my fucking God.

It’s blood.

I scream, over and over and *over*, kicking and thrashing as he looms above me with bulging eyes and his tongue lolling out

of his mouth. Shards of glass from the mirror stick out of the side of his face and neck like something out of a horror movie. Blood pumps in rhythmic gushes from the jagged hole in his neck, spilling all over me as he roars and burbles and wraps his hands around my throat.

And starts to squeeze.

And squeeze.

And fucking squeeze. I flail away, slapping at his horribly maimed face and trying to kick up with my knees. But my vision starts to darken and blur. My strength begins to sap out of me.

I can't breathe.

I can't fucking breathe.

Luca is turning paler and paler as the blood drains out of him. But I'm fading faster.

He's going to take me out with him.

Black spots dance around the edges of my eyes.

And then suddenly, the door to the room splinters off its hinges. Something huge, broad-shouldered, and dark with a savage look on its face surges in the room.

Castle.

In a split second, Luca is yanked off me. I drag a ragged gasp of air through my bruised windpipe as Castle lifts Luca up by the scruff of the neck, grabs his chin from behind, and yanks back, *hard*.

I flinch, sobbing at the horrible crunching, cracking sound as Luca's neck snaps.

He falls to the ground in a heap.

My pulse is racing a million miles an hour. I feel numb, cold. But then, strong, warm, powerful arms surround me. I'm being lifted and cradled against a rock-hard chest and carried out through the shattered bedroom door.

In the main room of the suite, Luca's two goons lie dead on the floor with their necks twisted at horribly unnatural angles. Castle deftly steps over them and out the door.

I can't even speak. All I can do is cling to him. And I start to cry into his chest as he holds me against his strength and carries me away.

CASTLE

LOGIC and all my training scream at me that I'm following the wrong objective here. That I'm reacting emotionally, not rationally.

Rationally, I can see that Callie is in shock, but that's okay. The blood is obviously Luca's, from whatever the fuck she did to his face and neck. So the logical thing to do here would be to *keep her in her damn room* while I fucking deal with this. Not storm down the hallway of a two-thousand-dollar a night luxury hotel with a girl drenched in blood in my arms.

But I'm reacting emotionally, which means I *do not fucking care*.

I brushed past the two European fuckwits that Callie left the gala with outside the hotel. For a moment, that was enough reassurance to make me turn around, or at least just go up to my own room. But that was before I paused at the curb and saw the black Escalade.

The one with tinted, thicker-than-normal windows. The one sitting a bit too low, giving away that it was armored. The person who used it could be anyone important, or wealthy, or dangerous. But when the driver leaning against the fender started talking into his cell phone about LA—in both English

and Italian—that’s when my hackles *and* my suspicions were raised.

That’s when I ran up here and saw one of Callie’s black heels outside her suite.

I wince a little as I shift her slight weight in my arms. One of Luca’s goons got in a decent hit on me while I was busy snapping his buddy’s neck. That never would have happened ten years ago when I was still a Ranger.

Fuck, I’m getting rusty.

The door to my room opens to my keycard. I slip inside, shut the door, and walk directly into the bedroom off the living area, setting Callie down on the edge of the bed. Her expression is blank and her face is pure white, her eyes staring a thousand yards through me.

Yeah, she’s in shock all right.

I squat down in front of her, peering into her face, willing her to look at me. “Callie. Callie, honey.”

She blinks—once, twice, before her eyes come into focus. But it’s only for a moment, then she’s staring through me again.

Shit.

I frown, turning to head for the bathroom. Suddenly, her hand shoots out and grabs my wrist in a vice-like grip. She doesn’t say a word.

She doesn’t have to.

“Easy, I’m not going anywhere,” I murmur quietly.

I grab a pillow off the bed, strip off the case, and then reach for the bottle of water on the bedside table. I wet the

pillowcase and start to clean the blood from her neck and chest.

I pull her dress back into place to cover her nudity, dabbing and wiping more of Luca's blood from her skin.

"Callie."

I hold her chin softly, lifting her face to mine again.

"You're in shock. You need to breathe, and you need to drink this."

I press the bottle of water into her hands. She nods mutely.

"Drink it."

Callie nods again, still in a numb haze, bringing the bottle to her lips and taking a tiny sip.

"All of it, Callie. You need to drink all of it."

Her eyes swivel slowly to mine, puzzled.

"What?"

"Drink the whole thing."

She frowns in confusion. "My throat..."

My eyes land on the ugly dark marks on her neck that didn't wipe away with that motherfucker's blood.

Bruises. He was trying to choke her to death.

Rot in hell, you piece of shit.

I reach up. She flinches, but lets me run my fingers over her neck.

"You're a little bruised, but you're going to be okay. Drink the water, Callie. And breathe."

"I can't breathe and drink water at the same time."

My eyes snap back to hers. They're clearer now, more focused. I grin.

"How about one and *then* the other."

She manages a weak smile as she brings the bottle to her lips again and takes a longer sip. Then another, before she brings it down.

"The whole thing."

"Jesus, I'm not a fucking fish. Chill."

My pulse jumps and I grin a little wider to hear her sassiness back.

"I need you to do something for me."

She frowns in puzzlement.

"I need you to stay here."

Instantly, her eyes start to fade again, and her hand lurches out to grab my wrist.

"Callie, I have to go deal with something."

She swallows heavily. "You mean the bodies."

I nod. "And I need you to stay right here while I do."

I don't have a gun on me, obviously. But when she finally allows me to pry her fingers off of my wrist, I head into the suite's kitchenette area and slide a massive, probably-never-used chef's knife out of the butcher block by the sink and walk back into the bedroom with it.

Callie regards it with clearer eyes.

"Are you serious?"

"Would it make you feel safer to hold it while I'm gone?"

She frowns, staring at it for a long time. Then she nods. “Yeah, maybe.”

I press the handle into her hands. “Stab anyone who comes through the door who isn’t me.”

She smiles quietly.

Good.

I squat down in front of her again, pulling the duvet up around her shoulders and wrapping it around her like a shawl.

“I’m coming right back. All right?”

She nods. “Okay,” she says softly and meekly, in a voice so un-Callie-like it almost breaks my heart a little.

Back in her suite, I shut the door behind me and grimace as I survey the damage.

Luca’s the problem. The two goons I could easily figure out a way to deal with. Because those kills were bloodless.

Luca’s blood, however, is sprayed across the entire fucking bedroom and is currently soaking into the carpet under his body.

That’s going to be an issue, and frankly, I don’t have the resources to deal with that at all. Luckily, I might know someone who does. Even luckier, he actually picks up when I call.

“Shit, man. I was wondering if I’d hear from you today. Did you wish Bryce a happy birth—”

“Jeremy, I need a favor. Fast.”

Instantly, his easygoing tone changes. “I’m listening, brother.”

“How secure is this line?”

“Secure enough, unless you’re working for Kim Jong Un. In which case, I’m about to get one hell of a promotion.”

I smile darkly.

Jeremy and I are the last two left. Where once there were five of us—Jer, Bryce, Matty, Jason, and me—now it’s just him and me. By pure shit fucking luck. Me because I was the last to walk into that house on the outskirts of Kabul. Jeremy because he ate bad food on base the night before our mission and was laid up puking his guts out.

Me, I tapped out, came home to bury my mother, and then met Cillian. Jeremy got recruited by the CIA.

“I need a cleaner in Paris.”

“Hang on.” I can hear him typing rapidly on a keyboard. “Where at?”

“The Plaza Royale Hotel. Nineteenth floor. Suite nineteen-oh-eight. And I need it fast, Jeremy.”

“Nice to hear from you too, buddy,” he mutters as he clicks away at his keyboard. “How you been, Jer? How’s life, Jer?”

“How you been, Jer. How’s life, Jer,” I parrot blankly before I sigh. “I wish I had time to catch up. I really do.”

“Just fucking with you, Castle, you know that. Okay, yeah, I’ve got a guy I’ve used before.”

“Agency connected?”

“No. Independent contractor. He’s good.” He pauses. “It’s gonna cost you, you know.”

“Figured as much. Whatever it is, just let me know.”

He clears his throat. “I gotta ask, Cas. Who’s the package?”

He means the dead guy.

“You don’t want to know.”

“Shit. Elected?”

“No, made.”

“*How* made.”

“Let’s just say, your cleaner better not be Italian.”

He chuckles grimly. “Got it.”

“There’s two others as well. Bodyguards or henchman. But they’re both clean. The primary is…” I glance into the bedroom at Luca’s body sprawled across the floor and the brand new red Jackson Pollock masterpiece splattered all over the walls.

“*Not* clean.”

“I’ll let my guy know. He should be there within two hours. Probably best if you’re *not*. Leave the door locked with the do not disturb sign on. Shit, I don’t need to tell you any of this, do I?”

“No.”

“Hey, Castle—”

“Yeah.”

My old friend sighs. “Let’s catch up sometime soon, for real. It’s been way too long, brother.”

“I’d like that.”

“And raise one to Bryce tonight, yeah?”

When I slip back into my own suite, I frown at the sound of running water. Callie’s not sitting on the bed anymore, either. I only find her when I push open the door to the sprawling white marble and tile bathroom.

She's still in her evening gown, sitting on the floor of the glass-walled shower hugging her knees with the water cascading down over her. The knife is still in her hand.

She's staring a thousand yards past the wall in front of her again.

Shit, the shock is back.

I don't think. I just step into the shower with her and sink down onto the floor next to her. Instantly, she curls into me, clinging tightly to my soaked tuxedo shirt and burying her face in my chest as the knife clatters to the floor. My arms wrap around her, and I just hold her like that as the water washes over the both of us.

CALLIE

THEY SAY time flies when you're having fun. What they *don't* say is that it also flies when you're trying to process trauma.

Wrapped in a towel, I scowl at my reflection in the shower-steamed bathroom mirror and peer a little closer at the dark circles under my eyes. I look tired. Frayed around the edges. Worn down.

Great. *Just* the look I want for the night of my twenty-first birthday.

Not.

I exhale, rubbing my face and rolling my shoulders. The thing is, I'm *not* hungover, though I've certainly been drinking a little more than I should be lately.

Since Paris.

Since I felt the life being choked out of me by a maniac gushing blood onto my body. Since I watched the man I'm hopelessly smitten with—in decidedly unrequited terms—*kill* that maniac right in front of me.

All that was two months ago, and I'm still unable to sleep through the night. Alcohol helps. Pot does, too, though sometimes it's a little much. Getting my doctor to up my

dosages for the Lexapro, Ativan, and propranolol I take for anxiety certainly hasn't *hurt*.

But I still can't sleep more than three hours at a time without waking up choking for air and clawing madly at blood on my chest that isn't actually there.

The only time I've felt truly safe, and truly not going insane, was right after the attack, in Castle's suite. When he came back and found me huddled in the shower and sank down to sit under the spray of the water next to me, and put his arm around me.

For the next thirty minutes, I felt safe. I felt like I could breathe.

I spent that night twisting and turning in his bed while he slept on the couch in the sitting room. The next day, I plastered a smile on my face, used half a compact of concealer on my neck, attributed my haggard appearance to my friends and family as "too much fun and champagne", and got on that plane back to New York.

The one other time I felt like I wasn't going crazy was when Castle drove Ya-ya, Kratos, and I back from the airport after we landed. He'd just finished helping Kratos carry the suitcases up when he found me shaking and nearing a full-blown panic attack in the kitchen as I waited for my meds to kick in.

He didn't say a word. He just pulled me into his arms tightly and let me cling to his chest while he reminded me how to breathe.

"Inhale, exhale, Callie. Inhale, exhale. It's behind you. He can't hurt you."

Five minutes later, I was calm, and it didn't feel like the world was crushing me under its thumb.

But Castle was gone.

That was two months ago, and I've barely seen him since.

There is zero part of me that thinks that's an accident.

But a lot has happened in those two months. Eilish and Gavan went through their horrible ordeal where they both almost died at the hands of Gavan's psychotic, revenge-bent aunt, Svetlana. They're also *engaged*, and even though I'm still wallowing in my own darkness, that makes me so unbelievably happy for them.

Also, Thermopylae Acquisitions—our family's "legitimate" private equities firm, named after the place where the fabled three hundred Spartans held their ground against thousands because our Ya-ya insists we're the direct descendants of the shirtless guys with the CGI abs from the movie *300* and do not even *try* to tell her otherwise—is having a *phenomenal* quarter. Ares started the company to better manage our family's and the Kildare family's investments, not to mention clean the dirty money. And a great quarter for returns is good for everyone.

Also in recent news, Neve took me aside the other day and slyly mentioned that she and Ares were "pulling the goalie." As in, I might be an aunt sooner rather than later. Which is *SO* fucking amazing and exciting.

But the biggest news of all...at least to me...is that there's been *zero* word from the Carveli family. None. Two months ago, Ares thought it was alarming that they'd stopped responding to him. A month ago, it was just plain weird.

But then a few weeks ago, the word on the street started to filter in from multiple sources that Luca Carveli was dead from an “unfortunate and unexpected heart attack”.

And *still* it’s been radio fucking silence from the Italians.

You’d think this would fill me with relief. Like, overwhelmingly so. It certainly has the rest of my family ecstatic that I’m no in the grip of the horrible blood-marker promising me to Luca.

But for some reason, I can’t relax quite yet. For some reason, I’m still waiting for the other shoe to drop, as if Luca’s going to come staggering back from the grave looking to finish what he started.

Yeah, I *seriously* need to start sleeping better.

I inhale and exhale once more into the mirror. Then it’s time to get ready for my own birthday party.

I’VE GOT plans to go out later with “the girls”—Neve, Eilish, Elsa, Una, and my and Eilish’s friend Dahlia—to celebrate my newly-minted legal drinking status. But first, it’s a family dinner dialed up to the max.

It’s well into fall, now. But just the same, Ya-ya’s had the outdoor area where we all love to eat set up for a huge birthday feast. The massive dining table is draped in white linen, and gorgeous floral arrangements under the arbor are wrapped in twinkling garden lights and surrounded by heat lamps and flickering torches.

It’s truly magical, and even if I’ve still got this darkness weighing on my shoulders, I can’t help but grin when I walk

out to the waiting crowd of friends and family in a beautiful setting like this.

“Surprise.”

I almost have a heart attack when I hear the voice behind me.

Since Paris, being surprised from behind isn't exactly on my list of favorite activities. But when I remember how to actually breathe, and can focus on who's standing in front of me, my face lights up.

“D!”

I fling myself into my brother Deimos' arms, grinning as he chuckles and hugs me back. When the rest of us returned to New York from London, Deimos stayed behind to run the European Drakos operations. The youngest of my brothers, I haven't seen him in *months*, and even then, it was only for like twelve hours because he was just here for a quick meeting before diving right back into work in London.

“I can't believe you're here!!”

He chuckles in that dark, slightly rough way of his. “I can't believe my kid sister is twenty-fucking-one. Goddamn, Callie, when did *that* happen?”

Our dad was a Greek mythology nut. So all six of us were named after various Greek gods, titans, and in my case, a muse. Our oldest, deceased brother, Atlas, was named for the titan who was condemned to hold up the heavens. Even though *our* Atlas seemed more condemned to be a ruthless asshole built purely from spite and malice.

It's a terrible thing to say, but he's not exactly missed much.

Ares is the god of war and courage. That tracks. Hades doesn't so much fit his “god of hell” moniker anymore, not after

finding Elsa. But that streak is still in there somewhere. Kratos, literal giant that he is, is completely the “god of strength and might”. Calliope was the muse of “eloquence, epic poetry, and harmony of voice”, which is comedy gold because I can’t sing for *shit*, and I’ve never once written a poem.

I also don’t have an eloquent bone in my body. Can’t win ‘em all, I guess.

But Deimos, like Ares, Hades, and Kratos, fully embodies his namesake. Deimos was the Greek god of dread and terror. And while *I’m* not scared of my own brother, I understand how most of the rest of the world is.

I mean, he’s a scary guy.

Tall and muscular, with jet-black hair, our father’s dark, brooding eyes, and oddly—considering the rest of us got the tanned Mediterranean skin genes—supernaturally pale skin. Combined with his deep-set eyes, his chiseled jaw and cheekbones, and his fierce look, Deimos cuts a fairly terrifying figure. There’s a reason even as the youngest Drakos brother, he’s running all of our European business almost single-handedly.

People fear and respect him. When he walks into a room, that room tends to go quiet. It’s like he got *just* enough of the ruthless genes from our father to be a serious force to be reckoned with, but not so many that he turned out a sadistic monster like Atlas.

But all of that aside, to me, he’s just D, and I love that he’s here.

Hades gives me a huge hug next and grins as he passes me a shot of ouzo. I make a face, because the traditional Greek

alcohol that tastes like licorice is *not* my thing at all.

“Hey, tradition is tradition, Callie.”

Behind him, *everyone* else raises their glass of ouzo as well, and I can see the beaming grin on Ya-ya’s face. She loves the stuff. I sigh, rolling my eyes as I pluck the glass from Hades’ hand.

“*Okay, okay.*”

“*Stin iyia mas!*” Ya-ya crows, lifting her glass as the rest of my family echoes the Greek version of “cheers”.

I’m stilling recovering from the licorice taste of the drink as Kratos comes over to give me a huge bear hug. Ya-ya clings to me, beaming into my face as she kisses both of my cheeks and tells me how proud of me she is, and how fortunate it is that fate stepped in and put a stop to the Luca madness.

Yeah, *fate*.

Fate, or a wall-mounted mirror to the jugular and a former Army Ranger snapping a neck.

One by one, my whole circle of friends and family hug me and wish me a happy birthday. Ares grins as he passes me a glass of expensive champagne with an ultra-sarcastic “well, here’s your *very first champagne*, since you’ve *just* turned twenty-one.”

He chuckles as he hugs me close. “Love ya, Callie.”

The whole thing is magical, and lovely, and should feel like a brand-new chapter of my life, and a clean slate.

But it doesn’t.

Part of it is the overwhelming dread waiting for the other Luca shoe to drop. A huge part of my sleep-deprived, anxiety-ridden

brain is anxiously waiting for him to come staggering back from the grave with zombie-like hands clawing for me.

But the other part—the bigger part—is that my entire circle of family and friends is here.

...All except one.

Ares and Neve, Eilish and Gavan, Hades and Elsa, Elsa's little sister Nora, Cillian and Una, Kratos, Deimos, Ya-ya, Dahlia... They're all here.

Castle isn't.

Cillian mentioned in passing that he'd be coming later, after dealing with a Kildare family matter. But even with all the love and well-wishes I'm getting from everyone else here, his is the one presence I'm missing.

The one man that makes me feel like I'm not about to explode into a million pieces.

He's not here.

For my birthday.

Ouch.

"Oh, shit!" Hades turns to grin at me as I sip on my champagne. "Where's your hat, Callie?"

I glower at him. "I am *not* wearing that thing."

"The hat" isn't a Greek tradition. It's just a ridiculous Drakos family one. It's a giant plush, green and purple striped brimmed top-hat, like the one the Mad Hatter in *Alice in Wonderland* wears, or the Cat In The Hat. Ares wore it on his tenth birthday and refused to take it off for the pictures, despite our father's insistence to get rid of it. Then Ya-ya decided it was adorable, so the hat stayed.

Two months later, when it was Kratos's birthday, he decided to wear the same damn hat.

And that, tragically, is how cringey family traditions are born. Since then, *all of us* have to wear that same goddamn hat at every single birthday party. My brothers think it's hilarious, of course. Meanwhile, I have twenty years of birthday pictures of me glaring at the camera like a pissed-off Cat In The Hat or the world's most aggressive Jamiroquai fan.

"Get the hat! Get the hat!"

Hades starts the chant. Pretty soon, all of my siblings and in-laws are chanting it too.

"*Fine*," I mutter, rolling my eyes and smiling in spite of myself. "Fine, okay. Be right back."

Up in my room, the hat is still sitting on the edge of my bed where Hades left it earlier in readiness for its big moment. I sigh as I put it on my head and glance dismally at my reflection in the mirror.

God, do I look stupid. But whatever. Maybe it'll distract from the bags under my eyes.

I head back down to the party and decide to swing through the kitchen to snag another flute of champagne. But when I step in, I instantly skid to a stop in surprise.

I'm not the only one in here.

Dahlia's eyes widen as they stab past a set of broad, muscular shoulders at me. And not just any shoulders.

Deimos' shoulders.

Deimos who's currently all but pinning Dahlia in place with a hand clenched on the counter to either side of her as he looms over her. I frown curiously as my friend smiles weakly at me.

“Callie...”

When she says my name, Deimos’ shoulders seem to tense a little more. But then a second later, he’s dropping his hand from the edge of the counter as he pulls away from a pale-looking Dahlia.

“I...was just looking for the bathroom,” my friend blurts. Her French mother’s green eyes glint against her father’s dark hair and tanned, Middle Eastern complexion.

“It’s, uh...” I frown. “It’s still where it was the last dozen times you’ve been over here?”

She forces an awkward smile to her lips. “Oh, right. Thanks.”

Her throat bobs, and I watch her shiver as she slips away from Deimos, shooting me another quick look as if I’ve just saved her from being devoured by a wolf before she disappears down the hall.

I watch her leave before I turn to glare at my brother. “What the fuck was that?”

Deimos lifts a shoulder, eying me coolly without blinking. “Just introducing myself to your friend, Callie.”

My eyes narrow. “Why was Dahlia scared of you?”

“Everyone’s scared of me.”

“Yeah, but why are you even talking to her?”

He smiles thinly. “I’m not talking to her. I’m talking to you.”

I have about a hundred other questions. But before I can get to them, he strolls easily past me, his dark eyes glinting as he pats me on the shoulder.

“See you out there, birthday girl.”

Um, okay. Weird much?

I make a note to grill Dahlia later about whatever the hell that actually was as I round the corner into the sitting room with the big open French doors that lead out to the gardens. When suddenly, I walk right into a massive, strong, familiar-smelling chest.

I gasp, jolting as I take a step back and then drag my eyes up to his.

My heart skips.

He came.

Castle smiles a tight smile. “Happy Birthday, Callie,” he growls quietly.

It’s almost the first words we’ve exchanged in two months. And I know that silence isn’t because of what happened in Paris. Castle isn’t avoiding me because he killed someone for me. He’s killed plenty of times—not just in service to the Kildares, but also before, in the Army Rangers, even though according to Neve and Eilish, he never ever talks about that.

No, it’s not Luca’s death that has Castle avoiding me.

It’s *me*. And what I did.

It’s the fact that I kissed him when I had no business to. The silence and his absence is my punishment. Because even now, two months later, what I felt the night of my stolen kiss hasn’t changed one bit.

Actually, that’s a lie. It has changed.

It’s gotten even *worse*.

And now, being this close to him, almost touching him, and smelling him, and hearing his voice for the first time in close to two months, it’s like the rush of a drug hitting my veins.

Like the air has been sucked from my lungs and my skin is on fire.

Castle's eyes pierce into mine, freezing the moment, before slowly, they drag up higher, and his brow arches in amusement.

God. Fucking. Dammit.

I cringe as my hand jerks up to yank the fucking hat off my head.

"It's just a dumb tradition..." I mumble, my face reddening.

"Every family has 'em."

I swallow. His jaw ripples. The seconds tick by.

"We should get you back to your party."

He starts to turn. But suddenly, my hand darts out to grab his forearm. I can feel him stiffen, and feel the way his arm muscles tense and ripple under my fingers.

"Castle—"

"It's going to be fine, Callie," he growls quietly.

He turns, and my pulse races as he pushes me back out of sight of the French doors, into a small alcove in the hallway. My breathing quickens. My skin tingles all over as my eyes lift to his.

He thinks me grabbing his arm is because of the Luca thing. *That's* how much he's moved past my embarrassing kiss and throwing myself at him.

Oof.

"Look, it's been two months, and we haven't heard a *thing* from the Carveli family. The rumor circulating about a heart

attack is even more proof that they have no idea what really happened and they're looking to bury the whole thing, too."

I swallow. "But what if...I mean...what if someone at the hotel—"

"My guy's cleaner wouldn't have missed a single thing. Trust me on that." His eyes lock with mine. "We're *fine*, Callie."

I swallow. His jaw grinds again.

"Castle..."

"It never happened."

The fire in his eyes tells me we're no longer talking about Paris.

We're talking about the rooftop.

My heart starts to beat faster. My tongue darts out to wet my dry lips.

"But...it did," I say quietly.

Castle's eyes narrow. "Stop it."

"You can't just pretend something didn't—"

"You're missing your own birthday party, Callie," he says quietly, with an iron edge to his voice. I swear he leans down a little closer to me when he says it, though.

My hand lifts, my fingers brushing the front of his button-up shirt. Instantly, his much larger one grabs my wrist tightly, pulling my hand away.

"One thing you'll learn as you get older, Callie," he growls. "Is that *you can* pretend something didn't happen. And then go on living your life as if it didn't. Believe me."

He pulls away and steps back out of the alcove. My soul screams for more of him, and my heart wrenches.

“Happy birthday.”

Then he’s gone, out to the waiting party.

THE CURRENT SHITSHOW that is my life notwithstanding, dinner is *amazing*. I do everything in my power to avoid even looking down the table to where Castle’s sitting. I joke with my brothers and my friends, and drink really good champagne, and eat delicious food until we’re all stuffed and smiling.

Even if my grin is half fake.

The waitstaff Ya-ya hired for the party is just setting down cups of coffee and plates of cake—chocolate with chocolate frosting, my *favorite*—when suddenly, everyone’s attention is caught by an unmistakable noise, and people start looking around in confusion.

“*Shit!*” Ares snarls, lurching from his chair and pointing. “Chopper!”

Instantly, we’re up, with all four of my brothers, Castle, and Cillian pulling guns out and training them on the black helicopter as it slowly descends from the sky. Hades is barking orders into his phone—probably calling the guards posted on the street and on some of the floors below—as the heli slowly touches down on the grass.

“Keep back!” Castle roars, his gun aimed at the helicopter as the engines cut out and the door slides open. A staircase lowers, and slowly, a man steps out and walks down to the ground.

A lethally good-looking man with dark black hair, piercing blue eyes, and a chiseled, aristocratic jaw in a black suit. A man who seems completely unfazed by all the guns trained on him as he calmly strolls toward the table.

“*Fuck, Ares,*” Hades hisses next to me, glancing at our older brother. “That’s—”

“Massimo Carveli,” Ares finishes in an edged voice. “Luca’s fucking *son.*”

My heart drops. My face pales as the man ambles into the glow of the string lights and torches. His mouth pulls into a menacing smile as he plucks someone’s flute of champagne off the table and brings it to his lips. He takes a sip, rolling his neck before suddenly, his eyes land right on me.

“A very happy birthday to you, Calliope,” he purrs in a deep, Sicilian-accented voice.

For some reason, instinctively, my eyes dart to Castle. His face is grim and lined, his arm muscles rippling as he keeps the gun trained on Massimo.

“What do you want, Mr. Carveli,” Ares growls thinly.

“For a start, I’d like all of you to stop pointing your guns at me. Clearly, I’m unarmed, and alone.”

“Well that was fucking stupid on your part, wasn’t it?” Hades mutters under his breath before Ares shuts him up with a look.

Ares glances around the circle and nods before he lowers his own gun and slips it back into his jacket.

“You’re neither a friend nor an ally of this family, and we have no business together. So I’m going to ask you one more fucking time, politely, why the fuck you just landed a

helicopter in my grandmother's yard in the middle of a private party. And then, I'm going to ask not so politely."

Massimo chuckles, sipping the champagne in his tattooed hand.

"Then I'll be brief. I'm sure the last thing your dear sister wants on her birthday is *impoliteness*." His piercing eyes swivel to mine. "Isn't that right, Calliope?"

"*Speak*," Deimos hisses. "Now."

"I'm sure by now, you've all heard of my father's unexpected and unfortunate passing."

When no one says a thing, he shrugs. "Indeed. That's about my feelings on the subject too." He turns and spits onto the grass as he mutters something harsh-sounding in Italian. "However, with his passing, it is now *I* who wears the Carveli crown."

"I'll be sure to send a delightful fruit basket," Ares mutters through grit teeth.

Massimo grins. "But you see, a crown, a throne, and a ludicrously fat bank account aren't the only things I've inherited from my father. Which is what brings me here tonight..." he turns his gaze to me once again. "And to *you*, sweet Calliope."

"Look, I'm gonna make this easy for you," Hades snaps. "I'm counting backward from five, and I'll even do it in Italian so nothing gets lost in translation. When I hit *uno*, if you're not on that chopper, I'm throwing your ass off the roof, *capisci? Cinque*."

Massimo just smiles wider.

"*Quattro*."

The Italian clears his throat.

“*Tre.*”

“I’m here,” Massimo growls quietly, “because the last thing my father left me, Calliope...” His eyes stab into me. “Is *you.*”

The rooftop goes silent. The color drains from my face as my pulse thuds in my ears.

“You see, by all rights, you are now *mine.*”

My head swims.

Because there it is.

The other shoe, dropping right down on top of me.

Ares barks a cold laugh. “By *zero* rights will you have anything to do with my sister. Get the fuck back on your—”

“Under the terms of your father and my father’s blood-marker —”

“I suggest in the *strongest way possible,*” Ares snarls, “that you re-read those terms.”

Massimo smiles. “What makes you think I didn’t do exactly that before flying all the way from Los Angeles to New York—a dirty city I fucking hate, by the way,” he sneers with an air of distaste. His eyes glint at my brother. “I suggest *you* re-read the terms on the copy of the marker you hold, Mr. Drakos. And as for you, my dear?”

I shudder as he turns his cold, brutal eyes on me, his lips curling dangerously.

“You, Calliope, have a week to be at my home, ready to assume your position as my wife and do *everything* that comes with that. Or there will be consequences—consequences that I promise you your family is not ready to deal with.”

He drains the last of his champagne, sets the glass down, and smiles once more at the whole group of us.

“Again—happy birthday.”

Then he turns and walks right back to his waiting helicopter as the motors engage.

And the second shoe crushes me under its heel.

CASTLE

YOU'D THINK BY NOW, given the cards I've been dealt, that I would no longer be shocked or surprised by life's ability to flip over a table and fuck shit up when you least expect it. I mean my life has been *defined* by fate kicking in the door and making a goddamn mess.

Even so, when Massimo drops that bomb, I feel all the air leave my lungs.

It's not the shock of his announcement, or the positively eye-rolling dramatics of him flying his ass in on a helicopter—though to be fair, there's no way anyone would have let him in if he came knocking at the front door. It's not even the cavalier way he looked at her and told her she was *his*, like some fucking collectible baseball card—though I felt a twist of something savagely vicious inside of me when he did.

No. What steals the air from my lungs is the look on Callie's face as Massimo walks away. After life kicks her right in the fucking teeth, *just* after I've told her it's all going to be okay.

That's what hurts the worst. Feeling that I lied to her. Thinking I literally built her up even higher just so she could fall even farther.

Predictably, after Massimo takes off the shit instantly hits the fan. In no time, we're all back inside, in the sprawling old library of the Drakos estate. Hades is yelling. Kratos is yelling over him. And then Deimos is snarling over the *both* of them.

Gavan is furiously barking orders in Russian into his phone in the corner. Neve, Eilish, and Dahlia try to console a stricken-looking Callie while Elsa gesticulates wildly with her hands as she talks legal mumbo-jumbo with Ares. Dimitra sits to one side with Elsa's wide-eyed sixteen-year-old sister, Nora. In another corner, I watch Una's hand quietly fingering something in her bag that I know damn well is a naked blade, a meditative, murderous look on her face.

"So get it the fuck out, man!"

I drag my eyes back to where Hades is raking his fingers through his longish hair, looking at Ares.

"I'm presuming it's still here in dad's old safe?"

Ares nods. "Yeah. One sec."

He disappears for a minute and then returns with a locked metal binder. Ares sets it on the desk in the corner, unlocks it with a brass key, and opens the front cover, revealing a yellowed page with two signatures at the bottom.

I've never actually seen one of these things, but I know damn well what a mafia blood-marker is. This one looks ancient. Below the hand-written words, both signatures are in dark, rusty red.

Yeah... There's nothing metaphorical about the term "blood-marker".

Next to both signatures is a thumbprint, also inked in blood. Ares's brow furrows deeply as he scans the page. Elsa moves next to him, frowning as she reads over his shoulder.

“Well?” Ares mutters, fury obvious in his tone. “What the fuck is that prick even talking about?”

Elsa just keeps scanning the page rapidly but carefully.

“*Elsa*—?”

“*Take it easy*,” Hades snaps, grabbing his brother’s collar as his eyes slip over to his fiancée. “She’s working.”

Ares nods. “Sorry,” he mutters, stepping back.

Elsa shrugs it off. “It’s fine. Just give me half a sec to piece this together. It’s not like mafia marriage contract law was something I specialized in at law school.”

My eyes slide back to Callie, sitting forlornly on the couch, staring at the wall in front of her. Part of me wants to go over—if for no other reason than to give her a reassuring pat on the shoulder and tell her that this, too, is going to be okay.

But I can’t do that.

For several reasons.

Callie and Eilish’s friend Dahlia, who looks thoroughly out of place given that she’s the only one here who’s not mafia connected, lowers her voice as she leans close to Eilish. “What exactly is a blood-marker?”

“An iron-clad agreement with monumental consequences if broken,” Kratos growls. “In our world, it’s literally an unbreakable contract.”

“How so?”

“If we broke this fucking thing,” Ares hisses, “we as a family would be *done*. Finito. Full stop. Completely excommunicated from the entire mafia world. Our enemies would have carte blanche to come after us without repercussions. Any treaties

we had with other families or organizations would instantly become null and void. Our allies would have to abandon us or face a similar fate.” His eyes narrow. “It means even my own wife’s family would have to turn its back on us, or also be destroyed.”

“Hang on.”

We all whirl at the sound of Elsa’s voice. She’s still hunched over the document, her fingertip tracing a sentence over and over.

“This clause, right here. I can’t imagine Massimo missed it, but I don’t know. Maybe he misread it, or didn’t think we’d catch the full shades of meaning in the wording?”

“What is the wording, exactly?” Ares asks.

“Massimo isn’t wrong. Technically speaking, in the event of Luca’s death, his son *would* inherit the terms of this contract, which means he’d be within his rights—” She stops and scowls. “I mean, within his rights as written in this goddamn thing—to marry Callie. *However...*” she looks up and grins. “There’s a grace period.”

“What??”

Callie bolts out of her seat, her eyes wide and the first splash of color in her face I’ve seen in her cheeks since that fucker landed.

“Yeah, it’s right here.” Elsa snorts. “What an arrogant, narcissistic prick.”

Hades lifts a brow. “Who?”

“Luca. He literally added in a ‘grieving period’. It’s worded weirdly, but essentially it says in the event of his death before

the contract is fulfilled, i.e., before he marries Callie, she's allowed a period to mourn Luca's death."

Hades snorts. Callie's lips purse again, her hand clenching and unclenching over and over at her side. It takes a lot—a *lot*—not to go to her. But I don't.

I can't.

"And in that period," Elsa continues, "it goes on to say that if she 'finds comfort and love elsewhere', she's free to *marry someone else*, and not Massimo."

Well, shit. That sounds like good news.

Hades looks up, grinning. "Wait, that's it? Callie could literally marry some friend of hers just for the hell of it, for like, whatever period of time, and it cancels out the whole thing with that Massimo fucker?"

Elsa nods slowly. Deimos clears his throat, his brows knit together darkly.

"Why the hell would he put that in there? I mean, the grieving period is pure narcissistic horseshit, I agree. But why the part about allowing her to avoid marrying Massimo? It's like a fucking get out of jail free card."

"Because Massimo got along with his father about as well as we did with ours," Ares growls quietly. "It's sort of an open secret. I don't know if anyone knows the details why, but they were definitely not close."

Kratos frowns. "So, what, this was Luca's way of giving the finger to Massimo in the event of his own death?"

"I don't think so." I shake my head, eyeing the contract on the desk before I raise my eyes to the rest of them. "I think it was a warning to his son."

Ares nods. “That’d be my guess, too. There’s going to be an identical blood-marker in Luca’s safe laying out the same terms. I’d bet anything that little clause was put in there as a subtle warning to Massimo that killing his own father wouldn’t automatically get him Callie, and by proxy, an alliance with our family. That also makes sense given the rumors I heard months ago about Massimo *not* being in his father’s will or his plans for the future of their organization. Clearly, they made up before Luca’s heart attack, given that Massimo *did* inherit his father’s fortune and throne.”

“That makes the next part a whole lot more logical,” Elsa murmurs, peering further at the document. “It only stipulates that Callie be married to this potential other party for one year in order to cancel the blood-marker completely. Again, in the event that Luca is dead before she and he marry.”

She winces as she looks over to Callie.

“So, you’d potentially have to marry somebody else for a year.”

Hades shrugs again, still grinning as he claps his hands and strides over to his sister. He rubs her shoulders and then gives her a hug. “Hey, Cals, cheer up! This is great! Pick a friend. Pick *anyone*. So, you have to marry them for a year on paper. So what—”

Ares clears his throat uncomfortably. When we all look at him, I frown at the grim expression on his face.

“It’s... Uh...” he looks away, raking his fingers down his jaw. “It’s slightly more complicated than that, I’m afraid.”

Deimos frowns. “Explain.”

“As you know, Thermopylae Acquisitions has had a killer quarter. A killer *two* quarters.” He frowns. “Actually, we’ve

completely blown the roof off expectations. That place is legit *printing* money right now.”

Hades’ brow furrows. “Bro, that’s generally considered a good thing.”

“Yeah, well...” His mouth thins. “The taxes on that kind of income aren’t. But, little known fact, there’s a tax ceiling on net income over five hundred million in New York for individuals under the age of twenty-three.”

Something snaps into place in my head.

Oh fuck.

Slowly, I see it dawn on a few other faces, one by one.

Ares looks grim as he turns to Callie. “I’m so sorry. I was going to talk to you about this sometime this week.”

“What the fuck did you do,” Hades growls quietly.

Ares exhales. “I put Thermopylae Acquisitions in Callie’s name three days ago.”

The room goes silent. Hades closes his eyes, his teeth bared. “You *stupid* motherfuck—”

“Come on, man!” Ares snaps back. “Like I could have seen any of *this shit* coming?!”

“Your job is to run this fucking family!” Hades snarls.

“I *am* running this goddamn family!” his brother roars back. “Every minute of every hour of every. Single. Fucking. *Day!*”

Neve quietly slides in next to him, slipping her hand into his and turning to kiss his shoulder. Ares takes a deep breath. So does Hades when Elsa puts her hand on his.

Slowly, Ares exhales again.

“The problem is, at the moment, eighty-five percent of our money and fifty percent of the Kildares’ money is tied up in Thermopylae.”

I glance at Cillian, watching his jaw clench.

“At the earliest, I could divest next quarter,” Ares mutters. “It would mean some fines, but I’d cover those myself. But that’s the earliest. The real issue is, if Callie just marries some friend or buddy or whatever, there’ll be no hiding that kind of money attached to her name. We’re talking two point six billion dollars in capital.”

Jesus fucking Christ.

“And friend or not,” Ares grunts, “that kind of money can change people.”

Deimos clears his throat. “You’re saying if she married a buddy, he could take one look at that money and file for divorce, looking to take half or more?”

“Exactly.”

“Yeah, well, isn’t that what prenups are for?” Hades mutters.

Next to him, Elsa makes a face. “Yes, but the second this theoretical husband filed and made a motion to collect on her assets, prenup or not, those funds would be locked down. Indefinitely. Every divorce and contract lawyer in the country would take that case on contingency, given the possible payout. We’re talking those funds being potentially frozen for decades.”

The room threatens to dissolve into chaos as voices begin to raise and fingers start to get pointed.

“Actually...” Elsa says loudly, quieting everyone. Her face sours as her eyes scan the document in front of her. “Wait. It

actually gets worse.”

Ares groans, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Exactly how the fuck can this possibly get worse.”

“It can’t just be some random guy,” Elsa says quietly, raising her eyes from the page. “As it’s written here, Callie can avoid marrying Massimo only if she instead marries the head of *another* mafia family.”

That’s the breaking point. At that, the room explodes into chaotic screaming and yelling. I stay where I am on the fringes of it all, my eyes locked onto Callie as she throws herself right into the thick of it—jabbing an accusatory finger at Ares, yelling something incoherent at Elsa, turning to scream blindly at Hades.

A hand lands heavily on my shoulder. I turn and meet Cillian’s calm, cold look. He nods with his chin, and I follow him a few feet away to the window.

“I’m going to be brief,” he growls quietly. “Ares is wrong.”

“About?”

“About having half of our money invested in Thermopylae. That’s what it was at first, but I’ve since gone behind his back and invested more.”

I make a face. “Fuck. What are we talking?”

“It’s more like ninety percent.”

Jesus fucking *Christ*.

“Elsa’s right,” he continues. “If Calliope marries just ‘some guy’ who happens to head a family, there’s no telling what might happen. Even if we’re talking allies, that person might take one look at that kind of money and decide friendship has a fucking price tag. And New York doesn’t look kindly on

prenups where the richer party keeps everything and leaves the other party with shit. It could be bulletproof, but a state Supreme Court could easily give a third or more of that away if it came to that.”

His sharp green eyes grab onto mine. I already know what he’s thinking before he says it.

“Cillian...”

“I’m not saying this lightly, Castle,” he growls. “But this is our backs against the fucking wall. I know we’ve been putting off having this conversation, but I *am* going to be stepping down. And the throne really is yours. You’re ready. You’re more than ready.”

“I’m *not a fucking Kildare*,” I hiss.

“Well, here’s your goddamn chance to become one,” he snaps back. “Christ, you’ve been one by proxy for ten fucking years, Castle. This is it.”

I turn away. My gaze pierces the chaos of the room and lands on a wild-eyed, flushed, so innocent and yet so fierce Callie.

Callie, whose lips I know the taste of.

Callie, whose body I know the heat and curves of.

Callie, who I’ve already killed for.

“Castle, this isn’t something I relish asking you, but—”

I turn away from Cillian and stride across the floor, my eyes locked onto her. My jaw set and my pulse thudding in my ears, I try to tell myself I’m doing this for the family. For the money for Eilish and Neve’s future, and their eventual children’s future. I tell myself I’m doing this because it’s the right thing to do. That this is simply another mission, and I’m simply a soldier, just as I’ve always been.

But the truth is, before I even let the words slip out of my mouth, I know that's not the reason I'm doing this.

I'm doing it for her.

And that's the most dangerous reason of all.

"I'll do it."

Everyone is still yelling at each other and nobody even hears me. So I say it again, much louder.

"I'll do it."

Slowly, everyone stops talking. Every face in the room swivels to stare at me—some with a look of confusion on their face; some, like Hades, with an accusatory scowl.

"*What?*" Hades hisses thinly.

"I said I'll do it." I tear my gaze away from him, letting my eyes stab through the lot of them until they pierce right into her own baby-blues looking back at me from under those thick black lashes.

"I'll marry Callie."

CALLIE

AT FIRST, it's sheer bedlam. Everyone's shouting at once. Neve is arguing with Cillian, accusing him of shoving Castle into the middle of this against his will. Deimos is roaring at Ares about putting the entire family at risk. Ya-ya is hastily ushering Nora and Dahlia out of the room, who've definitely been exposed to *way* more drama tonight than they probably ever expected to be at a simple birthday party.

Hades accuses Castle of trying to get into my pants. Eilish immediately defends him, screaming in Hades' face, while Kratos gets in *her* face, which of course sets Gavan off. When there's about six different fist fights about to go down in the fucking library simultaneously, I finally explode.

“*STOP IT!*”

When that doesn't work, I whirl, grab a crystal tumbler off the bar cart, and hurl it at the wall as I scream again.

“STOP!!”

The shattering glass against one of the bookshelves halts the whole circus and bring everything to a silent standstill. Ares catches my eye, and suddenly, the fury drops from his face as he gives a curt nod of understanding.

“Everyone. Out,” he growls quietly.

I can see Hades is about to say something. But when I glare at him, he drops it and just gives me a quick nod. Soon, everyone's filing out except Ares, Cillian, Castle, and me. When it's just the four of us left, my brother exhales slowly.

"First things first: this ball is completely in Callie's court now." He gives Cillian and Castle both a hard look. "This is *my* mess. And I'm not forcing my sister to do *shit* to clean it up."

"Noted, God of War," Cillian mutters.

My brother eyes him for a moment and then turns his gaze to Castle. "While I appreciate your offer, it doesn't necessarily solve our problem." He points to the blood-marker on the desk. "Elsa was clear. It has to be a head of a—"

"He will be."

Cillian turns his gaze to Castle. Something unspoken flickers between them. Because slowly, Castle nods his head. Cillian puts a firm hand on his shoulder, nods back, then turns to Ares as he takes a measured breath.

"I'm stepping down. Nobody but Una knows that yet, but they will as soon as I leave this room." He shakes his head. "I'm done, Ares. I mean not done with the life or with my family or even this organization. But I've been running the Kildare empire since I was seventeen. That part, I'm done with."

Ares nods slowly. "You're serious about this?"

"Extremely. Ireland was..." Cillian looks away. "Eye opening. Una and I want to travel. We want to live our lives together. And I can't do that sitting on the throne. There's just not enough space for both. So I'm making this choice."

My brother nods slowly again. "I get it, Cil. I do. But, big elephant in the room..."

“My last name isn’t Kildare,” Castle growls.

“Exactly.”

Cillian shrugs. “It’s not unheard of. Viktor Komarov runs the Kashenko Bratva. Michael Genovisi is head of the Scaliame family here in New York. It’s not even out of the question for an Irish family to have a female head, either. But Neve is your wife, and even if we’re aligned, that would never fly with the Council of Clans. Neither would Eilish, given that she’s with Gavan...not that I think she’d ever want to, anyway.”

Ares clears his throat. Cillian smiles.

“To answer the question you’re trying to figure out how to phrase delicately, no. Una and I aren’t looking to have children of our own. Not with the blood I have running in my veins. I’ve already spoken to the Irish Council. Pending an official declaration, Castle’s been vetted and approved.”

Castle’s brow furrows as his gaze shifts to Cillian. The older Irishman shrugs. “Call it planning ahead.”

“I only said I’d *think* about it, Cillian,” Castle grunts. “Jesus.”

“And it seems based on your unsolicited declaration five minutes ago that you *have* thought about it,” Cillian fires back.

“Unless you’d like to walk back that statement.”

Castle’s eyes dart to mine. I swallow, chewing on my lip as my pulse thuds in my ears.

“No,” he growls quietly. “No, it stands.”

It takes everything I have not to jump and down and to bite back the grin that is threatening to spread over my face. I can’t help it. And I know this is fake, and forced, and it’s not like he’s dropping to his knees with a ring and asking me to marry

him and ride off into the fucking sunset with him where he'll redefine the word "orgasm" for me on an hourly basis.

But still.

This is happening.

I'm *marrying* Castle.

Holy shit.

Don't scream and jump for joy. Don't scream and jump for joy.

Cillian clears his throat. "I think we should give the two of them a moment alone to think this through before they commit to anything."

Ares nods, then turns to me. He walks over, putting his hands on my shoulders and smiling wryly as he looks deep into my eyes. "You *do not* have to do anything you don't want to, Callie."

"Understood. But if I don't, we'll potentially lose a bunch of money, and so will the Kildares. Or, door number two, I'll have to marry Massimo Carveli."

Ares' mouth thins. He doesn't say anything. I mean what is there to say? I give him a caged smile.

"It's okay, Ares. You didn't fuck up."

You're giving me the best birthday gift I could have ever asked for.

Even if it's fake.

Even if it's forced.

Even if we'll spend a year of marriage with him ignoring me.

It's just a tiny win. But I'll take it.

"It's only a year," I shrug. "And Castle's not so bad."

He smirks, shaking his head. “Still. It’s up to you.”

When he and Cillian leave, shutting the door behind them, the library goes silent. Castle exhales slowly, raking his fingers down his jaw before shoving them through his hair.

“Congratulations,” I say quietly.

“On *what* exactly,” he spits. “Being forced into this fucking charade?”

My smile falters. My eyes lance into him as anger surges within me.

Fuck him. Past events involving me kissing him aside, neither of us asked for this. And I sure as shit don’t appreciate the way he’s looking at me like I’m a fucking burden he has to carry here.

“Yeah, because I actually set this entire thing up myself. Surprise!”

He shoots me a look.

“And for the record, I’m not the one who volunteered joining our hands in holy matrimony,” I mutter.

“Yeah, I’m sure you’ll go to the altar kicking and screaming.”

I glare at him. “Fuck. You. Get over yourself. And I was congratulating you on being the new Irish king, by the way.”

“Thanks,” he mutters darkly, exhaling loudly as his eyes lock with mine. “We have to do this, you know.”

“Thinking about the money?”

His eyes stay on mine. “Of course I am. I’m thinking about my family’s safety net, and considering the prospect of you marrying one of your little friends, and him running *off* with

my family's safety net. So, yes, Callie. I'm thinking about the money."

My lips purse. "One of my *little friends*?" I spit. "I'm not fucking ten, asshole."

"Okay, let's just stop," he groans. "Let's just fucking *stop*. Look, we both have to do this. So can we please make the best of it and just get it done."

"Wow," I drawl. "*So* romantic. I'm shocked it's been so long since you saw this Lorraine chick of yours."

"Okay, a, keep your nose out of my personal life. And b, you don't know what the fuck you're talking about."

I look away. "Fine. My mistake. So sorry to offend your girlfriend."

"She's..." He glares at me, then shakes his head. "You know, alternatively, I *could* just walk away and let you ride off into the sunset with the son of the man we killed. By all accounts, he's an even more sadistic psychopath than his fucking dad, so, you know, good fucking luck with that."

I bristle, swallowing as my face pales. Castle notices and realizes he's crossed a line.

"Sorry," he mutters. His eyes raise to mine. "Have you told anyone?"

"About Paris?" I shake my head. "No. You?"

He shakes his. "No."

"Not even Cillian?"

"I don't see why he needs to be involved."

Wow. I chew on my lip. Castle rakes his fingers through his hair again, his muscles rippling under his dress shirt. He turns

to the side, and I can't help but let my eyes run admiringly over his profile.

Fucking hell, it's outrageous how freaking gorgeous he is. Heat pools in my core as I basically ogle him and try not to grin at the thought that I'm about to be married to all *that*.

"Callie."

I blink, my face burning hotly as I realize he's turned and caught me staring at him like a fucking creep. I swallow as his eyes lock with mine.

"It won't be real, Callie."

I lift a shoulder easily as my arms cross over my chest. "Yeah, obviously. I know."

"*Do you?*"

Jesus. "I'm not a fucking *child*, Castle. I grew up in this world, remember? Yes, I understand the concept of an arranged, fake marriage."

He nods slowly as he steps toward me. If he was really trying to make his point about this being fake, I'm pretty sure he'd keep as far away from me as possible. Wouldn't he?

"What?" I blurt. It comes out as bitchy and snappish, but only because him coming closer to me is throwing me off kilter. It's making my pulse race, and sucking the air from my lungs, and fucking up the laws of physics and gravity.

You know, all the usual things he does to me whenever he enters the same room as me.

"I just need to be crystal clear about this," he growls. "What happened before—"

“Get over yourself,” I snap, feeling my face heat. “I was drunk, Castle.”

His mouth thins. His brow arches. “Ah. So you *were* drunk.”

Yeah, I’m a little late using his out.

I shrug. “Obviously.”

“And it *obviously* won’t happen again?”

I roll my eyes. “No, it won’t, okay? Seriously, my God, get over yourself.”

He’s standing right in front of me, looming over me and drowning me in his heat, power, and bergamot scent.

“This is to save you from that psycho Massimo, and to save both our families from financial ruin. *Not* to play house.”

It’s hard to keep the annoyed and bored routine going with him so close. For that matter, it’s hard to fucking *think* when he’s this close. Or breathe.

He’s not being fair.

“Fine, yes. For the last time, *I get it*. Okay?”

“There will be rules.”

I swallow. Something throbbing pulses in my core. Slowly, I drag my eyes to his.

“Rules?” I croak. “Like what?” My mind flips through a hundred different X-rated fantasies of Castle making me follow “his rules”.

And me *so* willingly submitting to them.

He frowns. “Like, no touching.”

My heart sinks. Oh. *Those* kinds of rules.

“Right. Yeah, obviously.”

“No kissing.”

“Kissing involves touching. You’re just being redundant there.”

“What I’m being is *clear*, Callie.”

“Kissing and touching is what married people do, Castle.”

He shoots me a piercing look. I roll my eyes.

“Oh my God, I’m kidding.”

Castle keeps that hard, eviscerating look on me.

“No touching, no kissing, no problem. It’s only a year, Castle. I’m sure we can keep our lives going exactly the same as they are now. Nothing changes.”

Bullshit.

Lies. So many fucking lies.

He nods. “Okay, then.”

“Great.”

“Great.”

Castle’s eyes meet mine. My throat bobs as I lose myself in those piercing blues.

“Callie,” he growls quietly.

My pulse hammers in my ears. My skin tingles with electricity as I swallow thickly and wet my lips.

“Yeah?” I croak quietly.

“I don’t want to start this on a foundation of bullshit.”

I swallow again. “Meaning?”

“Meaning I want to know why that happened that night.”

My heart skips. But I just shrug. “We already covered that. I was drunk.”

“That’s a nice story. Now I want the truth.”

I look away.

“What was it, Callie?” he growls. “Boredom? Not enough excitement or thrills in your life?”

Fuck you, asshole, it’s because I’m hopelessly in love with you.

“Something like that, maybe,” I snap casually. “I guess you have so many girls throwing themselves at you all the time you were just too worn out to say yes.”

He doesn’t say anything. But something begins to burn inside of me. Something sparks to life as he stands there, glowering at me.

Something that has me stepping closer to him. I reach out, but Castle’s jaw clenches, and he steps away from me.

My eyes raise to his as my lips suck between my teeth. “What are you so scared of?”

He laughs coldly. “I’m not scared of anything.”

“Are you worried about touching me because of my brothers?”

“I’m worried that you’re *not* scared of me.”

I gasp as he surges into me, grabbing one of my wrists as he leans down close to my face.

Really close. Closer than he’s been since the kiss.

“Because, sweetheart...” he rasps darkly. “*You fucking should be.*”

I’m still shivering when he lets me go. My pulse is still roaring in my ears as he whirls and storms over to the door. Just before

he opens it, he turns, and those piercing eyes stab into me.

“Happy birthday, Callie,” he growls quietly.

Then he leaves.

CASTLE

THE NEXT FEW days are a blur. And as annoyed as I initially was about Cillian preemptively putting my name before the Irish Council of Clans before I even agreed to the whole plan, now that things are in motion, it's a good thing he did.

It turns out that the "mourning period" outlined in the contract that Elsa was talking about...the little window Callie gets to "find comfort in and fall in love with someone else"...

...is *two fucking weeks*.

Meaning we need to get married *yesterday*.

I'm not sure what sort of pomp and circumstance I was expecting to change the head of an Irish mafia family, but I was definitely thinking some sort of ceremony. A knighting involving a fucking sword or something? Maybe in a weighty, somber cathedral?

Nope. It's none of those things. We meet in a room above O'Bannon's, an Irish pub in midtown, with Eamon Gallagher and Brian Fitzpatrick, two of the major Irish family heads from Ireland who sit on the Council of Clans: me, Cillian, Eamon and Brian, and Neve, Eilish, and Una, just because they want to be there for it.

There's no cathedral. No sword. I swear to uphold the rule and the will of the Council, and to put my family first. That part's easy. I might not be a Kildare by birth, but they're the only real family I've ever had.

At least, the only functional one.

The only one that's still alive.

The first one I knew was broken before I was even born into it. My father was a monster, and my mother his apathetic enabler.

Then there was Kelly, my little sister. The only good thing I can think of from that period of my life. But she was gone far too soon. Cruelly taken from this world by the very man who brought both of us into it.

The man we called "dad", whom I later killed with my bare hands.

The army is how I avoided jail. And it was the Rangers who showed me how to be a man. How to tap into that rage and fury inside of my heart and channel it correctly. That became the next family I knew: my special ops unit that consisted of Jeremy, Matt, Bryce, Jason, and myself.

I wouldn't call it particularly functional, or all that healthy. No family that exists in nearly perpetual violence and warfare can call itself healthy. But it was what it was, and it was what I needed during those years between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three.

Until an IED bolted to the kitchen table of a house we were breaching went off in their faces.

Then most of that family died.

And that's when I found my *next* family, the one I've been with for the last ten years. The one where I've basically fallen

into this role of being big brother to Neve and Eilish, and a strange sort of blend of brother and nephew to Cillian.

Maybe it's not the most functional family in the world either. But it's one I'd kill for. One I'd die for.

One I would do *anything* for.

So, yeah. Swearing to put them first is a vow I can make in my fucking sleep.

And that's it. That's the whole thing when it comes to changing the head of the entire Kildare empire. Two Council witnesses, a ten-second oath, and lastly a *sláinte* and a drink of whiskey, because of course that's part of it.

When it's done, after I've shaken Brian and Eamon's hands, and after Neve, Eilish, and Una have all given me big hugs and told me how proud they are of me, Cillian turns to me and holds out his hand. I shake my head in a mixture of amazement and disbelief as I grip it firmly.

"The king is dead," he growls quietly with a small smirk on his lips. "Long live the king."

A FEW DAYS LATER, I find myself doing something else I never once expected myself to be doing: shopping for luxury apartments.

I grew up in a shithole in Alphabet City that may as well have been a crackhouse. In the army, I lived in barracks and training camps, and once I was a special ops Ranger, "home" was basically any jungle, forest, or desert where I laid my head at night. I spent literally years without anything more than tent canvas between me and the night sky.

And then for almost the last decade, I've had my room at the Kildare brownstone on the Upper East Side, which is *by far* the nicest digs I've ever had. Declan, Neve and Eilish's dad, wasn't ever around much. But when he was, he had the master suite. The girls had their expansive rooms on the top floor.

My room was much more modest: just a quiet, regular-sized bedroom overlooking the backyard gardens, with a small balcony and a normal ensuite bathroom.

To me, the brownstone has been a mansion ever since I took the job as Neve and Eilish's bodyguard. A palace. A veritable penthouse. But now, I'm looking at *actual* penthouses. Currently, I'm being shown a fucking *monstrously* huge, four-thousand square foot open-concept thing along Central Park West. A modern all-glass monstrosity that isn't remotely my style. I mean there's a goddamn *waterfall* in the living room, for fuck's sakes. What the actual hell do I need a waterfall for?

"Well?"

I scowl at Brad, the real estate guy showing us this place, before I turn to groan at Una, who's taken it upon herself to go apartment shopping with me. She smirks at my glum face.

"You know why we're doing this."

I do. As the new head of the Kildare empire, it transpires there are expectations of me. Expectations like apparently I wear suits now, instead of my usual go-to uniform of black jeans and a white t-shirt. I mean, I *wear* suits. Just not often. And it's not like I need to sleep in the damn things. But Cillian's impressed upon me the importance of dressing for the role when I'm, say, going to a meeting with the heads of our vassal families, or any sort of meeting really.

I get it. I honestly do. I just don't...like it.

Anyway, yeah, that's why we're looking at these ridiculously expensive places today. Because as the new king, it's expected of me to be living—with my new bride—in a place befitting a king.

Not in the guest room of the family brownstone.

“The hell do I need a waterfall for?”

Brad clears his throat. “Actually, there are studies showing that incorporating nature into the home is balancing for the mind and grounding for the chakras.”

Una bites back a smirk. “See, Castle? It's for the good of your chakras!”

I glare at her.

“Well, I like it.”

Hades comes stomping down the stairs from the second floor.

“It's got *two* bedrooms.”

He levels a cold, hard glare at me.

“*Two* bedrooms.”

“I think he heard you the first time, Hades,” Una snickers.

“Cool. Well, I'll say it again, anyway. There are two of them, Castle.”

“Something you're trying to tell me here, pal?”

“Sure is, *pal*,” he growls, stepping closer to me and narrowing his fierce gaze at me. “You'd better use one that is *not* the same one that Callie uses. Because if you lay a fucking finger on my sister, I'll castrate you with a meat hook and toss your dick in that fucking waterfall.”

Brad gulps loudly, his face paling.

I just sigh, patting Hades on the shoulder in a friendly manner as I walk past him. “Not gonna be an issue, Hades.”

It’s not.

It can’t be.

It *won’t* be.

I repeat all three of those again in my head like a mantra.

Twice.

At my core, I understand that there’s currently nothing and will never *be* anything between Callie Drakos and myself. Her family are our closest allies. Her brothers are my business associates. Her best friends are effectively my little sisters.

She’s twelve years younger than me.

We’re simply marrying to avoid a catastrophe after we together killed one of the most powerful Italian mafia Dons in the country.

I could go on.

There’s a small problem, though. The thing is, much as I *want* to see Callie as all of those things: sister to my business associates. Best friend to my sisters. Untouchable. Unnoticeable. As completely *not* an object of desire to me, like Neve and Eilish aren’t an object of desire to me...

...we’ve already crossed a line.

Well, *she* crossed it.

And she dragged me right over it with her when she seared those lips to mine. When she slid her robe off and pressed her body against me, and let me nibble that sweet, forbidden fruit.

I’m having a *damn* hard time forgetting that taste.

Una sighs. “Brad, give us a second, if you would.”

“Of course, Mrs. Kildare. And again, if this isn’t exactly what we’re looking for, there’s this *fantastic* loft space in Soho, very special. I truly think you should take a look—”

“*Thank you, Brad,*” Una smiles sweetly.

Brad takes the hint, smiles, and scurries away noiselessly. Una arches a brow at me. “Castle, it’s a gorgeous spot.”

I shrug. “I mean, aside from that fucking waterfall...yeah, it’s nice.”

“It’s a twenty-million-dollar apartment, numb nuts,” Hades mutters. “Damn straight it’s *nice*.”

I glare at him. Una looks at me piercingly and shakes her head.

“Nice...but?”

“Look, I don’t want you or Cillian to think I don’t appreciate this. It’s just...” I shake my head. “Una, I don’t belong in this place. I don’t belong in this *life*.”

She cocks her head to the side. “Well, it *is* your life now, Castle. So learn to fit in. Trust me,” she grins. “If I can, you can.”

“I know. I will. But a place like this?” I make a face as I gaze helplessly around at all the splendor. “The role I can fit into. You and Cillian both know that. I can sit on the throne, and I can lead this family.”

She gives me a small, proud smile. “I know you can.”

“But *not* when I’m living in a place like this.”

Una nods, shrugging. “Well, what sort of a place *would* you work best from?”

“Honestly?”

“Please.”

I grin. “The same place I’ve lived in and called home for the last ten years.”

She laughs.

“What’s funny?”

Una snickers. “Just that I love being right when it comes to Cil. I bet him last night that you’d just want to stay where you are, so this is hilarious to me.”

I grin. “Well, when you pitch it to him, mention it’ll save him twenty mil, too.”

“You’re such a cheap date, Castle” she laughs.

“Well, for what it’s worth,” Hades cuts in, “*I* think the brownstone’s a perfect spot for them.” He levels a cold, withering look at me. “It’s got six fucking bedrooms, for a start.”

Una rolls her eyes. “Well, that’s that, then. Let’s go ruin Brad’s day. Then it’s time to get you fitted for a tux.”

I’M in one of those six bedrooms a little later when Neve drops by the brownstone. I look up from my favorite chair by the window when she knocks on my bedroom door.

“If my liege isn’t too busy,” she smirks, giggling when I roll my eyes, “I brought a congratulatory gift.”

She holds up a bottle of Jameson whiskey.

“Now you’re talking,” I chuckle, standing and grabbing two glasses from one of the shelves on my wall as she walks in.

“Guess a king should probably start drinking better booze, though, huh?”

Neve smirks. “Hey, the late Prince Philip’s favorite drink was apparently an ordinary pint of Boddingtons. I think you’re good there.”

I grin as we step out onto my small, modest balcony and slump into the two wooden deck chairs I keep out there. Garden lights twinkle in the backyard as Neve pours us two glasses of the Jameson and clinks hers to mine.

“*Sláinte*,” she murmurs.

“*Sláinte*,” I grunt back before taking a large sip.

“Well,” she shakes her head. “Looks like we’ve got yet another Kildare arranged marriage.”

I smirk at her. “Still doesn’t make me a Kildare.”

“Pfft, guilt by association and all that. And hey, you get the best of both worlds, really.”

“Explain?”

She grins at me. “You get to be a Kildare without actually having to deal with the insanity of *literally being* a Kildare.”

“Good loophole.”

Neve clinks her glass to mine again. “Fuckin’ right.” She glances sideways at me. “I mean... *My* arranged marriage turned out pretty swell for everyone involved.”

“*Your* arranged marriage ended up being to your fucking soulmate,” I grunt. “Not to mention to the only man in the world who could ever handle your shit.”

She giggles. “Fair. And all too true.”

“How is Ares, anyhow.”

She gives me a look. “Beating himself up. You know how he is: the king that never wanted to be king, who ends up being way too good of a king in the end. He’s considering it a personal character failing that he got Callie into this predicament.”

I frown. “He did no such thing. Their greedy father did.”

She rolls her eyes and raises her glass. “Well, here’s to shitty dads, I guess.” She frowns as she glances at me. “You never talk about yours.”

“Nope.”

And it’s going to stay that way.

Neve already looks up to me like I’m her personal Superman. The big brother she never had. The caped crusader who’s rescued her on more than one occasion. She knows about my time in the Rangers, and she’s obviously smart enough to put two and two together and realize that I clearly saw combat and must have taken lives.

But she never needs to know that one of those was my own father’s.

“That bad, huh?”

“That bad.”

She frowns. “I used to think ours was the crappiest dad out there. But he was just...not around. And a jackass besides.”

About two years ago, Eilish found out that the real cause of Erin Kildare’s too early death—Erin, as in Eilish and Neve’s mother—wasn’t the brain aneurism they’d been told it was. It was that she’d figured out that Declan was fucking around on her for years and years with fuck knows how many women, and was planning to leave him, taking the girls with her.

Then Declan put a stop to that by injecting an air bubble into Erin's bloodstream, which popped in her brain.

I had never heard a whisper of this. Neither had Neve. And I guess Eilish was originally going to keep it to herself. But she recently spilled it apologetically to both of us over drinks. I think she was worried about hurting Neve, and that's why she kept quiet. But I think it actually gave both of them some closure.

Years after he killed Erin, Declan ended up meeting with Gavan Tsarenko's adoptive father, Vadim, who confronted Declan about the decades-long affair he'd been having with Vadim's sister, Svetlana. Apparently, the affair even produced a kid, though no one knows what happened to the poor bastard. In the end, Declan ended up killing Vadim that night, which set into motion all the events that eventually led to Eilish and Gavan getting together.

Something else to file under "Life is fucking weird sometimes".

"Yeah, well, Declan *was* a jackass."

She shakes her head. "I'm just sorry he was always such a dick to you."

I shrug. "I was an outsider. He never wanted to hire me at all. That was all Cillian's idea."

"Well, cheers to Cillian, then. And to the best bodyguard *ever*."

I chuckle and do a fake, deep, dramatic bow as she laughs.

Neve turns to eye me. "You know, you're doing the right thing here, Castle. For Callie, I mean."

"Jesus, you make it sound like I knocked her up."

Neve raises a brow.

“I haven’t *touched* her. Christ,” I grunt.

Which is a lie.

“I’m doing this because if I don’t, our family could potentially lose a *lot*. Cil has a lot more invested in Thermopylae Acquisitions than you know.”

“Oh, no, I know,” she mutters darkly. “Who the hell do you think helped him invest it?”

She sighs, and I reach over and pat her arm. “Well, that’s why I’m doing this. Gotta save the Kildare bank account.”

“But you could’ve just let the alternative happen.”

“Meaning?”

She makes a face. “Let Callie marry Massimo Carveli.”

“I couldn’t let that happen.”

I would NOT let that happen.

“I know,” she grins. “Because you’re Captain freaking America.”

Like I said, she thinks I’m a superhero. Eilish does, too. Fuck, they *all* do.

But I’m not. Maybe I used to be. Maybe I was for Kelly, when I avenged her death. But I haven’t been Superman or Captain America since the night I lost three of my brothers because of my own recklessness.

I’m nobody’s hero now.

Not even close.

And they all have no fucking idea.

CALLIE

ONCE AGAIN, dark circles under my eyes greet me in the mirror. I haven't been sleeping well recently in general. But last night? Last night, I slept like absolute *shit*. And now I'm groggy, grumpy, and anxious.

Wonderful. Just how every bride wants to feel on her wedding day.

Yeah, today's the day. But instead of fitful dreams like I would imagine *real* brides-to-be have, about seating arrangements or bloating when trying to put the dress on or whatever, my pre-wedding-day dream was an actual nightmare.

A nightmare of watching Luca die all over again. Of seeing his blood spilling onto me while he screamed that I killed him.

It's hardly the first time I've had it, either.

I know he was a monster and a piece of shit. I know what my fate would have been if I'd actually married him, or, God forbid, if Castle hadn't come that night.

But still. Not only is the recurring dream utterly terrifying, but after I have it, I always wake up feeling guilty. Like I'm a condemned soul. A murderer. Castle may have yanked him off me and broken his neck. But I know all that did was hasten an

inevitable end I set in motion when I shoved him into that mirror.

He was losing *a lot* of blood. From his neck. There's no way he was leaving that hotel room alive.

And that was my fault.

I shudder, swallowing back the terrible guilt—which is made worse because I feel bad *for feeling bad*, considering who the deceased was.

God, I would *kill* for anxiety about stupid seating arrangements right now.

Later in the morning, Eilish and Neve come over to help me get ready. If I had it my way—and I'm one-hundred-percent sure Castle feels the same—the wedding would be at the courthouse, with a single witness each, and zero fanfare.

But of course Dimitra has other plans.

Ya-ya is no stranger to arranged marriages. She and my grandfather had such an arrangement, and they were always incredibly happy together.

They're who I think of, in fact, when I think of the poster couple for a happy, healthy marriage. Not my own parents. Like Neve and Eilish, I lost my mom young, really young: I was two when she died. We spent another few years here in New York after that happened, at this very house, with Ya-ya and Papou.

But Grandpa Jonas was the glue that kept things together, especially between Ya-ya and my father, who was a real bastard. When Grandpa died, the glue fell apart. Dimitra tried—hard, and with everything she had—to keep the family together. But our father was determined to get away from here, and took us all to London.

Then he died at our bother Atlas' hand, who then himself died right after. And it wasn't long after *that* that our uncle Vasilis died here in New York—alongside Declan Kildare. That's when we all came back home to the States.

Dimitra doesn't talk about our dad, or much about Atlas, either. But still, when I think of two people in love, that's who I think of: her and my grandpa Jonas.

And I think even though she knows Castle and I aren't her and Papou, part of her is trying to inject a little hope and joy into today's event. Which is why she's insisted on a "real" wedding.

So, no courthouse. I'm wearing the big white poofy fucking dress. There's a priest involved, and our families will be in attendance.

"I know it's for business reasons, Calliope," she told me last night. *"And I know it's just for a year. But you'll still want the pictures."*

So, that's why we're having a real wedding today.

For the fucking photos.

She's actually also not that off-base. *I* might not need the photos. But other people might. Other people like the Carveli family, not to mention the four other families that make up The Commission—the Italian version of the Irish Council of Clans, or the Russian Bratva High Council.

Massimo, of course, made a huge stink when Ares sent him word about my impending marriage to Castle. But it was sent along with a *surgically* crafted legal document drafted by Elsa, outlining the specific clauses of the blood-marker pertaining to these abrupt change of plans.

Massimo might be—probably *is*—fully aware of the mountains of bullshit he’s being fed. But after his initial retort and a phone call so vicious that it had Ares holding his cell away from his ear, there’s been radio silence from the Carveli camp.

Still... Fake as it may be, this marriage does have to look real.

So sure, fine. I want the photos.

I’ve told myself that it’s to silence any dissent from Massimo, if he comes looking to stir things up. But another part of me—even though I completely realize it’s all fake and means nothing—feels...

Giddy at the idea of seeing myself in a wedding gown next to Castle in a tux.

It’s like I said: a crush is a disease. And it’s one without a cure or medicine to ease the symptoms. Which means that even though kissing Castle has turned him into a giant sourpuss with a frosty shoulder whenever he’s around me, when I’m near him, I still feel it.

The pull of gravity. The air being sucked from my lungs.

The inescapable pain that comes from knowing—truly knowing from that dark, cold look in his eyes—that this crush goes strictly in one direction and one direction only.

And that’s something I’m going to have to make peace with. Because in five hours, I’m *marrying* the guy.

IT’S STILL a strange mix of feelings as I step out of the French doors into the gardens, dressed in white.

One the one hand, I truly know it's fake. I know the outrageously beautiful but stoic man standing at the altar doesn't want to be here. I know he doesn't want *me* at all, and that all of this is merely to fix a problem, not celebrate love.

But still.

Still.

When I walk down that aisle past the small group of friends and family toward Castle, there's an undeniable bounce in my step. An unmissable flutter in my stomach. An inescapable thudding in my chest.

The wedding might be fake, but the emotions—my emotions, at least—are all too real.

I teeter on the heels I'm wearing just as I get to the altar. What? The man I'm about to marry is like six foot five, and I'm *maybe* five foot three. I needed some height. For the photos. Sue me.

Castle's eyes burn into mine when I come to a stop in front of him. His jaw grinds, probably with annoyance.

The priest Ya-ya brought has been fully briefed on what this is. But still, he's a man of the cloth, and so he has Castle and I join hands. Before he begins, though, Castle leans down. For a second, my breath catches and my pulse skyrockets as I feel the warmth of his breath across my neck.

"Don't forget the rules, Callie."

Great timing. Thanks for the reminder, jerk-face. No touching. No kissing.

I got it.

The priest says his bit. Then we say the generic, paint-by-numbers vows. Somewhere in the back of my head, I

remember a younger me dreaming that one day, when I got married, my husband and I would write our own vows together.

But then I played a part in killing a mob boss. And now... well...here we are.

Although it's not like I've ever written a poem or a stanza in my life, Muse of Sonnets and Songs and whatever gobbledygook I may be named for. So maybe that part's for the best.

I shiver when Castle slips the ring onto my finger. And I'm shaking so hard when I do the same to him that I almost can't get the simple silver band on. Again, all for show, because we have to actually sell this, lest the Carvelis or any of their Commission friends decide to call bullshit.

"And now," the priest says with a nervous laugh. "Now would usually be the time where you'd kiss the bride."

Castle's eyes swivel to mine. His jaw ripples as those fierce blues stab right through me. My throat works. My bottom lip slips between my teeth.

"But, if you'd prefer not to, I can simply say, I now pronounce you man and wife."

It all happens in slow motion. We turn to step off the little altar, because it's time to go take these famous pictures. And as I step off of the platform, one of the *goddamn* too-tall heels I'm wearing catches on the edge.

Suddenly, I go sprawling.

And then suddenly, someone catches me.

Sort of.

Castle moves with startling speed as he lunges to grab me. When he does, he's over-extended himself, which means he's now sprawling forward, too. With a grunt, he twists his body just before he hits, slamming to the ground on his back as I go crashing down on top of him.

Chest to chest.

Hips to hips.

And *mouth to fucking mouth*.

It's a kiss so hard I can taste copper exploding into my mouth as our lips sear together.

But still, it's a kiss. Our second stolen one, and our first as man and wife. I know it quite possibly will be the last one, too.

But just for this one moment, surrounded by all the fake and the arranged, I'll take a giant, intoxicating gulp of real, and I'll hold the taste of it in my mouth as long as I can...

One second.

That's how long I manage to hold onto it. One. Single. Solitary. Second. After that, Castle's yanking his mouth away from me, and suddenly lifting me off him as he scrambles to his feet, like I'm weightless.

I collect myself, fixing my dress and blowing my hair out of my face before I turn. And when I do, our eyes lock *hard*.

Our friends and family are laughing, like it's a cute, funny "oopsie" moment. Like Castle's just fumbled his words while asking me to prom. Or I've just dropped the ring during our engagement photo shoot.

My face heats, and I force a weak, awkward smile, like I'm laughing at the moment along with them.

Castle isn't laughing. He's glaring into my very soul.

We made it *one second*.

Then we broke the rules.

CALLIE

GETTING the photos taken afterward is a blur. I vaguely remember posing for them next to a stony, lock-jawed, unsmiling Castle while Ya-ya's photographer snaps away. We mingle with our friends and family after that—again, for the photos, to “prove” our wedding is real to the Carvelis.

There's a toast of champagne—partly for the cameras, but also to celebrate that our marriage has just removed all the potential upheaval that we would have gone through otherwise. That I'm no longer taking “Carveli” as a last name, and Ares is no longer in danger of losing basically everyone's money in some potential theft-like divorce.

It's a win for everybody.

Except Castle and me.

Well, it's sort of a win for me. A secret, private win. One that I keep tucked way inside, like a hot little burning ember deep in my chest. But, judging from the glower on his face, it's not at all a win for my new husband.

He looked annoyed before. After the accidental kiss, he looks like he's at his own funeral.

But finally, after all the formalities, it's over. It's evening by the time Castle and I finally say our goodbyes and head

downstairs. The security guys at the front door have already reported that there's a car with men identified as Carveli soldiers parked down the street, with telephoto lens cameras, too. So when we walk outside to Castle's waiting Range Rover, we both make a big show of hugging each other.

Which is technically breaking a rule. But I suppose we already did that today. Castle leans down with our heads turned to the side, my hair hiding us. We don't kiss.

Yeah. I have a sinking feeling that's never, ever happening again.

We stay like that for a full minute. Castle even dips me, making me genuinely shriek, as I wasn't expecting it all. Finally, after a few more minutes, the car full of Massimo's men starts up and roars away.

We're in the clear. Instantly, Castle lets go of me and steps away. Instantly, he's glaring into my eyes with a darkness that honestly scares me.

"What?" I mumble cautiously.

"Nothing. Get in the car."

I shake my head, turning away from him. Angry and hurt by his icy coldness, and yet horribly, terribly, *traitorously* wishing I could kiss him again, for real this time.

When I look away from him, my eyes land on the street corner, and I go still.

It's the spot where he saved me about a year ago. Someone was trying to kill Neve, and they cut the cable on a wrecking ball at the building that was under construction across the street, sending the nine-ton ball of forged steel slamming down right where Neve's new car was parked.

A car I was seconds away from getting into for a test-drive.

Except Castle got there first, yanking me back and taking the hit himself when we rolled onto a taxi as it screeched to a halt.

That wasn't when I first fell for him, though. That came earlier.

It probably came the first time I ever laid eyes on him, the day Neve found out she was going to marry Ares. But *that* day? The day of the wrecking ball?

That's when Castle James wrecked his way into my heart.

And look at us now.

"Don't."

I stiffen as I feel him step up behind me. As I feel the power radiating off him against my back through the wedding gown.

"Don't what," I mumble.

"Don't read anything into that."

He knows where my gaze is. I turn, glaring at him.

"I wasn't."

Except I do. Always. I *always* look at that spot, remembering the way he bolted and yanked me away from death, every time I walk past it. Which is frequently, considering it's ten steps from my freaking front door.

"Come on, we're leaving."

I nod. Then I turn again to glance back at the spot once more. When I do, I frown.

Across the street from where Castle saved me from an ugly death, someone else is looking at that same spot. Or rather, they're looking past it.

And right at me.

A woman in black yoga pants and a black hoodie, with the hood pulled up.

I frown, shivering when I feel something cold pierce into me. A moving truck roars through the intersection. And when it passes...she's gone.

“Get in the damn car, Callie.”

MARRYING CASTLE FELT BIZARRE ENOUGH. But it's coming “home” to a house I've been to a couple hundred times as a guest that feels even weirder. So does seeing the few suitcases full of my clothes and random shit sitting in the foyer that Kratos brought over earlier today.

There'd been some talk of Castle getting a new place now that he's officially the head of the Kildare organization. But instead he opted to stay here, in the house he's lived in for the last ten years or so.

Honestly, I get that.

One of my worst fears about marrying Luca—I mean, aside from the probable abuse, sexual assault, and abject misery—was the idea of having to move out of our family home on Central Park South.

Sure, I lived in London for a number of years. But it never felt like home the way the English manor on top of the building over the park did. So I do understand why Castle wants to stay here. And if I *do* have to move out of my house and into his—because again, that's part of the image we have to portray—I kind of love that it's not some totally random, unknown space.

It's the Kildare *home*. A house I know. A house I've slept in probably a dozen or so times.

And that's comforting.

At least, it's comforting until we walk into the third-floor library. That's when the silent tension that's been brewing since we left the Drakos estate finally comes to a head. The second we step into the room, he suddenly whirls, his eyes stabbing into me.

"What?" I mutter.

"What?" he hisses quietly. "*What?*"

"I...don't understand the question?"

His eyes burn into mine. "You want to tell me what the *fuck* that was back there?!"

I stare blankly at him. "You mean the wed—"

I gasp as he surges into me, grabbing my wrist hard.

"You know what the *fuck* I'm talking about, Callie," he snaps.

"I mean *that kiss*."

I blink. "Excuse me?!"

"Exactly which of the *two* fucking rules—which are 'redundant' as you yourself so gleefully pointed out to me—did you not understand?"

I stare at him in disbelief. "I'm sorry, I'm not sure I was briefed on the rule where you're a giant fucking asshole now! What the *fuck*?! You think I orchestrated all that?!"

"Well?"

I roll my eyes. "You're fucking ridiculous, you know that? I *fell*, Castle."

“This isn’t a goddamn game, Callie.”

“Yeah, hard agree, so far, this marriage is a fucking walk in the park!” I scowl, shaking my head. “I can’t believe you seriously think I fucking *fell on purpose*, just to...what, gamble on the ridiculous odds of you falling backward after me, and me landing exactly on top of you and head butting you with my mouth? I mean, what are the chances?” I glare at him. “Castle, you’ve got some gall to accuse me of breaking these fucking rules of yours. Are we even calling that a kiss?”

“They’re *our* rules, not mine,” he snaps. “And I know you love breaking rules.”

“Yeah? Well, sucks to be you then, buddy. Cause you’re stuck with me for a year. Guess you got shackled to a problem child.”

“*Child* being the operative word.”

I glare venomously at him. “You’re an asshole.”

He shakes his head, storming away from me again as he marches over to the bar cart in the corner to pour himself a splash of whiskey.

“I don’t know why you’re so pissed at *me*,” I snap. “I didn’t force you into this! YOU OFFERED!!!”

He growls, turning to level an unfairly sexy if broodingly angry look my way.

“Here’s the fucking thing, Callie.” He walks slowly toward me, his gaze ruthlessly holding mine. “You see me as something I am *not*. You see the nanny. The fucking bodyguard hero.”

“I—”

“But *that isn't me*,” he snarls, making me flinch as he comes to a stop right in front of me, looming over me. “I’m *not* the fucking hero. I’m *not* the fucking good guy. Do you see any close friends, Callie?”

I swallow as I bite my lip.

“You and Cillian seem—”

“Cillian is my *boss*. Do you see any personal relationships? Any women around me, *ever*?”

I gasp as his hand grabs my wrist roughly, yanking me against his chest as I stare up into his angry, illegally gorgeous face.

“I went along with this marriage thing *not* to save you. To save my fucking family—the adopted family I don’t deserve, who took me in when I had nothing—from ruin and potentially more bloodshed. *That’s it*,” he hisses, gripping my wrist tighter and sending sparks of heart ricocheting through my core. “So, let me be crystal fucking clear about something. What you pulled before is not *ever* happening again. Is that understood?”

My throat bobs heavily. My skin tingles like it’s being licked by flames where his hand is touching me, the heat slowly spreading through the rest of my body like wildfire through tall grass.

“*Fine*,” I mumble quietly.

“Say it. Say it out loud.”

I’ve seen Castle take charge before. I’ve seen him stoic and all-business. But I’ve never seen him quite like this: brutally in control. Barking orders. Commanding. Domineering.

And it’s truly fucked up how hot that is.

I nod. “Okay, yeah, okay,” I blurt.

“Say it.”

“Yes, okay?” I snap, trying to force annoyance into my tone, so that he doesn’t hear the desperation and the aching need there as well.

“No touching. No fucking kissing.”

“I already agreed to that.”

As the ensuing silence hangs over us, I realize something. Over the course of this heated exchange, somehow, we’ve gotten closer together.

Somehow, my body is pressed to his. His beautiful, chiseled face is lowered even more, so that it’s mere inches from mine. And *somehow*, I’m up on my toes, staring up at him and drowning in those sharp blue eyes.

I can feel the thud of his heart through his tux and my gown in my own chest. I can feel my pulse hum against his fingers through the soft skin of my wrist.

I can smell the whiskey and promise of sin on his lips.

My head swims. My breath comes faster and more shallowly. His eyes slice into mine almost hungrily, and I feel myself sinking even more against his rock-hard body.

I think we’re about to break our rules.

Again.

“You can have the master suite. No one’s used it in years, not even Cillian when he lived here.”

The moment is shattered as Castle abruptly backs away. His eyes seem to spark a little hotter into mine. His jaw seems to grind a little harder. Then he looks away.

“That’s one floor up. I’m just down the hall here.”

I can feel his heat draining out of me, leaving me feeling cold and suddenly empty as he walks away. At the doorway, he stops and turns to level an unreadable look at me.

“Make yourself at home,” he mutters dryly.

Then he’s gone.

Welcome home, Callie.

CASTLE

MY HEART IS THUDDING in my chest as I close the door to my room and collapse against it. I drop my head back, nostrils flaring as I bring my hands up and rub my face furiously.

What the fuck was that? And why the *hell* does that girl pull me to her like a fucking magnet?

I want to tell myself it's her sheer proximity. Or, hell, because I just got legally married to her, and maybe some weird hardwired part of my DNA is expecting to consummate it now that we've crossed the threshold as man and wife.

Yeah, no.

That won't be happening. I will *not* be touching Calliope Drakos.

Not ever.

If it's not the proximity, and not something evolutionarily wired into my DNA, then maybe it's just that it's been a while. And I do mean *a while*.

Partly it's because my job and my life as Cillian's number two doesn't leave space for relationships, even casual ones. Another part of it is the simple fact that I'm, scientifically speaking, a hot fucking mess.

Women *think* they want a damaged soul. They want someone to play nurse to. To *fix*. To put back together.

What they're imagining is a quarterback with a sprained ankle, a cocky grin, and a plucky attitude. What they would get with me is a soldier more broken inside than they could possibly know what to do with.

I don't just carry physical scars of what bullets and shrapnel did to me on my body. I carry emotional wounds deep in a black soul. A soul I've spent a decade trying to cover with shiny white paint.

I can keep that veneer on for the family that gave me a second chance—for Cillian, and for the two girls who grew to be like sisters to me, to whom I was a hero. For them, I could be good. I could be normal, not held together with duct tape, stitches, and scar tissue.

But not for anyone else. Certainly not for a serious relationship, and not really even for the few casual ones I've had over the last ten years.

I'm not a pet project. I'm a fucking black hole into which their time, energy, love, affection, and ability even to smile will slowly disappear, until there's nothing left.

And most women, once they get to know me, see that.

So yeah, it's been a *minute*. And I try and tell myself that's the reason being in the same room as the girl I just married has my blood pumping hotter, and my mind filling with a million filthy, inappropriate thoughts that have my dick swelling until it's rock hard.

Even though she's completely untouchable.

Again, she's twelve years my junior. And if that wasn't enough, she's Eilish and Neve's friend. You don't fuck your

kid sisters' friends. Not unless you're a fucking sleazeball.

And never mind all of that, at the end of the day, this isn't a marriage. It's not a relationship, or a partnership, or anything.

It's a fucking job. A mission. And it's one I will not fail.

I can hear Callie swearing and thumping as she drags one of her huge suitcases up to the floor above me. I could easily help her. But not right now.

Right now, I'm still trying to get my pulse under control after being so close to her. Right now, my cock is still throbbing against my thigh.

So instead of helping her I exhale and finally start to take off my tux. Which is exactly when my phone rings. I glance at it and smile when I see Loraine's name.

"Hey, Lor—"

"OH MY GOD CONGRATULATIONS!!"

My brow furrows.

"For what?"

She sighs heavily. "Your *wedding!* Castle!" she shrieks. "Exactly when the hell were you planning to tell me about this?!"

I groan. "Okay, first, it's not what you think. But second, exactly how did you hear about it?"

"Oh, please, I've been following those girls of yours on Instagram for years. They're so grown up now!"

Right. Neve and Eilish. I frown as I put Loraine on speaker for a second and thumb to the app. Sure enough, there's a big gushy post from Eilish full of heart and ring and champagne emojis under a bright, sunshiney picture of Callie and me.

Motherfuck.

It's the moment where Callie fell and landed on top of me, our lips pressed together.

That's the fucking picture Eilish posted.

Yes, I know it's just so the Carvelis and any of their allies see it and don't question anything. And I mean, she couldn't have picked a better damn shot for the purpose. You can't tell that we've just fallen. The way it's zoomed and cropped, it just looks like this adorable photo of Callie lying on my chest kissing my mouth.

I hate to say it, but it's actually a phenomenal picture of her, not to mention social media gold.

I scowl as I thumb the app closed and bring the phone back to my ear.

"It's a long, long story, Loraine," I sigh, loosening my tie. I pour a splash of whiskey into a glass and, taking the bottle, step out onto my little balcony to sink into a chair. "And it's *not* what you think. And yes, I know she's young."

Loraine snorts. "What is she, twenty?"

"Twenty-one."

"Oh please. What's the problem? You're thirty-three, Castle, not sixty. And I was *way* younger than her when Bryce and I got married," she laughs. "Hell, I was younger than her when Tea was born."

"It's really not what it looks like. I can't be more specific than that, but I just need you to trust me on this one."

Loraine sighs. I can just imagine her cocking her hip and shaking her head in that way she has.

“I always do, Cas”

I sigh. “You know the feeling when you make it to the top of a mountain of your own creation, but you don’t know what to do once you get there?”

She snorts. “Do I ever. It’s called raising a child.”

I chuckle. “Well, that’s me.”

“Elaborate?”

I take a gulp of the whiskey. “Cillian stepped down. You’re talking to the new, slightly confused, completely out-of-his-depth head of the Kildare family.”

Lorraine whistles long and slow.

“*Wow*. I mean *woah*, Castle! That’s...a really big deal, isn’t it?”

Lorraine’s vaguely aware of what I do and who I work for. Just not the more sordid details.

“That it is,” I sigh.

“So...wait...are you like the Godfather now?”

I laugh. “That’s not quite how it works in real life.”

“Yeah, but I’ll bet it’s probably *kind of* like that.”

“I thought we agreed a long time ago to not talk business?”

She chuckles. “Hey, you’re the one who brought it up. But fine. Point taken. Let me just say congrats, then.”

I hear someone in the background on her end, and then Lorraine murmuring “Castle got a big promotion.”

“Congrats, Castle!” I hear a much younger voice call.

I grin. “Tell Tea I say thanks.”

Bryce was like a big brother to me, and Loraine's like the big sister I never had. She's also one hell of a mother. Like, *tour de force*. She already was, raising Teagan alone while Bryce was off with me and the other guys on our various shit show missions. But she grew even stronger after he died.

I would have killed for a mother like her.

Because mine was a drunk, apathetic enabler to a monster. One who didn't lift a goddamn finger when that piece of shit beat their own daughter to death right in front of her. One who wanted to put me in prison for killing that son of a bitch when I was seventeen.

Dominic Farrell, the head of one of the Kildare's most trusted vassal families, is the one who got me out of that particular jam. I'd done some odd work for him over the years, and he pulled some strings and got me enlisted instead of going to prison. Bootcamp for a hotheaded New York street kid was shit, but it was a fuck of a lot better than going to jail for murder.

"Hey, Castle?"

Lorraine's voice lowers. My brow furrows.

"Yeah?"

"I...sorry, I hate bringing this up, but..."

"What's going on, Loraine?"

She sighs. "I haven't gotten the check yet this month."

When I became Cillian's number two, I started making more money in a week than I had made in a year in the army. Even before that, working as Neve and Eilish's bodyguard, I was making a goddamn fortune.

What the fuck was I going to do with a fortune?

So I set up a trust—for Loraine and Teagan—enough that Tea could go to college and come out with enough money left over to start whatever life she wanted, and that Loraine wouldn't want for anything, either.

Because I know if I'd been lucky enough to have a family like Bryce's, and *unlucky* enough to die like he did, he'd have done the exact same thing for me.

The trust also sends out checks every month to Matty's widow Shawna, and Jason's widow Megan.

I frown. "Seriously?"

"Yeah, look, I'm sorry, it's not a big deal—"

"Yeah, it is." My brows knit. "Shit, Loraine, I'm so sorry. I'll look into—"

"Castle." She sighs, and I can almost hear her smile. "You don't always gotta be the hero, you know. I can call the law offices myself. I just wanted to mention it in case there was anything going on that I should know about."

Hero.

Why the fuck does everyone insist on calling me that? Hearing it from the widow of one of the men for whom I was *not* a hero just makes it hurt even worse.

I douse the sting with the rest of the whiskey in my glass.

"I'll call them right after this," I growl. "I'll take care of it, I promise."

"Thanks, Castle."

"You don't have to thank me."

"Yeah, I—"

“You talk to Shawna recently?” I interrupt, changing the subject.

“Yeah, actually. She’s doing good.” She chuckles. “I’m not sure... I think she met someone, she’s just too embarrassed to tell me.”

I chuckle. “Well, if he can keep up with Shawna, I’m sure Matty would approve of him. It’s been ten years. She’s allowed to find someone again. So are you, ya know.”

Lorraine snorts. “Nah, I’m good. Please, I downloaded Tinder about a year ago and wanted to throw up. Dating sucks these days.”

“Tell me about it.”

She laughs. “Yeah, well luckily, in case you’ve forgotten, you’re *married* now? As in, *today*?”

Right.

That.

Lorraine chuckles again. “Speaking of which, what the fuck are you doing wasting time talking to me? Shouldn’t you be knockin’ boots and consummating the thing with your blushing bride?”

My jaw tightens as my lips remember the taste of Callie’s.

“Hey, what about Megan?” I switch tracks again. “Heard anything lately?”

Lorraine is silent for a few seconds. So am I.

We all lost a lot that day. I lost my three best friends. Lorraine lost two friends and her husband. So did Shawna.

Megan was Matt and Bryce’s little sister. She lost both her brothers and her husband that day. I talk to Lorraine fairly

often, and Shawna when we have time to catch up. I know they keep in touch with each other.

Megan's the lost one, though. She got the worst of it that day. I know she's got a new number, and that she moved. I don't know where. But I do know she cashes her trust checks every month when I send them. So at least they're getting forwarded to her.

That's all I need to know.

"She's still hurting pretty bad," Loraine says quietly. "I talked to her maybe two years ago. It wasn't a good conversation. She's in a lot of pain, Castle."

I close my eyes. My body flinches involuntarily when I replay the blast punching me out of that doorway and into the sand. My vision swimming as I tried to make sense of the smoking crater where my three best friends had been just seconds before.

"Anyway," Loraine sighs, "I really should let you go. Go be with that new wife of yours. And whatever the reason, Castle, I'm real happy for you. I hope you know that."

I nod. "Hi to Tea for me. We're overdue for a catch up."

"Hey, if you can get that girl on the phone, let me know your secret. She never picks up when I call, even when it's from the next room over to tell her that supper's on the table. I have to send her a flipping text. A *text!*"

I chuckle. "Take care, Loraine."

"Lots of love, Castle. Bye now."

I put down the phone. I'm just reaching for the bottle for a much-needed refill when I hear the crash upstairs.

Shit.

I don't even think. I move on instinct, bolting through my room, up the stairs, into the master suite, and then shouldering my way into the connected master bathroom.

"I'm *fine*, Captain America," Callie sighs, glancing up from where she's kneeling on the floor. "Relax."

It looks like the crash was the sound of her bag of toiletries and a hair dryer falling off the vanity onto the floor. She's turned away from me, grabbing up some of her stuff, and I kneel to help, reaching for the mess of makeup, a toothbrush, and random prescription bottles.

"*Wait—!*"

Her face is burning bright red as she snatches the three prescription bottles from my hands. But not before I've accidentally seen the Lexapro, Xanax, and Ativan labels.

All drugs for anxiety and depression.

The bathroom goes quiet. Callie looks away from me, her shoulder tense and the tips of her ears red. She's clearly embarrassed.

She has zero reason to be.

"Surprise. You're married to a literal crazy chick. Lucky you," she mumbles as she quietly shoves the bottles back into the toiletries bag.

"I'm on Team Prozac, myself."

She stops shoving her stuff into the bag. Slowly, she glances back toward me.

"And I'll pop a couple propranolol and a Zoloft if I'm feelin' extra fancy."

The corners of her mouth curl up slightly. Her cheeks are still pink, but when she raises her eyes to mine, I can see relief in them, even if she doesn't say anything, and the embarrassment is gone.

“Unpack. Shower. Relax,” I murmur. “Try to make yourself comfortable. I'll figure out some dinner for us.”

I close the bedroom door behind me when I leave. In the kitchen, I poke around, but there's nothing actually edible in the fridge, so I end up calling for pizza from one of my go-to spots, just up the street.

She's still not down when it arrives.

“Callie?” I call upstairs. There's no answer, so I jog up to the second floor and call again “Callie? There's pizza down—”

That's when I hear the yelling.

I charge up the rest of the stairs, slamming my way into the master bedroom with my gun in hand. I whirl toward the bathroom...

Where the door is cracked open.

Where the shower is still running.

And where I can see the naked shape of Callie through the fogged-up glass, dancing and swaying her hips as she belts out “Wrecking Ball” alongside Miley Cyrus crooning out of a speaker on the bathroom counter.

Walk. Away.

I need to walk the fuck away, right the fuck now.

But I don't. I stand there, my eyes riveted on her, and my cock turning to pure steel in my tuxedo pants as I watch her dance

and sway her way right into the darkest, deepest, most dangerous levels of my lust.

She stops dancing. Her hand raises and wipes the fog from the shower glass across her face.

Instantly, our eyes lock.

Callie flushes. Her lip sucks between her teeth.

And she grins.

That's what I summon the strength of a fucking *monk* and turn to march right out of that bedroom before I break every single rule and cross every single line.

Yeah, this is going to be a problem.

CASTLE

NEEDLESS TO SAY, we don't have dinner together that night. I eat my pizza out on my balcony washed down with a large glass of whiskey, trying to purge the memory of Callie dancing in the shower from of my head.

Except it doesn't work. It completely backfires. The more I try *not* to think about it, the more my memory keeps focusing on the tiniest little details—the way her hips rolled and swayed. The tan of her skin through the fogged glass. The darker coloring of her nipples.

The way she saw me...and *grinned*.

She knows exactly what she's doing. She's fucking with me. Goading me. Making this whole fucking situation even harder for me. But, this all tracks with who Callie Drakos is as a person. I've only known her for a year and half, but that's what she is.

An instigator.

A troublemaker.

A provocateur.

Which would all be fine, and something I could ignore, if it wasn't for the tiny little fact that I can't stop thinking about her

in dark, carnal ways. Or stop fantasizing about wrapping that long dark hair in my fist and guiding her bratty, sassy mouth to my swollen cock.

Yeah, trying not to think about it blows up in my face. Because three drinks later and about an hour after seeing Callie dance her way through my fantasies, I'm back in the dark of my room with my cock pulsing and twitching in my hand as my cum sprays into a towel.

What a fitting end to this ridiculous day.

I'm up early the next morning. I mean, I'm always up early, but today it's early even by my standards.

I work out, run five miles on the treadmill, and eat breakfast.

There's no sign of Callie.

I assume it's because she's twenty-one years old, and it's barely nine, so she's probably still sleeping. But part of me wonders if she's having second thoughts about grinning at me when I saw her in the shower. I wonder if she's thinking about it now with embarrassment and some awkwardness, and is hiding away in her room.

I mean, yeah, I thought she was screaming for help, not yelling a Miley Cyrus pop anthem. But I *did* barge in on her privacy.

I'm still grumpy about that, and still kinda thinking about what I saw when I *did* barge in there, when I get text from Cillian, letting me know that he, Ares, Diemos, and Hades are a few blocks away and are dropping by for coffee.

I head upstairs and knock on Callie's door.

“Callie, you up? Cil and your brothers are almost here.”

There’s no answer. I knock again, harder.

“Callie.”

There’s still no answer. This time, I slam my fist on the door. When there’s *still* no answer, my hackles raise.

I don’t care if you are only twenty-one. Nobody sleeps through something that loud.

I twist the knob and crack the door open as I stick my head inside.

Fuck. Me.

She’s got AirPods in her ears. Because she *is* still sleeping.

On top of the covers.

On her stomach. With one leg bent with her knee up, facing away from me.

In just a teal thong.

The demon inside of me roars. My blood rushes through my ears and straight to my cock, which instantly swells rock-hard as my eyes land on her pert, tight little peach of an ass, split down the middle by the thong.

The thong is pulled tight between her legs, and right up against her pussy. The fucking lace is half see-through, and it’s molded to every—and I do mean *every*—square millimeter of her cunt.

Shit.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

My hand drifts down to the bulge in my sweats, cupping my swollen dick before I can stop myself.

Callie stirs.

Fuck.

I hastily drop my hand and slip back out the door, closing it silently before I knock. Very loudly and insistently.

“Callie!”

“W-what?” she mutters groggily.

“Get up. Your brothers are coming over.”

And I need to take a seriously cold shower before that happens.

“YEAH?”

Deimos nods at my raised brows. “Yeah.”

“For how long?”

Originally, Callie’s brother was going to fly back to London, where he runs the Drakos family’s European operations, tomorrow.

Apparently, he’s decided to stay in New York for a while.

“Unclear,” he lifts a shoulder.

“About as unclear as his goddamn *reason* for suddenly abandoning his job back in London,” Hades mutters.

“Hades,” Ares growls.

But Deimos seems completely unfazed as he leans against the kitchen counter, ignoring both of his brothers.

“I haven’t abandoned anything. I’m more than capable of handling business from this side of the Atlantic. And Kostas

can deal with anything on the ground in my absence.”

I’ve never met Kostas, Deimos’ number two. But I’ve heard he’s every bit as formidable and slightly spooky as Deimos is.

“Well,” Cillian clears his throat. “This is for you.”

He hands me a brand-new iPhone. I frown.

“I already have a phone. Actually, I have this exact model.”

“Well, this is your *business* phone.” He smirks. “You’re going to be one of those douchebags with two phones now. Sorry, comes with the job.”

Ares smirks as he lifts two phones out of his pockets. “Truth.”

“If you want to really lean into it, you could get one of those fuckwad Bluetooth things for your ear, so no one at Starbucks has any fucking clue if you’re talking to them or the phone,” Hades adds helpfully. I glare at him.

“I’ve already programmed pretty much everyone’s number in there for you,” Cillian adds.

“Well, look at you, Castle,” Ares grins. “You already have a new number two!”

Cillian shoots him a cold look of death as Callie blunders into the room in sweatpants and a hoodie.

“Morning,” she mumbles.

“And how was your night at Casa del Kildare, Ms. Drakos,” Cillian smirks. “I trust your room was up to par.”

“*And* single occupancy,” Hades mutters, shooting me a look.

I ignore him, turning to where Ares is rolling his eyes.

“Yeah, well, anyway,” the older Drakos brother says. “Two things. One, there’s a lot of chatter on the street this morning

about Massimo.”

I arch a brow. “I’m guessing he’s a little pissed that he didn’t get a wedding invite?”

Ares smirks darkly. “Yeah, something like that. He’s pissed, that’s for sure. The question is, *how* pissed.”

“As in,” Cillian adds, “is he pissed enough to do something about it, and make this into something bigger than it needs to be?”

“Exactly,” Ares growls. “This arrangement breaks the contract and protects the combined assets of our families. Does it also start a war with the Carveli family? I don’t know. So I took the liberty of setting up a meeting with Michael Genovisi.”

I arch a brow. Michael is the head of the Scaliame family here in New York, but to my knowledge, the Kildare organization hasn’t ever had any dealings with them—good or bad.

As if reading my thoughts, Cillian glances at me and shakes his head. “No, we’ve never really crossed paths professionally. I’ve met Michael through friends of friends, though, and he seems like a level-headed and rational enough guy. Given that the Scaliames are one of the five Italian families in The Commission alongside the Carvelis, he can provide a good temperature read for all of this.”

Hades pours himself a cup of coffee and leans against the counter. “Dante Sartorre is going to be at this little sit-down, too.”

Very interesting.

I’ve only met him in passing, but Dante Sartorre wields *considerable* power in New York’s underworld. He’s actually a distant cousin of the Carveli family and is also the primary investor and head operator of Club Venom—an extremely

exclusive kink club here in the city that caters to the wealthy, connected, and frequently criminally-minded.

I know all this because Cillian used to be a member, before he met Una.

Hades was too, actually, before Elsa came along. That's most likely how and why he'll be at this meeting. I know he and Hades have some history together.

"Okay, when's the meeting?"

Ares glances at his watch. "We should head out in ten. That doable?"

I nod.

"There's no way I'm going to be ready in ten minutes."

I glance over to where Callie's hunched over a cup of coffee on one of the kitchen stools, fastidiously avoiding eye contact with me.

Maybe I was right about the whole regretting grinning at me from the shower thing.

"No problem. It's just going to be me and Castle," Ares says.

She makes a face. "No. This meeting is about all of this, which involves me."

"Stay here, Callie," I growl. "Unpack, set up your room. Whatever you want. I'll fill you in when I get back."

This time, her eyes lock on mine. "I'm not a little housewife."

Hades chuckles, patting my back. "Yeah, good luck with that, bud. All right, I'm out."

I blink. "You're not coming?"

“If he’s not fucking going, I’m *definitely* fucking going,” Callie mutters.

Hades snickers and walks over to ruffle his sister’s hair. “Take it easy, bossy pants. If it’s just Ares and Castle, it keeps it simple.”

I glance at Cillian. He shrugs, grinning at me. “Hey, you’re the king now, my friend. It’s not *my* meeting. Or my problem.”

IF CALLIE WAS PISSED BEFORE ABOUT NOT being allowed to come to the meeting, she loses her *shit* when I tell her she can’t actually leave the house at all.

“*What?!*”

“Look, let me just settle the meeting first, okay? Your brother was saying there’s a lot of chatter on the streets about Massimo being pissed about the wedding.”

“What, you’re worried he’s going to walk up and fucking shoot me or something?”

“Honestly? I have no idea.”

From everything I’ve ever heard about the psychopath named Massimo Carveli, that’s not actually outside the realm of probability. I mean I doubt it. But, I’m a cautious man.

So, it wasn’t exactly the plan to leave the house with Callie hurling curses and insults at my back, but hey, that’s the way it shakes out.

Thankfully, my reception at the meeting is a hell of a lot more pleasant than my departure *for* it. Michael Genovisi is a strong, healthy-looking man in his fifties with silvered hair

and sharp blue eyes. He smiles cordially as he shakes my hand.

“Mr. James,” he growls in a deep voice. “It’s a pleasure. And congratulations on your new position.”

“Thank you, Mr. Genovisi. And thank you for taking the time to sit down with us today.”

He smiles. “Please, Michael is fine.”

“And Castle works for me.”

He chuckles, shaking Ares’ hand. They’ve clearly met before. Then he turns to the two men beside him.

“This is my second-in-command, Vincent Cave.”

Ares informed me on the drive over that the dark-haired man with the chiseled jaw is also Michael’s son-in-law.

“And this is Dante Sartorre, a mutual friend of, well, many people. I thought it would be good to include him today as well.”

Dante cuts an imposing figure: broad-shouldered and almost as tall as me, with a swarthy, sharp jaw, piercing eyes, and well-groomed dark hair. Michael might be the Don of one of the biggest Italian mafia families in the country, with Vincent his number two and probably eventual successor, but Dante’s dressed better than both of them.

We all shake hands and then sit around a big wooden table in the middle of the meeting room that looks out over the Hudson.

“I’ll get right to it, since we’re all very busy men.” Michael drums his fingers on the table and looks right at me. “I know there’s been murmurs on the street regarding Massimo Carveli since your marriage to Calliope Drakos was announced. And

I'm sure you have more than a few concerns about how—or if—any Carveli aggression would pit my own organization against yours.”

I lift an eyebrow. “It’s...crossed our minds.”

“Once or twice,” Ares mutters.

Michael smiles and shakes his head. “Well, let me put those fears to bed right now. Massimo’s sudden lack of marriage prospects are both none of my business and none of my concern.”

“If things *do* come to a head, though,” Ares growls. “You sit on the Commission together.”

Michael nods. “Yes, along with the Barone, Amato, and Marchetti families. But the Commission operates much like your own Council of Clans,” he says, nodding to me. “Or the Russian Bratva High Council. It’s not a blood pact. We all simply happen to be the five biggest families, so we share information and have agreed not to go to war with each other. That’s all.”

I look him in the eye. “What’s your sense on current events? *Is* Massimo going to make something of this?”

He shakes his head. “Unfortunately, I don’t know. His father was a real piece of work and frankly he would have. The son, I don’t know so well just yet. I’m sorry. That’s all I can say for now.”

He stands.

Guess that’s meeting adjourned.

After we all shake hands again, only Michael and Vincent leave. Dante smiles a calculating smile and clears his throat.

“Mr. Drakos, I wonder if I could have a moment alone with just Mr. James and myself.”

Ares glances at me and shrugs. “Hey, it’s his kingdom now. I’m just the brother-in-law.”

Ares smirks at me. I try my best not to remember the sight of his sister’s pussy this morning through her almost transparent panties.

When he’s gone, Dante sits back in his chair across the table from me and steeple his fingertips.

“We’ve met before, I believe.”

I chuckle. “I think you helped me carry my former boss out of the back door of your club with a knife embedded in his side.”

As in, the night Cillian and Una met.

Hell of a first date.

He grins. “That would be the time, yes.” He sighs. “Mr. James —”

“It’s Castle.”

He lifts a brow, his lips curling. “You *are* a king now, you know. You might want to get used to the titles and formalities.”

“I’ll have to work on that. What did you want to talk about?”

Dante nods slowly. “I have bad news and good news for you. Which would you like to hear first?”

“Let’s go with the good.”

He frowns. “It actually works better if I start with the bad.”

“Then by all means, Mr. Sartorre.”

“Massimo knows about Paris.”

I'm no novice when it comes to hiding my emotions. And I've got a perfectly practiced poker face. But inside, something explodes. A fire roars.

And my first fucking thought is of Callie.

And her safety.

I reach into my pocket and pull out my phone. When I open it, I frown. Shit, it's the new one Cillian gave me. *My* phone isn't on me. It's back at the house. And when I scroll through the new one, I quickly realize that "pretty much everyone's" numbers that Cillian already programmed in does not include Callie's.

I frown as I raise my eyes back to Dante.

"I'm sorry, what *about* Paris?"

Dante chuckles darkly and leans forward, resting his elbows on the tabletop.

"Mr. James, look at my face. Do I look like a fucking idiot?"

"No, you don't."

"Fantastic. Then we're off to a good start." He raises one brow. "As I was saying, Massimo knows what happened in Paris. And so do I." He spreads his arms. "The driver outside the hotel recognized you."

Shit.

I was so preoccupied that night with getting to Callie and making sure she wasn't being taken advantage of by those two drunk Euro-fucks that I didn't even stop to wonder if the driver who tipped me off that Luca might be inside might himself be tipped off by *me*.

“When his boss wouldn’t answer his phone, and when said boss was discovered to be *missing* once he went looking for him, he put two and two together.” Dante spreads his hands. “Et voila.”

I just keep staring at him coolly.

“So why am I not dead yet?”

Dante smiles. “Well, now, there’s the good news. Luca was... not popular with the other heads of The Commission. Michael was being diplomatic and putting it mildly just now. The truth is, Luca was utterly reviled. He was a drunk, a cheat, a lech, and a sadist. He wasn’t loved at that table *at all*, and he was loved even less so by his son. You killing that pig was the nicest present you could’ve given Massimo.”

I frown. “So, what—he’s showing me mercy out of gratitude?”

Dante chuckles. “Sort of. Hating his father or not, honor and reputation and all that nonsense would still require Massimo to kill you for killing Luca—if it’s *known* that you killed Luca.”

“But he does know.”

Dante sighs a little impatiently. “Yes, but nobody *else* does.”

I arch a brow. “You do.”

“Yes, well... I make it my business to know *everything*, Mr. James.”

“And the driver?”

“Oh, he’s dead,” Dante says flatly with zero emotion. “Massimo.” He shrugs, as if that explains everything. “As I said, only he and I know. And he doesn’t want it getting out that Luca was killed. The story of the heart attack has to be universally believed.”

“And why is that?”

“Because three days before Luca’s”—Dante puts his fingers up to make air quotes—“*heart attack*, he wrote a lovely legal will naming his son next in line for the Carveli throne, and heir to his entire fortune. Which was really a plot twist, considering that not a month before that, Luca had signed off on *another* will that basically said the exact opposite.”

My brows knit together as I rake my fingers down my jawline. “So why the sudden change of heart?”

“Ah,” Dante smiles. “That’s the fun part. There *was* no change of heart. His heart was already no longer beating when he allegedly wrote this will. The date on it, a week before his alleged heart attack, was four days *after* you made him disappear in that hotel suite.”

Oh.

“So Massimo forged a will after his father died, giving himself the keys to the kingdom.”

Dante nods.

I drum my fingertips on the table. “But if this is a non-issue with Massimo, why the fuck is he thumping his chest about Calliope Drakos and the marriage blood-marker we had with his father?”

Dante chuckles. “You must not know many Italians, Mr. James. Testosterone. Machismo. Bravado. The usual Italian shit. So, rest assured your new wife is safe in your hands. And my...” his lips curl. “*Informed* opinion is that these street rumors about Massimo’s anger regarding your recent wedding are simply that: rumors, and nothing more.”

I nod. “Well then, that just brings me to the only other question I have.”

Dante grins. “Why am I telling you all or any of this?”

“Bingo.”

He shrugs. “Because the king is dead. Long live the king.” He smiles grimly. “I make it my business, Mr. James, to make friends in high places. Hopefully, this will set us up for a mutually beneficial and profitable friendship.”

I make a mental note to kick Hades in the nuts for putting me in bed with this fucker, because I’m pretty sure I trust Dante about as far as I can throw him. But I’m also good at reading people, and while his intentions might be suspect, I get the impression that the information itself is solid.

After we shake hands again and both leave, I glance at my phone again to see a text.

ARES DRAKOS

Yo. Think you left your personal cell back home so texting you here. Sorry, had to run to another meeting. Cillian had one of your guys drop your Range Rover off. Parked outside.

I look over to see that my car has indeed been magically delivered to the curb outside of the meeting. I swivel my attention back to Ares’ texts.

ARES DRAKOS

Also, get a fuckin’ driver, dude. You gotta look the part now.

I roll my eyes as I get behind the wheel of my Range Rover. Yeah, no. King or not, I’m capable of adulting without having little underlings buzzing around driving me and cooking for me or washing my goddamn clothes, thank you very much.

I scroll down to the contact for Patrick—one of the guy’s I’ve got on front door guard duty back at the brownstone—and hit call.

“Hey, boss.”

“Everything look good over there?”

“Yeah, we’re clear. Cillian filled me in on the talk about this Massimo fuck. We’ve got our eyes peeled for when Mrs. James—”

“It’s still Ms. Drakos,” I grunt.

“Right. Sorry. Well, we’ll make sure she gets in okay when she gets back.”

I go still.

“Excuse me?”

“When she gets back to the brownstone.”

I almost crush the phone in my hand.

“She went *out*?” I hiss.

“Uh, yeah.”

I see red as I start the car in a fury. He had implicit orders not to let her out of the house, dammit.

“Patrick, why in the ever-loving *fuck* would you let her do that?”

“Wait, what?” Patrick’s no idiot, but he sounds genuinely confused. “Castle, you said it was fine.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?! I told you not to let her go!”

“I know! But then you texted me like half an hour after you left!”

I squeeze my eyes shut and inhale deeply.

Callie texted him.

From *my* fucking phone.

I hang up, boot up the Find My app, and log into my account.

The map pops up, and there it is. There *she* is.

And sweet merciful fuck, she's in *huge* fucking trouble now.

CALLIE

“YOU WANT ANOTHER ONE?”

I puff out my cheeks, feeling the alcohol buzzing through my veins and heating my face. It’s noon, and I’ve already had two of the double vodka sodas this place serves in pint glasses.

“*Ehhh...*”

Stavros chuckles. “Aww, c’mon, Callie. Live a little.”

I roll my eyes, a grin on my face. “I know, you’re right. But I should head home soon.”

“For what?”

I groan. “Trust me, you do *not* want to know.”

He shakes his head, his smile faltering a little as he pushes his dark hair back from his handsome face. Stavros is a good-looking guy, with strong genes, enviable bone structure, and *great* hair. I remember Tomas always bitching about never getting any girls while his brother was out charming half of New York.

“Gotta get back and into the housewife role, huh?”

I shoot him a look. “Fuck you. That’s not fair.”

He shrugs. “Hey, man, you’re the one who got married.” He looks away, his face darkening. “To a fucking *Kildare*.”

“It’s complicated, all right?”

I’m sure most people who know me—or Castle, for that matter—and who are aware of the situation with the Carveli family are clear what this marriage is. I mean it’s not like Castle and I were even dating or anything, and suddenly, boom, we’re married? Come on.

But people can have as many suspicions as they like. The important part is, neither Castle nor I can lend any weight to those suspicions.

“Complicated?” Stavros scowls. “More like a hostile takeover.”

“Excuse me?”

“I mean, first Ares, and now you?”

The alliance between my family and the Kildares has been great for everyone. But, there’s always a few disbelievers, and you’re never going to please everyone.

Stavros is very much one of the “displeased.”

He wasn’t a fan of the Irish to begin with. But then, when his brother Tomas participated in that unsanctioned hit attempt on Neve, and Ezio had that brother killed in retaliation for it, things got even worse. These days Stavros tolerates working alongside and keeping the peace with the Irish, but only because he has to.

He also makes sure that’s not even a little bit of a secret.

“I mean Callie, I seriously don’t get how you manage to hang out with them.”

“Elias—”

“Hang on, I’m getting us another round.”

He gets up from our table in the corner and stalks across Jessie’s Place—a dark and dingy dive bar in midtown that I *love*. For bonus points, they’ve historically not checked my ID, which actually just blew up in my face a little when Stavros and I ordered our first round, and he decided to mention to Jessie herself, possibly in the hopes of getting us a couple of freebies, that I’d “just turned twenty-one.”

Oops.

While he’s getting our drinks, I pull out Castle’s phone. I glare at it as I type in the passcode that I watched him input this morning in the kitchen before he left it behind.

I know. This is bad. Straight up crazy, even. And I know deep down I have zero right to be snooping in his phone or upset about anything I might find. Except, the crazy part of me has already rationalized it by telling myself that we’re married—that Castle is my damn *husband* now. And given that he is, when he leaves his phone behind and it starts blowing up with texts and selfies from some *very* cute and *very young* blonde girl?

Well, a wife deserves some transparency when it comes to women texting her husband, doesn’t she?

Fuck. Yeah, no, *any* way you slice it, this is uncool. Really not okay. Even though I didn’t even *find* anything that bad at all.

No super weird porn—no porn at all, actually, which, having grown up with five older brothers, feels *insane*.

No hookup or dating apps. No dirty pics or sexting exchanges with girls. There’s a whole text convo with this fucking Loraine chick. And apparently, Castle calls her semi-regularly,

which makes my blood boil. But their texts are pretty innocent.

But then there's this *Teagan* person. Teagan with the ridiculously perfect blonde waves, and this goddamn 2008 Taylor Swift country girl thing going on that's so fucking cute I want to throw up. Teagan with the big perky tits and the perfect white smile.

Teagan who was texting Castle "so sorry I missed you the other night!!" Or "you owe me a big one!" followed by an emoji of a *horse*, for fuck's sake.

I mean *Jesus*, have some fucking subtlety.

And my husband could have a little fucking class too, while we're at it.

I *know* we're not really married, but still. Are you fucking kidding me? Never mind having an ounce of respect for me, has he thought for a single second how chatting away with a girl who by all appearances is even younger than me would look for our whole "image" thing if it got out?

I mean she even sent him selfies in different outfits, asking him to pick one "for the big date".

Yeah, sit on a fucking tack, *Teagan*.

I scowl at my nearly empty glass before I bring it up and suck the last of the vodka soda down through the straw.

There's a small chance I have an unhealthy grip on jealousy. Or, more exactly, reality. I mean... I *haven't*, always. Hence the pharmaceuticals I'm prescribed that I've been taking since I was like sixteen.

But, regardless of the weirdness in my own head, that's what pushed me over the edge today. I was already pissed about

being locked up while he went out to his big important meeting, like a freaking housewife. And then seeing all those texts from Teagan?

Yeah, no.

So when Stavros texted me to see what I was up to, that was my out. I used Castle's phone to text Patrick at the door, and was on my way in no time.

Stavros had mentioned lunch. But so far, "lunch" has been through a straw, on the rocks, with a lemon wedge on the side.

Real talk, I'm not that mad about it. I needed a drink to get over the embarrassment still choking my thoughts today following last night's debacle in the shower.

Yes, *he* was the one looking. Staring, actually, in a way that Castle's never stared at me before. But I didn't shout, or cover up, or even pretend to be mad that he was watching.

I *smiled* at him.

Which of course shook him out of the moment and sent him stalking off. I've tried to convince myself that I didn't scream at him or make a big deal of covering up because it would have made it awkward.

But that's a big fat lie. I didn't do those things because...fuck, I don't even know now. Because I was riding the high of the wedding, however fake the promises? Because I was still smiling from the way he'd helped me pick up my meds without a trace of judgement or "oh, so you're crazy" on his face?

No, I stayed where I was and smiled right at Castle because *I liked* him looking at me.

Wanting me. Desiring me.

And then of course, I fucking smiled at him like a dork, and he took off to go text this Teagan ho.

Such a dick.

“Here we go.”

Stavros settles into the tall chair next to me at the hightop table as he sets our fresh drinks down.

“So,” he smiles flatly at me. “How’s married life.”

“Stavros, it’s been *one* day.”

“And you’re already out getting drinks for lunch with another guy! Yeah, off to an awesome start, I’d say.”

I blush, shaking my head as I lower it to take a sip through my straw.

“What, friends can’t meet up for celebratory wedding drinks?”

Stavros doesn’t exactly frown. But there’s a shadow between his eyes and his jaw is grinding a bit.

“I don’t see any reason to celebrate another Drakos tying themselves to that fucking family, Callie.”

My lips twist as I put my hand on his. “I miss Tomas, too, you know.”

“They *killed him.*”

I’m not about to get into the complicated layers of how all of that went down. Not with Stavros, who’s obviously still more than slightly raw about it, and especially not when I’m a little tipsy.

I go to pull my hand back. But Stavros suddenly twists his, so that he’s holding mine.

“Stavros—”

He runs a thumb over the simple wedding band on my finger.

“This is a lie, Callie.”

“Stavros, c’mon. You know how these things are. Your family is as mafia as mine.”

“I know it’s bullshit,” he mutters. His eyes lock on mine. “You’re looking good, Callie.”

I flush, rolling my eyes. I literally just threw whatever was at the top of my suitcase on before coming out, which happened to be an old skirt and a summery tank top. I had a jean jacket over it, but that’s come off in the stuffy heat of the bar.

I glance down and grimace. Okay, the skirt is a little short. Not *that* bad, but enough to suggest that maybe I came out purposefully looking to show more leg. And given Stavros’ fondness for letting me know that he’d be more than fine being more than friends, I’m suddenly a little worried about the message I might be accidentally sending right now.

“Look, Stavros—”

His hand tightens on mine.

“I know I could be for you what he never would—”

“And what *precisely* is that?”

We both jolt at the bark of Castle’s voice. Just as we’re turning toward it, Castle’s powerful hand grabs Stavros by the throat and shoves him backward. Stavros gasps, choking as he half-falls, half-slips from his chair and is dragged onto his feet. His eyes bulge wide as they swivel up to the merciless, vicious look on Castle’s face.

“I asked you a *fucking question*.”

I've seen Castle be a forceful, intimidating guy before. But this is next level. There's a dark power in his face and his words, and a cold ruthlessness in his eyes that scares me a little.

And excites me a whole fuck of a lot.

"Well?"

Wisely, Stavros doesn't answer him.

"No? Nothing?"

My breath catches when Castle suddenly slams Stavros backward against the wall behind him, pinning him there as he leers close to his face.

"Let me be *crystal* fucking clear about one thing," he snaps coldly. "The woman you've been talking to alone in a bar, feeding alcohol to, and *touching* with your filthy fucking hands is my *goddamn WIFE*."

There's only, like, three other people in here. But they go silent and seem to quietly drift into the shadows. Behind the bar, Jessie does the same.

"I...I..."

"You *what*," Castle snarls. "You thought I'd just be okay with any of that?"

"*I'm sorry*," Stavros chokes. "Seriously. Castle, we're just friends."

Castle's eyes dart to me, standing off to the side. I nod, dazed, before he turns back to Elias.

"If you worked for me, this would be going a very different way right now," Castle snarls darkly. He drops his hands from Stavros. "But, seeing as you don't, this is where we will end

this.” He jabs a finger against Stavros’ chest, hard. “You might’ve been able to bullshit her about coming out today, but don’t ever try and do it to me, because I can smell bullshit on cocky little fuckwads like you a mile away. Now stay the *fuck* away from my wife. This is your only warning.” He leans *really* close to Stavros, and the younger man’s eyes go wide. “*Leave.*”

It’s actually hard not to laugh at the comical speed and scrabbling with which Stavros exits, like he’s Road Runner with spinning legs churning to get away from Wile E. Coyote.

Quickly, my bitten-back smile fades as Castle turns to level a menacing glare at me.

I shrug, playing nonchalant, which is my go-to defense strategy and has been ever since I was a kid.

“What?”

I frown at him, as if I’m annoyed that he’s ruined my fun. I call this “The Brat Maneuver™”—another strategy I’ve used for, let’s face it, far too long.

“You had explicit instructions.”

“I’m not your employee.”

“No, Callie,” he snaps, surging against me and grabbing my wrist. “You’re not. You’re my fucking *wife*, and I told you to *stay. Fucking. Home.*”

I glare at him. “*Wow*, okay. So, we’re back in the nineteen-fifties, then? Stay home, dear. Mind the children, dear. Have the roast and a stiff cocktail ready at six when I come home, dear!”

Castle snorts. “I’ve seen your bedroom at Dimitra’s place. The day you clean house and cook dinner is the day my name is

Mickey fucking Mouse.”

My eyes narrow. “You’re an asshole.”

“And you’re a spoiled little princess who’s never learned that it’s not all about her!” he snaps. I gasp when he grabs my wrist tightly. “There’s a potential threat on the streets. We’re leaving. Now.”

I yank my hand free. “No, we’re not. *You* may leave if you like. I’m going to sit here and finish my—”

“You’re going to walk out of this goddamn bar with me right now, or so help me God I’m going to throw you over my shoulder like the misbehaving bad girl that you are and *carry* you out.”

Sweet. Jesus.

I know he means it like “a naughty child” and not “Sir’s *bad girl*,” which is obviously what my fucked-up, twisted, filthy and depraved little mind wants it to be. But still, when he says it, I feel a throb of something hot explode in my core. I can feel my face flush as my skin prickles with need for him.

“So?” he snaps. “What’s it going to be, Callie. Are you walking out like a grown up, or—”

I pull away from him, turn, and hop determinedly back onto my chair. Facing away from him, I grin to myself, humming with excitement and energy as I calmly continue sipping my drink.

Which is exactly when he grabs me, making me shriek as he hefts me into the air, tosses me over his shoulder with a hand on my ass to keep my skirt down, and marches out the door.

I think I’m in trouble.

I also think I'm probably not meant to be this excited about the consequences.

CASTLE

I'M FURIOUS.

The problem is, I don't want to admit—even to myself—why. Yeah, part of it might be this fucking girl's utter defiance, and the fact that she never *once* just does what she's told. Or that she's a goddamn lightning rod for trouble.

That might be why I was initially annoyed. But I know damn well that's not why I'm fucking *livid* now.

That honor goes to the fact that when I walked into this dump, the very first thing I spotted was that little motherfucker holding her hand.

The fact that his eyes were glued to her nipples, braless and hard against the thin tank top she's wearing together with a skirt showing *way* too much leg.

I know this is fake. I *know* we're not really a couple.

So why the fuck do I feel like I just walked in on my *actual wife* with another fucking man?

I ignore the way she squirms against my shoulder. I pretend I don't feel the way her ass muscles clench under my hand or the way her body grinds against me as she tries to wriggle out of my grip.

That's not going to happen. Callie trying to physically overpower me is like a bunny rabbit trying to wrestle a grizzly bear. It'd almost be funny if it wasn't turning me on so much.

And it is.

I *like* how tiny she is in my arms, more than I have any right to like. I like how she looks up into my eyes, even when she's fussing and fighting and trying to make a stink about something. I like that I know I could wrap my hands around her waist, or just one around her throat, and my fingers would probably touch. That her petite frame is virtually weightless in my arms.

Visions of bouncing Callie against the wall impaled on my cock like my own personal fuck-toy chase through my head like wildfire. Lewd images of the sheer size difference between us—of how fucking tight her little cunt would be stretched around my thick cock...

I grit my teeth as I storm across the parking lot to the waiting Range Rover.

Get it together, man.

My jaw grinds as I swallow back the black thoughts and burning desire roaring through my veins.

She's a mission; that's all. This isn't some "Penthouse Letters" column. She's not, and can't be, a sexual object for my lust.

But try telling that to my dick right now as she squirms against my shoulder in that too-short skirt and thin top.

Callie squirms and hits my chest with her fists as I swing her down and set her on her feet against the passenger side of the Range Rover. I yank the door open next to her.

"Get. In."

“Why.”

“That *mouth*,” I mutter darkly. Callie’s cheeks burn as her eyes glint with something dangerous and excited. Her bottom lip disappears between her teeth.

Fuck me. She really, really needs to stop doing that lip thing.

“Get in, Callie.”

“How was your meeting, *dear*,” she coos in a sarcastic voice. “When we get home, I’ll have the roast and your drink ready for you lickety-split, *dear!*”

I glare at her. “The meeting went fine. Actually, really well.”

Her brow falters, and she drops the attitude.

“Do I... I mean, do we still need to be worried?” she says quietly. “About Massimo trying to get revenge for the wedding?”

My face softens. I step back so as not to crowd her quite so tightly against the side of the car. She’s so fierce and outgoing and wild all the damn time, it’s like the sun disappearing behind a cloud when she crumples in on herself like this. I don’t like it.

“I think we’re okay, actually,” I say gently, trying to put her at ease. I smile reassuringly at her. “My sources...and I think they’re reliable...say the threats and rumors were posturing and bravado, nothing more. We’re safe.”

She grins widely. “Seriously? That’s great! So there’s no threat?!”

I smile. “No, there’s—”

“So,” her grin fades again and she squints at me. “What *exactly* is your goddamn problem with me getting drinks with

a friend, then?”

Son. Of. A. *Bitch*.

Yeah, I just walked right the fuck into that one.

“My *problem*, Callie,” I snap, “is that you don’t follow the fucking rules. *Ever*. And from now on, if you can’t do that, and if you act like a fucking child, there will be consequences. Now, get in the damn—”

“Like what?”

I tense. “Excuse me?”

“*What. Consequences,*” she smirks at me.

I slowly shake my head, hating that I’m relishing the way her breath catches and her nipples harden a bit more when I move closer, pinning her to the car at her back.

“Don’t push me, baby girl.”

Heat explodes behind her big blue eyes and deep in her cheeks.

“What are the consequences, Castle?” she breathes heavily.

I bristle. Every nerve in my body jolts with electricity, and my brain screams at me to walk the hell away from this dumpster fire right now, before the energy crackling between me and the girl I can’t touch incinerates us both.

“Get in the car.”

Somehow—God only knows how—I turn and march around to the driver’s side door and climb inside. Callie stands there petulantly. When I rev the engine, she slides into the passenger seat and slams her door shut.

“*WELL?*”

She was quiet on the drive, sitting in the passenger seat sulking and staring out the window. But we’ve barely made in the front door before she’s started up again.

I need a fucking drink. Callie follows me as I climb the stairs to the third-floor library.

The problem isn’t just that she’s a brat. I mean, *yeah*, she is. But if she were a snotty, pampered one, or one of those social media girls obsessed with themselves and their dumb, vapid lives, it would be easy enough to ignore.

But that isn’t Callie. She’s sharp and witty, and smart—too smart for her own good, honestly. The issue is, she’s *just* bratty enough to get under my skin, and just *her* enough to fuckin’ stay there.

“Well, what,” I snap as step into the library and cross the room to the bar cart.

“You said there’d be consequences. I’d like to know what they are. Better yet, what these mysterious, mercurial rules of yours even are that will *warrant* an as-yet undefined ‘consequence’ if broken.”

Jesus Christ, this girl.

“*Don’t*,” I sigh.

“I’m just asking—”

“And I’m *telling* you. Stop playing fucking games, Callie.”

“C’mon! I can’t just blindly follow rules when I don’t know ___”

“How about listening to me just for fucking *once*.”

“You’re not my father.”

“*No*,” I snap back. “But I’m your...”

I trail off as I pour a glass of whiskey and raise it, swirling the liquid around and turning to level a hard look at her.

“The word is ‘husband’, in case you’ve forgotten,” she smirks at me. When I don’t respond, she rolls her eyes. “What, does that make you uncomfortable?”

“*No*, but it’s...fake.”

“So how about ‘guardian’?”

I groan, shaking my head.

“No, no...” Callie muses, tapping her chin. “No, that sounds tawdry. Like a Victorian scandal. Ooh, how about *ward*? Is that it?”

“Does your attitude have a fucking off switch?” I mutter, taking a sip of my drink and wishing I’d poured a larger one.

She grins impishly, her sinful lips curling devilishly.

“What made you mad, Castle?”

My forearm muscles ripple as I grip the glass tighter.

“Because you just told me there’s no threat against us anymore. So what was it?”

My eyes dart to the side, stabbing into her. Callie’s flushed. She’s not drunk, but she’s had some drinks. With *him*.

“You’re fucking reckless,” I mutter. “And for some reason trouble follows you everywhere. Regardless of the threat level against us, my *rules* are there because I don’t honestly think you can be trusted on your own, without them in place.”

“*Wow.*” She shakes her head. “Just...*wow.* Cool. Well, fuck you too, Castle.”

“Am I wrong?”

“You’re a *jerk*, so there’s that.”

“Callie, you didn’t *know* the threat was gone when you went out with *him*. Yet you went anyway.”

Her lip curls devilishly.

Shit.

I didn’t mean to stress “him” so hard. But she caught it.

“To clarify, are you mad that I went out? Or mad that I went out with Stavros?”

Something dark and heated churns in my center.

“Is he your boyfriend?” I say, with way more edge to my words than I intended.

“No,” she replies softly. “I have a *husband*, in case you haven’t heard.” She looks away. “He’s just a friend.”

“A friend who obviously wants to be more than fucking friends with you.”

She shrugs. “Maybe. Yeah, probably.”

“And still you went out drinking with him, dressed like *that*?”

She sneers at me. “Like what, a slut?”

“Your words, not mine.”

Her mouth falls open. “What the *hell* is wrong with the way I’m dressed?”

“It sends a message, Callie.”

“To him? Or to you?”

I need to get out of this enclosed space with her. Before I grab her, kiss her so hard it fucking bruises her lips, and *ruin her* for any other man.

“I’ll ask again. What’s wrong with my clothes, Castle?”

“*Nothing*. But, if we’re talking about image here, and our whole fucking *ruse*, then, yeah, damned straight I have a problem with you going out dressed like that.”

“*Why?*” she snaps.

“Because you’re my wife!” I hiss back. “Because there are eyes on us. Lots and lots of eyes. And fake or not, Callie, when all this is over, you get to fuck off to whatever the hell it is you’re going to do—open a bar, go on permanent spring break, sip wine coolers in Dimitra’s yard for the next twenty years. But me? I’ve got a fucking empire to run. I have an image I have to uphold—”

“Well if you’re image is *asshole*, you’re doing fucking fantastic, for what that’s worth!” She smiles sarcastically, giving me a “ok” sign with her fingers.

“The image I’m going for,” I roar back, my voice rising to a crescendo, “is *not* one of a man whose fucking wife is out drinking at dive bars with other men in the early afternoon, braless and in a skirt so short it might as well be a belt!!”

She gasps in surprise, then her face darkens a little bit as those big blues lock with mine and her dark lashes bat slowly.

“*Fine*,” she finally mutters. “Okay, fine.”

“Thank you,” I growl.

“But, to be clear...”

I scrub my face as I turn away from her. She’s literally *incapable* of not getting the last word.

“Yes?”

I glance back at her. Callie is leaning against the doorframe, tapping her chin. “When I go out, I’ll be more aware of how I dress and act, okay? But at home, can I just wear what I want?”

I shrug. “Fine, yes. Sure.”

“Great!” She beams at me, then nods at the drink in my hand. “I’m going to go change. Would you pour me one of those?”

She skips out of the room before I can say anything. I turn to glare out the window and blow out a breath.

A year. I have to play this game with Callie for a *year*. But then, it could be worse. It could be *much* worse. And I know I’d still do it no matter how bad it actually was. Because this family—the Kildare family—has given me everything. More than they even know.

And I’ll die before I let them down.

“Where’s mine, hubby?”

I turn and start to roll my eyes. But they don’t make it all the way around. Not when they turn to stone, stabbing into her as my jaw grinds tightly.

Fuck. Me.

Callie’s grinning at me like the cat who’s caught the canary, standing in the doorway to the library in a tiny, tight, cutoff t-shirt that falls basically three inches below her tits, and little lace panties.

Oh, and white tube socks up to her knees.

That’s it.

Blood hums just beneath the surface of my skin. And God help me, my dick turns to steel in my pants as she grins impishly at me.

“What? We’re at home, right? Weren’t the rules that here, I can wear—”

“What the fuck are you doing?”

She lifts her shoulders. “Getting a drink.”

She prances toward me, smiling like this is all totally normal as she brushes past me and gets a glass from the bar cart. She furrows her brow. “Is there anything but whiskey? I kinda like vodka.”

When I don’t answer, she turns to smirk at me. “Castle?”

She’s trying to fuck with me. I’m not an idiot, and I know when someone’s trying to make a point.

I just don’t fucking like it much.

“Go put some fucking clothes on.”

“I am wearing clothes.”

My teeth grit. “Callie, so help me God—”

“What? Castle, I’m just playing by your rules.” She smiles innocently. “They *are* your rules,” she says sweetly, batting her eyes at me. “Aren’t they?”

“Yeah, they are,” I growl.

Sure are.

I close the distance between us so fast her breath catches in her throat as her eyes go wide. In one motion, ignoring every single warning siren blaring in my head, I grab a fistful of her hair, yank her head back, and crush my mouth to hers in the single most vicious, brutal kiss of my entire life.

“And now,” I growl against her pillow-soft lips, “you’re about to find out what happens to little *brats* who break ‘em. Now *bend the fuck over.*”

CALLIE

I'M KISSING HIM AGAIN.

It's the only thing I can even think. That I am *kissing* Castle all over again. And this time, it's not stolen, at least, not by me. And it's not an accident because I was clumsy.

This time, it's a real kiss. And it feels like my feet have left the ground.

My head swims as I absolutely melt against his chest, my pulse racing so hard it feels like I might have a heart attack.

"And now," he growls darkly as he pulls away, nipping at the bottom lip as he does, "you're about to find out what happens to little *brats* who break 'em. Now *bend the fuck over.*"

Holy fucking shit.

I almost can't even process what he's just said. It's so outrageously domineering and rough.

And so, *so* fucking hot.

Before I can even really follow his order, Castle's carrying it out for me. I whimper as he yanks me around with a force that makes my head spin and slams my thighs against the arm of the couch. My mouth falls open as he roughly shoves me

down, bending me right over the side of the couch with my ass in the air in just a pair of panties.

And all at once my entire world turns upside down when his strong palm connects sharply with my ass.

“Oh *fuck...*” I choke, the breath leaving my body as fire replaces it.

He does it again, and this time, it’s not a choked gasp that tumbles from my lips, it’s a fucking *moan*.

And I know he’s heard it.

“If you insist on acting like a brat, Callie, I’m going to treat you like one,” he growls. “And if you insist on parading around this fucking house like a little slut, I’ll fucking treat you like *that*, too.”

I whimper, writhing against the arm of the couch as he spanks me again and again.

“*I am,*” I moan, shuddering as my skin turns to fire.

“You’re *what*, Callie,” he growls, leaning over me with his lips by my ear. His hand stays on my ass, stroking the pink, tender skin as his masculine smell invades my senses.

“*A fucking slut.*”

He growls thickly. “For *him*?”

“*No,*” I whimper, shaking my head with hooded eyes and heated breath. “Not for him.”

I yelp when Castle spanks me again, his breath hot against the curve of my neck. His hand strokes the skin he’s just slapped again.

“*For whom,* then.”

“*You*,” I choke, my breath becoming ragged. “I’ll be a slut for you.”

I shiver as he suddenly nips my earlobe with his teeth.

“*Then pull your fucking panties down.*”

It’s all I can do not to fucking come right here and right now against the arm of the couch. I reach back, shuddering as I peel my lacy panties down, blushing deeply as I feel them stick and cling to my wetness.

When they’re past my ass, I whimper when he suddenly grabs my wrists and tangles them in my panties, pinning them to the outside of my thighs with my face against the couch cushions. I moan when I feel his hand stroke over my totally bare ass—knowing he can see exactly how fucking wet I am.

Castle groans deeply, and I suddenly jolt as if buzzed with electricity.

He’s just stroked a thick finger right up my dripping wet lips.

“Now,” he growls thickly. “What exactly made this slutty little pussy so fucking messy, Callie?”

I whimper.

“Was it *him*?”

I cry out when he spans me hard, making my body jerk against the couch as pure sin and excitement explode through my core.

“*No*,” I choke. “No, it wasn’t him.”

He spans me again, making me moan deeply. “Then. Who.”

“*You*.”

“Good girl.”

And suddenly, he's sinking a thick finger into me. My eyes start from my head, the breath choking in my throat as my mouth falls open in pure heaven.

Nobody's ever touched me like this. And I'm *high* on the fact that it's Castle who's touching me now.

He sinks a second thick finger into my pussy, stroking it in and out together with the first, curling them against my front wall. The sounds that come out of my mouth are mortifying. But I can't stop. I can't contain the choked moans and whimpered cries of pleasure as Castle roughly fingers my pussy while his thumb starts to roll over my clit.

I yelp when his other hand comes down hard, spanking my ass again. My pussy clenches instantly, rippling around his fingers as I scream my pleasure into the couch.

"You like everyone thinking you're a bad girl, don't you, Callie," Castle breathes into my ear. He spans me once more and then brings that hand under me, shoving my skimpy t-shirt up and roughly pinching one of my nipples as he fingers me.

Holy fuck, it's too much. I can feel reality blurring around me, my mouth slack against the couch as I whine and moan and push my hips back like an eager little slut. *His* eager little slut.

I want more fingers in me. I want *all* of his fingers in me. I want all of *him* in me, taking me, dominating me, making me his now and forever.

"So why don't you show me just how bad you can be, baby girl," he growls, stroking my g-spot over and over and *over* as every nerve in my body threatens to explode.

"Come all over my fucking fingers, Callie. I want to feel you come like a good little slut."

My vision blurs. My core tightens to a steel ball as his thumb rolls across my clit.

“Be a fucking good girl and fucking come for me, baby girl.”

Oh fuck.

I hear his zipper yank down, and my eyes go wide.

Oh holy fuck.

He’s going to fuck me.

He’s really going to fuck me.

This is really happening. I’m about to lose my virginity to CASTLE.

“Come for me, and then I’m going to fuck you like the bad girl you are.”

The steel ball in my core turns white and then explodes with the force of the sun. I scream, my body twitching and writhing. My fingernails claw at my own legs, trapped by my panties. My toes curl on the floor as spasms rock through my body and I shatter into a million pieces.

My head is swimming. My heart pounds like a piston against my chest as I pant into the cushions. I swear, I’m going to have a stroke.

...And that’s when the front-facing windows across the room *explode* in a hail of glass and mortar.

I scream as the moment shatters together with the windows, and I’m instantly frozen by the sound of the gunfire blasting through the night.

Castle moves instantly, without flinching.

He grabs me and yanks me across the room, throwing me behind another couch and flipping it onto its side between me

and the window.

I'm still screaming as thundering gunfire explodes through the front wall and the ruins of the windows, sending bits of paper from the shelves of books flying into the air like confetti. Castle bolts across the room, hurdling a table and then yanking open a closet, exposing a big metal cabinet. He thumbs in a code, tears the door open, and suddenly whirls, a rifle in his hands.

"STAY DOWN!" he roars, spinning around, dropping to one knee, and lifting the stock to his shoulder in a movement so practiced, so routine to him, it's almost terrifying.

His shoulders tense up. His breathing slows. I scream again and cover my ears on the floor as he starts to fire back through the shattered glass before suddenly, everything goes quiet and still but for the thunder of my pulse in my ears, followed by the sound of approaching sirens wailing in the distance.

CASTLE

SHE'S UNHURT.

For some reason, that's my single thought after it's over. Hell, it was consuming ninety percent of my thought process even as I was yanking out the rifle I've had in that gun safe for the last nine years "as a precautionary measure". Making sure Callie wasn't hurt even had a negative impact on my ability to focus and breathe through the shots when I returned fire.

Which, ironically, is probably the only reason that motherfucker got away.

The shooter was up on a neighboring rooftop across the street with a fifty-caliber—a gun big enough to blow holes through the front wall of the library and turn half the books inside to confetti. I mean shit, it even blew the fucking door off the goddamn room behind us.

But whoever it was got out of there *real* quick when I started shooting back. And I'm even pretty sure I hit him somewhere around the shoulder as he was bolting.

Callie is unhurt, though. That's what matters the most, now that the smoke has cleared and the adrenaline has worn off.

My confusion over my concern for her safety isn't that I'm a cold, heartless shithead. Of course I was worried about

protecting her. But the *level* to which I felt that protectiveness, and the pure unmitigated rage I felt toward a person trying to cause her harm wasn't just regular anger, or the instinctive safeguarding of a noncombatant.

It felt supremely personal. It felt like the level of protectiveness and fury I'd have felt if someone were shooting at Neve, or Eilish—maybe even more.

That's what's confusing to me. Almost as confusing as the rage I felt when I walked into that bar and saw another man's hand holding hers.

I've had a chance to comb over the shooter's perch across the street. Whoever he—or she—is, they're a trained professional. Even in their rush to get away once I started returning fire, they managed to take every single shell casing with them. The whole area's also been doused with bleach, which means even if I did clip them and make them bleed, any possible DNA sample is gone.

Yeah, they knew exactly what the fuck they were doing when they tried to kill us.

This was planned.

And “we” weren't the target.

Callie was.

I knew that the second I saw the way the shots were clustered against the side of the couch I threw her behind. And it was confirmed later, when Kildare and Drakos forces, aided by some of Gavan's men, did sweeps of everyone's homes and near anywhere any of us might do regular business.

They only found one thing: a sniper rifle mount bolted to the roof of a building across the street from the Drakos estate, with an unobstructed view of Callie's bedroom window.

Someone wants her dead.

Hours later, with the scene at the Kildare brownstone now roped off by NYPD officers loyal to our organization, Callie and I are stepping into a midtown luxury apartment belonging to Gavan's half-brother Konstantin, co-leader with him of the Reznikov Bratva.

Konstantin and his wife Mara have just recently welcomed twin girls into the world at their main home in London. This is just a *pied a terre* they keep here in New York for when they visit. For the foreseeable future, it's going to be where Callie and I hide out.

And Gavan's assured us it's a fucking impenetrable *fortress*.

He, Ares, Deimos, and Cillian are behind us as we walk into the admittedly stunning sky-high penthouse with views over Central Park and half of midtown.

"I know, it's a lot of windows," Gavan growls quietly. "But they're military-grade bullet-proof. The door is steel-lined and punch-code locked, with reinforced framing and hinges. The perimeter walls are steel braided concrete, and there's a fully-stocked armory in the walk-in closet in the bedroom. The code is eleven-six-eight-two. Oh, and the entire building management works for me."

I arch a brow. Gavan shrugs.

"Just standard home security in the Bratva world."

"I'm impressed."

"What you are, my friend, is *safe* here. That I can promise you."

"And obviously we'll have our own men and Drakos men posted at the front doors, on the roof, and on every other

floor,” Cillian mutters.

I nod, turning and watching Callie walk across the huge living room to the giant wall of windows. She’s put on some yoga pants and a hoodie after the chaos of the shooting, and I can see her reflection in the glass as she looks out—the way she grins as she takes in the magnificent view.

As if she *wasn’t* just shot at with bullets big enough to cut her in half.

It’s not benign indifference to her brush with death. It’s not that she doesn’t get it, or hasn’t realized how close we both came to getting killed. It’s that she’s moved past it already and is choosing instead to drink in the beauty of the moment.

I’m not sure if I’ve ever realized before that that’s part of her personality.

“Look,” Ares sighs. “I know it’s not ideal, Castle.”

It’s not. Billionaire fortress it may be, Konstantin and Mara’s penthouse is a one-bedroom, one-bathroom deal. And Callie and I are going to be stuck in here together until the forces Ares, Gavan, and I have put together find this shooter.

No, that’s not “ideal” in the slightest.

Not when it’s clear from the events right before the shooting that I can’t be trusted alone with her.

At all.

Even after the chaos we’ve just experienced, and our brush with death, that’s almost the only thing I can think of. The sweetness of her submission. Her breathy moans and her sock-covered feet curling against the floor as she whimpered for me.

And the pinkest, sweetest, wettest pussy in the fucking world, clenching around my fingers as she fucking came for me.

I clear my throat and my head, frowning as I turn to Cillian. “I need to be out there, helping to tear this city apart looking for this prick.”

His brow furrows as he nods slowly. “If you want. That’s now officially your call to make.”

Ares clears his throat. “I can’t tell you what to do, and I won’t. But...” He turns to watch his sister as she explores the penthouse. Then he glances back to me with a hard look on his face. “Look, the fact is, there’s not a single person on the planet that I’d trust to protect my sister more than you. You’ve already saved her life, twice. You’ve saved mine, and you’ve saved my wife’s on more than one occasion. And for that, you know you have my eternal gratitude. But I have to ask you for one more favor.”

My molars grind as I swivel my gaze to where Callie’s just settled into the big couch by the fireplace and kicked her bare feet up onto the glass coffee table like she owns the place.

And as I do basically every time I look at her, I’m caught between the overwhelming desire to keep looking at something so goddamn beautiful, and the need to turn away from something so fucking forbidden.

Because for me, looking at Calliope Drakos the way a man looks at a woman is like looking directly into the sun.

In other words, a really bad idea.

“It’s pretty clear it’s *her* they’re after, Castle,” Deimos growls quietly, running a tattooed hand over his jaw. “She’ll be safest here, with you.”

No, she won’t.

Because if Callie keeps looking at me the way she *always* looks at me while we're locked in here together, I'm not exactly sure how long I'll last before I look back.

Or do way more than look.

But of course, I say yes to staying here with her. Because even though I may not be the hero they all think I am, I'm at the very least cursed with a hero complex.

Even though I'm not fucking Superman, I just can't for the life of me stop jumping in front of trains and bullets.

Gavan clears his throat, stepping closer to all of us as Callie disappears into the bedroom to explore.

"Could we talk for a moment?" he growls. "In private?" He jerks his head toward the terrace. The rest of us follow him out, and I close the door behind us before leaning against it.

"What's your prevailing theory on the shooter?" Gavan asks in a measured tone, looking at me. "I'm asking you as a both a combat veteran and as someone who understands this game we all play."

I reply immediately. "A professional. No doubt there. They were set up properly, they had a secondary shooting location across from the Drakos estate, and they were focused. The shot groupings in the hit on our brownstone definitely point to Callie being the target."

Ares' eyes flash with a primal sort of fury that I understand all too well.

"Also," I go on, "they didn't leave a single shell casing behind, and even though I'm pretty sure I winged them, there wasn't any blood, and the scene was doused in bleach." I frown as I stroke my jaw. "I'd say professional hitman, for sure, and almost certainly military trained."

Gavan nods. “Okay. So who would want Callie dead?”

My brows knit as I glance at Ares, who I’ve already filled in about my brief conversation with Dante after our meeting with Michael.

“Normally I’d say Massimo would be the primary suspect, except Dante Sartorre put that theory to bed at a meeting I had with him earlier today. He claims Massimo is just thumping his chest. Image and all that. They claim...” I glance at them.

I still haven’t mentioned what happened in Paris to any of them.

“Dante says there was no love between Massimo and Luca. And that the precise circumstances of Luca’s death, along with the legitimacy of the will naming Massimo heir to his fortune and throne are both things Massimo might rather not have examined too closely.”

Gavan nods. “Really. How trustworthy is Dante?”

“He’s got no reason to be bullshitting us, if that’s what you’re asking,” Cillian growls. “Dante trades in information. It’s his currency. And by that metric, he’s the richest man in this city.”

Ares clears his throat. “It could be any of our enemies. Fuck knows our families have plenty of them. But the timing with the wedding just seems...” He scowls. “Like it’s not a coincidence.”

I nod. “Agreed.”

Gavan sucks his teeth as he leans against the railing of the balcony. “I have another theory. But I’m not sure you’re going to like it.” He glances between me and Cillian with a significant look. “What do you know about Declan Kildare’s affair with Svetlana?”

Recently, Gavan brokered a deal with the notoriously vicious Drazen Krylov—a legendary boogeyman in the Bratva world—after he helped Gavan and Eilish in exchange for a fortune he’s now using to rebuild the Krylov Bratva. Part of the deal included Drazen giving Gavan a fuckton of information on a wide range of mafia family heads that Drazen had collected. There’s been some *very* interesting things indeed found on that hard drive, all well-documented enough to stand up to thorough investigation. But one of the biggest ones was proof that Svetlana—the sister of Gavan’s adoptive father, with whom Gavan lived with for some time—had been having a prolonged on-again, off-again affair with Neve and Eilish’s father, Declan.

That was the affair that Neve and Eilish’s mother Erin found out about, and tried to leave her husband over.

It’s also what got her killed by that same husband.

Cillian frowns. “I know it’s the reason my brother killed your father, when he confronted him about it.”

That’s the other part of this shitty bedtime story. When Gavan’s adoptive father, Vadim—Svetlana’s brother—confronted the married man who’d been having an affair with his sister, things got violent, and Declan ended up killing Vadim.

“It’s complicated” doesn’t even begin to cut it.

Gavan nods. “So, as you already know from what I found on that hard drive from Drazen, there was a child that came from that affair.”

Cillian nods. “Yeah, and I’ve been looking into it, for obvious reasons.”

He glances at me, and my jaw tightens.

“*Obvious reasons* being that this kid is technically Declan’s heir?” I grunt.

He nods. “Pretty much. But I haven’t found a goddamn thing. And believe me, I’ve looked.”

“I...might’ve found something a few days ago, when I was going through some of the files on Drazen’s hard drive.”

Cillian’s sharp green eyes dart to Gavan’s. “And?”

“Your old friend Owen Foley apparently had microphones recording everything that went on in his office.”

Oh, really. Owen was a long-time ally and head of one of the most powerful Kildare vassal families. Until the bastard showed his true colors.

I’ve definitely gone and pissed on his grave on more than one occasion since then.

“And what, pray tell,” Cillian growls dangerously, “are *in* these recordings?”

Gavan nods. “There’s not a lot on the hard drive. Drazen only got a few audio clips, and most of them were just Owen stuffing his face or getting a blowjob from his favorite working girl.”

I make a mental note to fill my bladder and go visit Owen’s grave again soon.

“But...I think you’ll be interested in this particular one.”

Gavan holds up his phone and hits the play button on an audio file.

“I don’t fucking like it, Owen.”

Cillian and I both snap to attention, glancing sharply at each other as Declan’s voice rattles out of the phone.

“He’s going to find out some day,” Declan growls tensely.

“Take a breath, Dec,” Owen urges. “You’re overthinking this. He doesn’t know. He never *has* to know. That’s the decision you made years ago.”

“Overthinking?” Declan snaps. “The fuck am I going to do when he realizes he’s my kid? Fuck.”

Owen sighs. “I told you. You should have had her taken care of the second she told you she was pregnant.”

Declan barks a cold laugh. “Right, sure, and bring the weight of that entire fucking organization down on my ass. Yeah, solid fucking plan, Owen.”

“Is this fucking for real?” Ares hisses.

Cillian’s green eyes narrow and he holds up a finger, nodding silently as the recording goes on.

“The fuck am I supposed to do when he realizes he’s got a goddamn empire with his goddamn name on it.”

“But it *doesn’t* have his name on it,” Owen protests. “I don’t see Kildare on that birth certificate, do you?”

“He’s an angry kid, Owen.”

“The world is full of angry kids. You’re worrying far too much about this, Declan.”

“Yeah? How about angry ones with his expertise with a fifty-cal?”

I stiffen and my eyes widen as they stab at Gavan’s phone.

That was what the shooter tonight used.

Holy shit, what the fuck am I hearing?

“He’s violent, Owen. We’ve both seen what he can do. There’s a darkness in him, and I know you see it as well.”

“Well, dark or not, he’s long gone, Dec. Relax. Let me pour you a drink.”

“If he finds out, I’m a dead man, Owen. *Dead.*”

There’s the sound of two glasses clinking. “I’m telling you, he won’t. Or...if he does...let’s pray we’re both long gone and buried.”

Declan snorts a cold laugh. “And God have mercy on whoever’s sitting in our places when he does.”

The audio file ends. The terrace is silent.

“The gun tonight was a fifty-caliber,” I growl quietly, surveying them all.

“And we have *no* fucking idea where this goddamn son is?” Ares hisses, his eyes darting inside to Callie who is on her phone in the kitchen.

“We don’t know a fucking thing about him,” Cillian growls. “If he’s alive or not, if he knows who he is or not...” He squints into the middle distance. “I’m on it. I trust that this stays here on this terrace, with just us for now?” He raises his green gaze to Ares and Gavan. “Neve and Eilish *do not* need to know about this right now. If ever.”

“Of course,” Ares growls.

“I’m quite serious,” Cillian snarls with a vicious lethality in his voice.

Ares drops a hand onto Cillian’s shoulder. “And I quite seriously agree. You have my word, Cil. Neve in particular had a hard enough time wrapping her head around what her dad did to her mom. I’m not dumping this on her as well.”

“And I don’t enjoy emotionally burdening my fiancée,” Gavan murmurs. “So no, I won’t be talking to Eilish about this.”

Cillian nods. “Thank you.”

WHEN CILLIAN, Ares, Deimos, and Gavan take off, I walk back into the big open living area, where Callie is now sprawled on the couch. She looks up, her face turning pink as our eyes lock.

Yeah.

Instantly, I’m remembering the way she moaned. The eager way she writhed for me and came all over my fucking fingers.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. This place is sweet.”

I can see the way she’s putting up a brave front and trying to be flip and nonchalant. More and more I’m noticing that that is her default self-defense strategy. But there’s trying to play it cool, and there’s trying to pretend you’re fine after you’ve been fucking shot at.

“It’s really okay if you’re not,” I growl quietly. “Being shot at is an intense experience. If you want to talk about it—”

“Anything *you* want to talk about?”

My brow cocks.

Yes...but no.

Because as I stand here, looking at her, reliving the violence that came *after* the pleasure, it’s like a bucket of cold water being dumped on my head. And it’s very, very sobering.

This—our arrangement—cannot be *that*.

As in, a real relationship. As in, what we came so perilously close to doing in that library before the bullets started flying.

My job—my mission—is to protect my family and its empire. Part of that is keeping Callie safe.

Not fucking her.

Not spanking her, and fingering her tight little cunt until she floods my fingers, and imagining that it's my cock instead.

It's not going to be pleasant, but it's time to nip this in the bud.

“Callie, what happened earlier—”

“I'm a big girl, Castle,” she says flatly as the hint of smile drops from her lips. She pointedly turns her attention back to her phone. “It was some fun. No need to read anything into it.”

I keep eying her as she types away at something or other.

“So...you're okay?”

“Yeah.”

She pushes her fingers through her long, dark hair. “I'm fine.” Her lip sucks between her teeth as she turns toward me. “There's, uh...there's only one bedroom, though.”

“Take it,” I grunt. “I'll be fine on the couch.”

I refuse to acknowledge the barely contained look of disappointment on her face.

But this isn't any more a honeymoon suite than we are an actual married couple. This is a hideout. It's Fort fucking Knox, if Fort Knox came complete with a wine fridge, remote-start fireplace, state-of-the-art luxury kitchen, and sixty-million-dollar views of Central Park.

Without another word, Callie abruptly gets off the couch, grabs her bag, and carries it into the bedroom. The door slams shut behind her as my brain does somersaults trying to shake the memory of the sound she made when she came for me from my head.

Yeah, good luck with that, bud.

This is going to be a very, *very* long year.

CALLIE

FUCK. It's obvious he regrets what happened earlier. It's also obvious I should, too, except I seem to be incapable of doing that, *or* of pushing it out of my mind.

It's kinda hard to forget your first real sexual experience involving something more than your own fingers or a battery-operated helper, after all. And when that experience is the most mind-blowing, toe-curling, full-body-explosive feeling you've ever had in your life?

Yeah. No. I'm pretty sure I'm going to have a hard time forgetting that.

And I *know* I don't regret it.

Even if it's clear his walls have gone right back up and are even higher than they were before.

The really insane part is that I'm not even thinking too much about the fact that we were just shot at. That Neve and Eilish's home, which has become *my* secondary home, which has always felt so safe, was just riddled with bullets.

I mean, obviously that terrifying memory is there. But it's way in the background compared to the replays of Castle grabbing me and kissing me in a way I've literally dreamt about since quite possibly the day I met him. And as much as I know I

should forget that, and as clear as it is that he'd like to, as well, there's no erasing any of that from my thoughts.

In the lone bedroom of the apartment, I scowl as I hug my knees to my chest on the bed.

He's so confusing. It feels like one minute he's looking at me like I'm this terrible burden he's been saddled with, and the next, there's a vicious jealous fire in his eyes, like he's furious that I'm even aware other men exist on the planet.

Which is total bullshit. Stavros is a friend, nothing more. Meanwhile, Castle's the one texting this Loraine chick, and whoever the *fuck* Teagan is.

My breathing speeds up as my temper flares. Fuck this. I've never been one to just sit on things—case in point, my insane decision to just *kiss him already* the other day. And I'm not about to spend a year married to this man just sitting in my room sulking.

Castle looks up sharply when I come storming out of the bedroom and march over to where he's leaning against the kitchen counter scrolling his phone.

“Who the fuck is Teagan?”

He raises his eyebrows at me like a teacher. “Looking through other people's phones and private messages is generally frowned upon, Callie.”

“Oh? Well so is texting fucking high school girls, asshole!”

His face remains utterly neutral, which is even more infuriating. Like he's not in the least bit embarrassed, or feels no shame about it.

“*So sorry I missed you the other night'?!*” I snap, parroting her text back to him. “You *owe her a BIG one'?*” Fucking

gross, Castle! How old is she?! Not old enough for you to be taking her on a *big date*, that's for fucking—”

“She's eighteen,” he says in a slow, measured tone.

“OH! *Well!* My mistake, then!” I sneer sarcastically. “By all means! Take her out for a night she'll never forget! Just be sure she does her times tables homework before you fuck her —”

“Green really isn't your color, Callie.”

My throat bobs heavily as he stands from where he's been leaning on the counter and walks slowly toward me. He moves like a predator stalking its prey, his eyes glinting with a shade of anger mixed with something electric that makes my skin tingle and my heart race. I step back, but instantly have to stop when I feel the cool metal of the fridge behind me.

“Not to mention, *none of that* is your fucking business,” he growls.

I shiver as he comes to a stop right in front of me, looming over me and caging me against the refrigerator. His god-like lips curl dangerously at the corners.

I glare up at him. “You think I'm jealous?”

“Isn't that it?”

I swallow. “Go look in the mirror, buddy. I'm not the one that almost went full Mike Tyson on a guy in a bar.”

The heat that flashes in his lethal blue eyes is as terrifying as it is exciting.

“Who is he to you,” he growls darkly.

I chew on my lip, not saying anything as his gaze burns a hole right through me.

“Why? *Jealous?*”

“Is that a yes, he’s your boyfriend?” Castle rasps.

I suck on my teeth. “No.”

“*Was he* your boyfriend?”

“I like this jealous husband look on you—”

“Answer the fucking question, Callie,” he snaps, sending a bolt of something dark and sinful throbbing through my core.

The answer is obviously no.

But I can’t help myself. At this point, I think I’m addicted to this knife’s edge I walk with him—teetering on a razor blade between wanting him and wanting to see how far I can push him before he snaps.

“Maybe,” I shrug. “Or maybe he’s just a boy that I call *friend* —”

I gasp, my pulse shooting through the roof as Castle suddenly explodes into me. His big hands wrap around my throat, squeezing just enough to send pure fire and lust erupting through every nerve and synapse in my body. Electricity dances over my skin, radiating from the point of contact of his hand on my neck as he looms over me. His eyes ripple with blue fire as the very air is stripped from my lungs.

“Going out with him,” he rasps into my face, “was incredibly fucking stupid.”

“Because of the threat against us?” I snap. “Or because he’s a man who isn’t *you?*”

“First of all,” Castle mutters thinly, “he’s a kid, *not* a man like me.”

Fuck, why is that so hot. And so freaking true. Stavros isn't actually that much younger than Castle—he's probably midway between our ages—and he's a good-looking guy.

But he's got nothing on Castle.

Stavros *is* a boy in comparison.

Castle's the most *man* I've ever known. Rough, hardened, masculine, dangerous. Hauntingly beautiful, yet stony and full of sharp angles and hard walls.

“And second of all,” he hisses. “There *is* a threat against us! *Clearly!*”

“Well!” I snap back. “I didn't *know* that yester—”

“That *will not* be happening again.”

“What won't? My lunch with a friend, or you kissing me like I belong to you before getting into my pants?!”

The kitchen goes silent as we both freeze. As the replay *obviously* flickers over both of our faces. His chiseled, handsome jaw grinds, his eyes turning to crystal blue slits as his hand tightens around my neck and sends heat roaring through my core.

“You need to forget that, Callie.”

The words aren't delicate, or gentle. They're a slap in the face. Cold, brutal, and without remorse.

“That should not have happened. And it *won't* be happening again.”

His hand drops from my throat and he turns away, pulling the heat from my skin and taking the air from my lungs with him.

“I don't know what you want!” I snap.

Castle bristles, his broad, muscled shoulders tensing.

“First you want me to keep my distance! Then you want me close to you! Ooh, but not *too* close!”

“Callie...”

“You tell me there’s no touching or kissing,” I scream at his back. “And then you bruise my lips like you fucking own them and finger-fuck me until I come! I don’t think it’s *super* out of left field for me to ask you to *make up your fucking mind!*” I yell. “Because I have *no fucking idea* what you want—!”

I gasp, choking as he whirls like a tornado on me. His eyes storm with heat and danger, and I whimper as his hand wraps tightly around my throat, pinning me to the fridge as he dips his face to the hollow of my neck.

My heart pounds. My entire body tingles and prickles, like the charge crackling in the atmosphere before a thunderstorm breaks and shatters the sky.

“You want to know what the fuck I want?” he snarls right in my ear. My eyes roll back, my mouth goes slack, and my legs weaken.

“*Fine*, baby girl,” he hisses. “You want to push me, and push me, and fucking push me until I snap? *Fine!*”

I whimper as his teeth rake across the soft skin of my neck.

“Then let me clear up any confusion, Callie, and fucking *show you* what I want.”

My breath catches and a stab of something heated and twisted curls deep in my core when he nips at my earlobe.

“*Get on your fucking knees and open your fucking mouth.*”

CALLIE

HOLY FUCK.

It's by far the dirtiest thing anyone's ever said to me. But it's also the most sinfully *hot* thing anyone's ever said to me, too. And the fact that it's Castle saying it makes me want to hear it in a loop on repeat. I want to listen to him growling it into my ear over and over until the words and his tone alone send me gasping over the precipice.

I whimper as his hand slides into the back of my hair, his fingers threading through my locks before pulling them tight into a fist.

"*You asked*, baby girl," he growls thickly. "So let me show you what the fuck I want. You want to play the bad girl?" Castle's eyes lock with mine. "Get on your fucking knees and show me how just bad you can be."

It's embarrassing how fast I drop to my knees in front of him. My pulse is thudding as I look up at him. His chiseled jaw grinds, and I drink in the raw power and heat in his stormy blue eyes. He reaches for his belt, undoing it as my heart races like crazy and a throbbing pressure builds in my core.

"Take off your top."

I'm tingling everywhere, and my hands tremble as I reach down to grab the bottom of my hoodie. I pull it off, revealing that I'm not wearing a bra underneath it. Castle's gaze drops to my bare breasts, and when I realize his pants are already bulging obscenely at the zipper, I shiver with heat.

I did that.

That's because of me.

It's a powerful feeling.

Castle's hands drop to his pants, popping the button and deftly pulling down the zipper. His hand slips inside as my heart climbs into my throat.

And then suddenly, he's pulling out his cock and letting it throb and hang heavily in the air between us.

Sweet. Merciful. Christ.

He's fucking *huge*. I mean the man is six and a half feet tall and built like a professional athlete, but holy *fuck*. Even on *Castle*, it looks big.

And swollen. And hard. And as thick around as my freaking wrist.

Above me, Castle smirks darkly.

"Still want to play the bad girl with me?"

I gulp as my eyes lift from his huge cock to the vicious, lethal look in his eyes.

I nod as my face heats.

"Hands behind your back," he growls quietly.

I do as he says, my fingers nervously twisting together.

"Open your mouth, baby girl."

My lips part, my jaw opening wide as his hand slides into my hair. He tangles it in his fist, pulling my head toward him as my pulse roars and heat pools between my thighs.

It occurs to me suddenly that I've never really labeled myself as anything sexually, because I've never *explored* anything sexually. At least not with anyone but myself. But now, here on my knees on the floor, eagerly and obediently opening my mouth for his cock with my hands behind my back, I realize I suddenly know exactly what I am.

A submissive.

Or at least, with Castle I am. Because I'm not just doing this because I, pathetically, want him to "like me". I'm not doing what he asks so he "notices me."

I'm doing this because it's unbelievably fucking hot. Because the way the usually calm and even somewhat charming Castle is growling filthy orders to me, telling me to "get on my fucking knees" for him, makes me want to touch myself until I come screaming his name.

I tremble as my lips hover an inch away from his throbbing, hard, swollen cock head. Our eyes lock.

"*Like this?*" I purr sensually as I open my mouth even wider and stick out my tongue like I'm getting ready to lick the most delicious ice cream cone in the known world.

Castle groans. The muscles of his tattooed forearm ripple, and his grip on my hair tightens. And suddenly, he's guiding the fat head of his cock between my lips and over my tongue.

I moan.

Again, it's not even because I'm merely trying to please him, even though I am. And it's not because I'm trying to prove anything to him, or me. It's because the second his gorgeous

cock stretches my lips wide and glides over my eager tongue, it's like a flash of pure heat sparks through my entire body.

My legs squeeze together, and I whimper again as I let my tongue dance over the underside of his dick. I sink my mouth down lower, until I realize I can't actually get that much in my mouth given how big he is.

But fuck if I'm not going to try.

I breathe through my gag reflex, ignoring the way my spit is running down his cock and my chin. I keep my eyes locked on his as I slide up and back down. My tongue swirls around the head, and I can taste the salty sweetness of his precum as I drag my tongue over the velvety hardness, stretching my lips wide.

Castle groans, his cock throbbing in my mouth. He lifts his shirt and pulls it off, and I shiver when my eyes drift to his muscled abs and the deep grooves of his hips. He gathers my long hair in a fist, tugging just hard enough to slip my mouth off him with an audible pop as I gasp quietly.

Our eyes lock.

“Open wide, baby girl,” he growls quietly. “I’m going to fuck that bratty little mouth of yours now.”

I moan embarrassingly loudly. My jaw opens wide, and I whimper when he guides his thickness back between my lips. He rolls his hips, gliding over my tongue and sinking right to the back of my throat. I suppress the gag reflex again, my pulse roaring and pure desire throbbing between my legs. His muscles ripple as he pumps in and out, fucking my mouth while his fist is in my hair guiding me.

It should be outrageously demeaning and a complete turnoff to be...*used* like this.

It's not.

It's the polar opposite.

My head swims, and I'm shifting my own hips side to side, squeezing my thighs together to keep some pressure on my aching clit.

Suddenly, Castle's pulling me off him, making me gasp as spit drips between my swollen lips and his pulsing cock. I feel like I'm floating as he lifts me up into his arms. My legs wrap instinctively around his hips, and when his mouth slams to mine, I moan as I kiss him eagerly.

He carries me across the room, dropping onto the couch on his back with me on top of him. His tongue dances with mine as his hand slides into the back of my yoga pants and my panties. He starts to peel them both down over my ass, shoving them down my legs as my nipples rub over his chest.

Then suddenly, he's dragging me up his body, pulling me by the top of my thighs, until I realize what he's doing.

"Castle..."

His firm grip on my ass positions me until I'm straddling his face. I blush fiercely, suddenly feeling hugely self-conscious about...well, everything.

The angle. The lighting. Do I look fat? Is this weird? Should I run and shower real quick? What the fuck are you supposed to say or do before someone goes down on you for the first time?

Castle just shakes his head, as if he's hearing every single one of my anxiety-fueled insecurities out loud and he's chasing them away.

"Right here, baby girl," he growls, touching his own lips. "I want that pretty pussy riding my fucking tongue until you

come all over it. I can't—I *won't*—wait any longer to taste how fucking sweet you are.”

Holy. FUCK.

The way he talks to me is fucking *insane*. His words are able to tease and prod their way into the deepest, darkest places in my soul and push every single button I have. And before I know it, his powerful hands are yanking me down, and suddenly, for the very first time, I'm feeling a man's tongue between my legs.

Holy fucking HELL.

For one second, I'm actually *furious* with myself that I waited so long and wasted so many years *not* feeling this and not experiencing this. Because sweet Jesus, it's the single best feeling in the world. It's fucking heaven the way his tongue teases up and down my lips and then swirls around my aching clit.

But in the next second, the frustration melts away as I moan deeply. And I'm not mad anymore, because I wasn't really missing out all these years.

I was just waiting. For *him*.

Castle's strong hands grip my ass, guiding my hips to rock on his face as his tongue pushes deep into me. I cry out, choking on the pleasure of him fucking me with his tongue. My eyes roll back, and I scream up at the ceiling. It feels as if his tongue is worming its way all the way up inside me.

His lips wrap around my clit. Castle groans deeply, sending vibrations through my core that send me reeling. His tongue swirls and dances over the throbbing, aching button, making my thighs clamp around his ears as my body ripples with pleasure.

It's like I'm lost, tossing on the stormy ocean that is Castle. I'm vaguely aware of writhing and whimpering against his mouth as a ball of what feels like pure pleasure knots and throbs in my core. I feel like a goddess of sex, my hands sliding up over my own body—pinching and rolling my own nipples and gasping at the sensation, shoving my fingers through my hair as my hips buck against his tongue over and over.

His palm spans my ass, bringing me to my breaking point. And when his lips fasten around my clit again, and he starts to dance his tongue over me, I lose all control.

Suddenly, I'm coming. And I'm coming *hard*.

I cry out, my hips still rocking hard against his mouth and tongue as the orgasm explodes through me. A wrenching shriek of pleasure tears from my lips and black spots dot the edges of my vision before I start to collapse.

He catches me, easing me back onto the couch as my lungs beg for air. I squeeze my thighs together, twitching from the aftershocks of my release as I slowly open my eyes.

Castle's looking at me with a look on his face that's halfway between a smug grin and raw hunger. My eyes slide down the rippling muscles of his gorgeous body, and it's only then that I realize he's kicked his pants off at some point. My eyes bulge as they lock onto his throbbing hard cock, jutting out from his grooved hips and toned abs.

And then slowly, I'm crawling between his legs. Castle groans as my small hand wraps around his shaft—at least, around as much of it as I can—pumping him as my eyes lock with his. My tongue wets my lips before I lean in to kiss the crown. My lips part, sliding down over his swollen dick as his hands slip

back into my hair, making me throb with need as he wraps it around his fist.

“Yeah, just like that, baby girl,” he growls as I start to moan and slurp on his cock. “Fuck, Callie...”

“I want to taste your cum.”

The second it flies out of my mouth, I’m shocked I actually said it. But I hold his gaze with mine, stroking his slick cock as I lean down to drag my tongue over his head.

He growls, his hand tightening in my hair, sending a thrill through me. “Then open wide, because I’m going to fill this pretty mouth with it.”

I moan as my lips slide over his head. My tongue swirls around his crown as both my hands pump his swollen shaft. My eyes stay locked with his, watching the fire surge into them as his jaw grits tightly.

And then suddenly, I’m watching him come even before I feel it. His cock explodes in my mouth, sending thick ropes of hot, sticky cum across my tongue and against the back of my throat. I struggle for just a second, coughing. But then I get the hang of it, and the thrill of feeling him pulsing in my mouth and filling it with his release is like a drug that I’m already hooked on.

I swallow eagerly, realizing I actually like the salty-sweet taste. And even when his cock stops throbbing, I keep it between my lips, stroking him slowly as the last of his cum drips onto my tongue.

All of a sudden, my body is aware of how much energy I’ve just expended as I feel Castle’s strong hands cradle me, his big arms lifting me up against his body. I whimper as he kisses me

deeply, apparently totally unfazed by the fact that I've just swallowed his cum. So hot.

My eyes flutter closed, then open, then closed again.

Then I know nothing but the heat of his embrace and the rhythmic thud of his heart in his chest.

CASTLE

I STIR, flinching as daylight stabs at the back of my eyelids. As my brain starts to wake up, I crack an eye open and fumble for my phone on the coffee table, glancing at the time.

Fuck.

Eight in the morning? I haven't slept in this late since before I enlisted.

I let my eyes fall closed again, sinking halfway back into sleep as I drop my head back onto the couch.

Yeah, so, *that* happened.

I allow myself a small smirk as my mind replays the events of last night—namely, of Callie's full, pouty lips wrapped around my cock and her sweet pussy grinding on my tongue. Of the way she writhed and came completely undone for me.

The way I fucking craved her again, a thousand more times, the second it was over.

After she exploded on my tongue last night, and after she swallowed me whole, I held her because she was shaking and looked like she might actually faint. Then she fell asleep—right on top of me, her cheek to my bare chest.

There's a small chance I allowed that to go on a bit longer than it should have.

Kissing her was already against the rules. *My* rules. But wrapping her hair in my fist and fucking her mouth before shoving my tongue deep in her pussy shattered every shred of reason and rationality I have left.

It shouldn't have happened.

...So why would I do it a hundred times over?

As my mind wakes a little more, I remember that I eventually carried her, still sleeping, into her room, to her own bed.

Which I *did not* share with her.

What happened, happened. But I can't make this more than it is, because that is not what we are. I might want Callie, in a carnal sense. I mean just fucking look at her. I might also care for her more than I should.

But it's obvious from the way she looks at me that this marriage isn't fake for her. Or at least, it's not as fake as it *should* be for her.

I'm not who she wants. Not really. She might think I am, but if she knew who and what I really am, this little crush of hers would've gone up in smoke a year ago.

No, I'm not what Callie really wants, or needs.

Not after Kabul.

In a year, when this is over and done with, she deserves to find someone real; someone who's truly capable of what she deserves in life. Not a shell of a man like me.

I flinch, suddenly ripped from the remaining fog of sleep by a clatter of metal. And when I do fully wake, my nose sniffs and

my brow furrows.

Why do I smell bacon.

Frowning, I sit up and peer over the back of the couch toward the kitchen area. Instantly, my eyes are met by a grinning Callie.

“Morning,” she chirps, turning to flip the bacon on the stove before moving the pan off the heat. “Coffee’s ready.”

I stand from the couch, just in my boxers. Callie blushes, her lip catching between her teeth as her eyes sweep over my bare chest. I turn away, pull jeans and a t-shirt out of my small suitcase, and slip them on.

As usual, Callie’s pouring her disturbing amount of oat milk and a lethal amount of sugar into her coffee as I step into the kitchen. I bite back a smirk, remembering the time at the Drakos house a few months ago when Callie offered me the rest of her Starbucks cup when I mentioned being exhausted.

I remember the way she giggled and howled with laughter when I almost spit it out again, telling her it tasted like diabetes in a cup.

I pour a cup of coffee for myself—black, no sugar, thank you very much. When I turn, my pulse thuds as Callie moves toward me.

“Hang on,” I growl, trying *very* hard not to let my eyes linger on the little sleep shorts that cling to her ass and the way-too-small tank top, obviously without a bra underneath it.

I grit my teeth as I shake my head.

I’m not going to relish this. But we *have* to agree that this—whatever “this” is—can’t happen anymore. Even if I’m relatively sure I’ll die before I ever lose the memory of Callie

on her knees looking up at me as she swirled her tongue around my swollen cock.

Ever.

She frowns as she stops a foot away from me. “What?”

She’s trying to look nonchalant, because that’s Callie. Because that’s her defense mechanism, her armor—always be aloof, sarcastic, easy-going, and then you can’t be hurt.

She’s not pulling it off quite as well as usual this morning, though.

“We need to talk about what happened last night.”

“Okay?”

I frown. “So, maybe you should start—”

“The fuck. You’re the one who wanted to talk about it.”

I exhale slowly, shoving my fingers through my hair. “Callie —”

“I know this is fake, Castle,” she says evenly.

“I’m not talking about the marriage.”

Her face flushes. She sucks her lip between her teeth in that way she has that makes me want to grab her, flip her around, pin her to the counter, and fuck her hard until her cum is dripping from my swollen balls.

Get your shit in line, man.

Callie rolls her eyes, shrugging. “Castle, it’s *fine*. I had fun, you had fun...” she smirks. “Your dick had fun, anyway.”

I bite back a groan as she grins at me.

“What’s wrong with having fun, Castle?”

“Because I don’t know if *we* can,” I growl. “Together.”

“Why not?”

You know damn well why not.

“Because fun can turn into...more.”

She looks away. “We’re friends, right?”

I frown. This feels like a trap.

“Yes,” I say cautiously. “But—”

“So, let’s call it that. We’re friends. And just because we’re married, that doesn’t have to stop.”

“Friends don’t do what we did last night, Callie,” I growl quietly.

“Certain kinds of friends do.”

My cock twitches.

“I’m just saying,” Callie shrugs. “We’re stuck married to each other for a year, we’re both adults with adult needs, and unless we want to have a second, separate arrangement where we can go meet those needs elsewhere...”

I see. Fucking. *Red.*

I imagine that little fuck from the bar with his hands on her. Touching her. Kissing her. Tasting her.

Fucking her.

“No,” I snarl with a vicious brutality even I wasn’t expecting.

The corners of Callie’s lips curl up just a hint, her brow arching.

Jesus, dial it the fuck back, dude.

“That’s not safe.”

She looks amused. “And what wouldn’t be ‘safe’ about an arrangement where you’re allowed to go screw whoever you want...” She shrugs, *barely* holding back the sour look on her face. “*Teagan*, for instance...”

“We’re not having that discussion again, Callie.”

She shrugs. “Or I could screw...*whomever*...”

“*Because*,” I snarl. “If they were to find out about the money...” I stop and shake my head. “It’s just a bad idea, Callie.”

Because the thought of you with another man makes me want to spill blood.

“So...*we* can have an agreement, then?”

God help me, the swiftness with which my cock grows to full, swollen fucking size, straining feverishly against my pants when she says that is alarming.

And dangerous.

And *telling*.

“Excuse me?”

She blushes. “I just mean...if one of us has...*needs*...”

I absolutely cannot be thinking of Callie’s “needs”.

Or the way her pussy clenched around my fingers as she moaned for me. Or the way she tasted, or the moans she made when my balls emptied my cum down her throat and she swallowed it all down.

Or the ways her eyes *begged* me to take everything else I wanted from her.

“*Callie*...”

“Relax, Castle.”

Her face heats as she sniffs contemptuously and shrugs, flipping her hair over her shoulder as she turns away.

“Just because I’m married to you, doesn’t mean I’m going to fall in love with you.”

CALLIE

BUT ONLY BECAUSE I probably already am.

That's the second part of my punchline, the part that doesn't make it anywhere near my lips, let alone past them.

We eat the breakfast I made in relative silence after that. I glower into my eggs and bacon, trying not to steal glances at the man eating next to me with the bulging arms and swaths of tattoo ink...and the perfect jawline...and the intense blue eyes.

The man whose tongue was between my legs last night. The man who told me to "get on my fucking knees and open my fucking mouth", which is literally the single hottest thing anyone's ever said to me.

I mean holy *fuck*, who even talks like that?

Castle does.

Castle talks like that. At least, to girls he looks at the way he looked at me last night—like he wanted to devour me whole.

He's, umm...not looking at me like that anymore.

I steal another glance at him as I chew a piece of bacon and take a sip of coffee.

I know what his cock tastes like.

The sinful knowledge burns like a hot coal in my mind. Like a dirty little secret, or classified information I'm not supposed to know. Like he's Mount Olympus, and last night I stole fire from him.

Almost absentmindedly, I let my tongue trace over my lips, remembering the way they felt all swollen and puffy last night after what we did.

That was a new sensation for me.

So was the electric, tingling, aching sensation between my legs from his mouth, and the sweet burn of his stubble on my inner thighs. The demanding way his tongue swirled around my clit, rendering me unable to do anything but explode for him.

I want *more* of that feeling. A lot more of it.

Like...right now.

But he isn't looking at me at all, let alone how he looked at me last night. He just eats his breakfast in silence—not even pointed silence meant to make a statement.

He's completely moved on.

Last night, to him, was a mistake. Or just some fun. Or a bit of both. And now, in the cold light of day, he's remembering how he *actually* feels about me.

Indifferent. Like I'm just the kid sister of men he calls friends. The little playmate of the girls he calls sisters. The burden he's stuck with for the next year. Nothing more. That's why he's not looking at me this morning the way he looked at me last night. Why he hasn't even noticed that I'm—purposefully—wearing tiny little sleep shorts that may as well be panties and a too-small tank top without a bra.

It's why pretty much the first thing he did after waking up this morning was make sure that I knew that last night was "a mistake".

Cool. Yeah. *Got it.* Thanks.

After breakfast, Castle showers in our lone bathroom, and then comes out looking fucking *good*.

Really, really good.

Cillian's uniform as leader of the Kildare family was a very Johnny Cash-inspired look—black suit with black shoes and a black dress shirt. Castle steps out in dark, almost-black charcoal gray suit pants with a matching vest and a white dress shirt slightly open at the collar, with the sleeves rolled up to just below the elbows.

I mean sweet Jesus.

If they made sexy lingerie for men, this would be it. Just...*all* of this business, standing right here in front of me.

Castle either doesn't notice or pointedly ignores the way I'm staring at him as he walks back into the kitchen.

"I have some stuff I need to attend to."

I nod, not quite capable of words yet as I walk up to him. He bristles, his eyes narrowed as if on high alert. When I reach up, his hand suddenly shoots out to grab my wrist, stopping me from touching him.

"*Callie,*" he growls with a warning edge to his voice. "We literally just talked—"

"Can I get the *lint* off your fucking shirt?" I mumble, glaring at him as I feel my face turning red.

He scowls. But his grip drops from my wrist. I pluck the errant piece of fluff from his collar and flick it away.

“You look good.”

He jaw grinds. I roll my eyes.

“Oh my *God*, Castle. I’m allowed to compliment you on your appearance on like your first real day as the boss, aren’t I?”

He looks away and then nods.

“Yeah, sure.”

“Well, that was it. You look good.”

“Thanks,” he grunts.

Except, I haven’t backed away since plucking the thread from his shirt. And neither has he.

“I’ll be back late. You need to stay here for the time being.”

“Got it.”

He arches a brow. “I mean it, Callie. Please. No running off.”

“If you keep talking to me like I’m this much of a fucking idiot, you will not survive being married to me for a fucking year, I promise you,” I snap back. “*I mean it, Castle,*” I grunt in a tone meant to imitate his.

He just glares at me. I roll my eyes.

“Remember that time *yesterday* with the bullets and the exploding window and the near death and all that fun stuff?”

“It rings a bell,” he grumps back.

“Wow! Amazing! Me too! Probably because *I was there!*” I smile sweetly. “So, yes, Castle, I’m *well* aware of the security concerns involved with me leaving this apartment.”

“Fantastic.” He sucks on his teeth, his brow furrowing. “Are we also clear on the other matters we were discussing earlier?”

“You mean, am I clear that you just wanted to come in my mouth and go down on me, but that you don’t want us to fall in love with each other?”

Watching a grown man blush—especially a man as gruff, big, and imposing as Castle—is something I hope everyone can experience at least once in their life.

“*Yes, dear.*” I flash a saccharine smile at him as I pat his chest. “Yet again, *I got it.* Okay?”

After he leaves, I stare at the apartment door with a mix of annoyance and guilt. Annoyance because he keeps feeling the need to remind me that what happened between us was just sex—or at least as near to sex as I’ve ever gotten.

The guilt, though, is all me. Because not-so-deep down, even though I keep telling him to relax, and that I get it, and that it’s fine...

It’s not. It’s really, really not.

I’m lying to him, and therein lies the guilt.

But if I can’t get what I want from Castle, I’ll steal it from him in my own private way. So, fine, sure. Last night and what happened in the library at the brownstone can be “just sex” or “a mistake” to him.

To me, though? To me, a little taste of heaven is better than nothing at all.

FOR A WEEK, we fall into a stalemate. It's like the Cold War in here. We talk, but only peripherally about mundane things. It's never conversation, it's just information. Like "do you want the first or second shower, Callie?"

The answer in my head, of course, is "I want to shower *with you*", but I don't actually have the ovaries to say that out loud to him.

I *can't* say that to him. He's made that abundantly clear.

But I can still think it, dammit. I can still fantasize about it, and gasp quietly into my pillow at night as I imagine Castle slipping into the room, pinning me to the bed, and ravaging me.

Finally, after about a week of him going off to play King of the Kildares during the day while I'm stuck like a prisoner in this gilded cage, feeling like I'm going to die of actual boredom from binging episodes of *Ninety Day Fiancé*, Neve stops by to keep me company. Security has been beefed up around everyone in her family as well as mine. But since it's pretty clear who the target was, the rest of them are all still free to, well, be free. They're not prisoners like me.

"So, how're you doing?"

I shrug as the two of us lounge on the sofa in front of the big stone fireplace with cups of coffee. The fact that all I can think about is Castle pulling me onto his mouth after I moaned around his cock the other night *on this very couch* has my face burning hotly as I try to hide behind my coffee mug.

"Oh...fine."

She snickers, shaking her head as she looks around the penthouse. "Sorry, I know this is serious, and I'm not *at all*

trying to downplay the fact that you got shot at and everything...”

My brows lift. “But?”

“But I’m *tickled* that Castle is living his worst nightmare right now.”

I tense, frowning. “Um...meaning?”

Neve laughs, instantly reaching over to squeeze my arm affectionately. “Oh my God, no, sorry. That came out totally wrong. I don’t mean *you*. I mean the fact that he’s forced to play house like this and live with a woman,” she giggles. “I mean, obviously you’re not like, *a girlfriend* or whatever.”

“Yeah...obviously,” I mumble through a forced smile. Then my brow furrows. “Wait, so...what exactly do you mean?”

She rolls her eyes. “Eilish and I—and Cillian, and Una, basically everyone—have tried to set Castle up with women like a million times.”

My back molars grind.

“And?”

She shrugs. “And nothing. The man is terrified of commitment.”

I frown. “Yeah, but...he *dates*, right?”

She snorts. “If he does, it’s in secret. Trust me, I’d have noticed.”

I chew on that for a second, sipping my coffee, feeling... *jealous*.

Of Neve.

It’s such a stupid thought process, and this isn’t even remotely the first time I’ve felt it around her or Eilish. But I can’t help

it. There are just times where I'm flat out *jealous* of them and what they've had with Castle. Obviously, it's never been anything romantic in the slightest, with them basically being his sisters. But what I'm jealous of is the intimacy they have with him. The easy, casual way they can joke with him, or how he ruffles their hair or hugs them. The history they have with him.

It's ridiculous, and I always feel like an asshole feeling that jealous feeling that I get around them sometimes. But it always come back, like right now.

I steal a glance at her. "Do you know about this Teagan girl?"

She frowns. "Who?"

"Teagan. Or Loraine?"

She shakes her head. "Not ringing any bells."

I exhale quietly.

"But..." she smiles wryly. "He's also a very private person."

"And complicated," I mumble. She nods as I raise my eyes to hers. I look down into my mug. "I just...want to understand him better."

Neve glances at me curiously, her brow arching. "*Oh?*" she says pointedly.

My face heats. "Not like that," I blurt, laughing nervously.

I don't know why I've always kept —and continue to keep— my feelings for Castle from one of my best friends in the world. Maybe because I'm painfully aware of how pathetic it is for me to be head over heels for a man like him?

Maybe because he's like a brother to her, and last night he made you come on his tongue?

I swallow the heat from my face, desperately wishing I had my bottle of Ativan right now.

“I just mean, if I’m going to be living with him for a year... you know?”

Neve nods slowly, smiling quietly at me. “I get it.” She shrugs. “Well, okay, what do you want to know?”

I frown, sucking on my teeth. “Does he have any family?”

I’m always intrigued by people from small families, or people without families at all. It’s just such a radically different existence from mine, as one of six siblings.

Neve shakes her head. “I don’t think so. But I’m not sure. Castle’s family was Kildare-affiliated. Not quite a vassal family, but both his parents did work for the organization. The Jameses.”

I frown. “Did you know them?”

“No. Cillian doesn’t have very nice things to say about them, though. All I know is, Castle’s dad and his sister both died before he went into the army.”

“He had a sister?”

She nods. “Yeah.”

“Is that why he enlisted?”

She lifts a shoulder. “Your guess is as good as mine there. Look, Castle’s one of the most important people in my life. Like the brother I never had, or a really close uncle, you know?”

I nod as she continues.

“But he really is a pretty private person. I mean I’ve known the guy for ten years and I’m still not clear on his path to

becoming Cillian's number two and now head. Or how he even got appointed our bodyguard, to be honest. I mean, you know our dad ran things here in New York. But technically he still reported to Cillian, who was the head of the whole organization back in London. And after what happened to me..."

She looks away.

She doesn't have to finish that sentence.

Neve was kidnapped by a psychopath named Seamus O'Connor when she was like nine—in retaliation for what the one-time Irish mafia hitman perceived as a slight on the part of Neve and Eilish's dad.

Long story short, Cillian ended up saving her.

"Sorry, we don't have to talk about—"

"No," she smiles, distractedly running a finger over the scar she still bears on her wrist. "No, I'm okay. Seamus is dead and gone," she says flatly. "But, after that whole thing, Cillian decided our father wasn't really doing enough to protect his family. I remember he flew to New York and had a bunch of loud arguments with Dad in the study." She shrugs. "A week later, we met Castle, and the rest is history. But for real: ten years later, I still have no idea what he did in the service, or why he joined in the first place, or—honestly—why he left, either. He simply doesn't talk about it."

I look down into my coffee, swirling the contents of the mug absently before realizing Neve is looking at me curiously.

I flush. "What?"

"Oh, nothing..." She bites her lip. "Okay, sorry, I have to ask." She drops her voice even though we're the only two people in the apartment. "Are you *into* Castle?"

My face heats terribly, which I try to cover with a massive slug of coffee.

“Me?” I squeak, forcing a laugh that doesn’t sound real even to me. “Oh, *no*. No.” I shake my head. “No. Definitely no.”

“Sooo... You’re saying that’s a no?”

I groan as my face turns crimson. “That’s a no.”

Neve grins, eyeing me. “I mean, I *get it*. He’s handsome, he’s got the dark and brooding thing going on, war veteran and all that.”

And my every fantasy for like a year and a half...

She shrugs, grinning at me. “If you *are* into Castle, that is...” she eyes me. “I guess I’m not *anti* it? I mean, I get why you think I might be, but I don’t think I am?”

I laugh nervously. “Yeah, but...no way. Definitely not.”

She laughs, as if the tension’s just been broken. “Yeah. I guess that’d be pretty weird, actually.”

I force a laugh. “Yeah, totally weird.”

Fuck. Me.

IT’S A BAD, terrible, horrible, awful idea. It’s actually such a breach of trust that I want to smack *myself*. But when Neve leaves, I still pick up the phone and call Elsa.

“Hey!” my future sister-in-law exclaims brightly when she answers the phone. Then her tone immediately switches to one of concern. “How are you holding up?”

“Oh...fine. Just bored out of my skull. Trapped.”

She sighs. “I seriously can’t imagine. Want some company over there? Hades and Nora and I were planning to make pizza tonight. We could do it over at Konstantin’s place with you?”

I smile. “Thanks. But nah, that’s okay. It’s probably best if…”

I don’t finish the sentence. But I know she gets it. The unspoken thing here hanging over all of us is that *I’m* the target. *I’m* the danger magnet.

She and everyone else I know are literally safer the further they stay away from me at this point.

“So, what’s up?”

I chew on my lip. “You guys use private investigators at the firm, right?”

Elsa’s a partner at Crown and Black, one of New York’s most esteemed law firms.

“Oh, yeah, lots of them, actually.”

“Do you have a good one you’d recommend?”

I can picture her frowning as she pauses before slowly answering.

“I *do*, but…” She clears her throat. “What’s going on?”

“I… There’s this friend of mine who’s nervous about this ex of hers,” I lie. “I want to track him down and give her peace of mind that he’s not coming back.” I wince. “That’s…legal, right?”

Elsa laughs. “Yeah, that’s totally legal. And I do have someone. He’s good, too. Very discreet. I’ll text you his contact info right now.”

I smile, even though I suddenly feel like *such* an asshole.

Because of course this isn't for a friend. It's for me. To dig into Castle's life. The lie I've told myself, to make myself feel like *less* of an asshole for prying into his life, is that there's no way I can be married to someone with that many secrets for a year, even if it's a fake marriage.

The pathetic reality is, I just want to know everything about him. Selfishly, because if I learn things about him, they're like little pieces of him that I can secretly cling to. And jealously, to see if there *are* other women in his life that me and this situation are keeping him from.

God, I'm such a psycho.

"Okay, great. Thanks so much, Elsa."

"No problem! Hope your friend's okay."

And that's how, twenty minutes later, I've officially hired a PI to snoop on my own husband.

What could possibly go wrong?

CASTLE

I'M USED to the deep end, and not so much diving as getting chucked head-first into it. Hell, it's been like that my whole life. Almost every major event has hit me unexpectedly, shoving me down deep and forcing me to either learn to swim really fast, or fucking drown.

My childhood. Realizing very young that my parents *were not* there to help me, or care for me, or protect me, but that they were going through life looking out for themselves first, and me and Kelly if they had any energy left over afterward.

That was being chucked head-first into the deep end with a brick tied to my feet. That was realizing I'd better learn to make food and clean my own clothes pronto, or I'd be going hungry and dirty for a week before anyone noticed.

But of course, as soon as you learn to swim in one deep end, life will scoop you up and dump you right into another, even deeper swimming pool.

Childhood was bad. But adolescence was a nightmare, and my teen years were hell. Then came the day when our family of four became a family of two. The day Kelly and our father died.

She by his hand.

And he by mine.

Taking a life at the age of seventeen is a deep end no one should stick so much as a toe in, never mind plunge into headlong. Luckily, Dominic Farrell, for whom I'd done some work before, pulled some strings with the arresting officers that *my own mother* had called on me. As he explained it to me, I had a choice: trial as an adult and prison for a very, very long time. Or go serve my country.

In hindsight, prison would've been easier.

Prison wouldn't have gotten three of my best friends in the world killed because of me.

But life kicking your ass into the deep end is what molds and shapes you. And these days, it's what's given me the ability to walk into a meeting full of Kildare vassal family heads and a bunch of our top people and address them as their new king.

Of course, even as I'm standing at the head of the table talking, the information bomb Gavan dropped on us at Konstantin's place the other night rings like a bell in my head.

Somewhere out there, maybe even in this very room right now, is the *true* Kildare king.

Sure, I've been approved by two other Council of Clan families. And I've been the loyal number two to the outgoing head of *this* family for almost ten years. I'm as near to being a Kildare as you can get without actually having been born one. I found a "loophole", as Neve put it.

But...technically speaking...there's another, truer, more legitimate leader for this family. One who actually has Declan Kildare's blood flowing in his veins.

"If he finds out, I'm a dead man, Owen. Dead."

“I’m telling you, he won’t. Or...if he does...let’s pray we’re both long gone and buried.”

“And God have mercy on whoever’s sitting in our places when he does.”

It’s a thread I’ve been worrying at ever since I listened to that recording. Declan’s heir might be out there. He might be angry about what he was denied given who he is. And since he’s got Kildare blood, well, I mean...look at Declan. Or Cillian, for that matter. This heir could have Declan’s terrible temperament, or worse, Cillian’s actual psychotic tendencies. Cil, especially now he’s with Una, is able to keep his monster in check, at least.

...But who the fuck knows if another Kildare without that control, that anchor, would be able to do the same.

And what happens if this potentially angry, quite possibly psychotic Kildare heir finds out who he is and what he should have, and sees Callie and I as having effectively usurped *his* throne?

What happens if this potentially unhinged, angry heir already *does* know who he is?

Would it drive him to kill?

Getting officially settled in as the head of the Kildare organization takes almost a full week. There are individual meetings with the various heads of vassal families. I have sit-downs with as many of our allies as I can, with Cillian next to me, to show a peaceful transition of power and make sure they know I’m the one they’ll be doing business with from now on. Shane Dorsey—who’s now the acting director of FBI operations for all of New York City and a long-time Kildare

ally—sets up an official meeting for us to make sure we’re both on the same page.

The cynic in me thinks Dorsey is mostly just making sure he’s going to keep getting *paid*. But then, he’s also proven himself to be a huge asset to our family over the years. And honestly, I like the guy.

The days are filled with meetings and handshakes. At night, I come home to a usually-quiet apartment.

It would seem Callie finally listened to me when I made it clear we couldn’t repeat what happened before, and is now either too embarrassed or in too much of a sulk whenever I come home to face me. Because for a week, we’re like ships passing—her in the bedroom, me on the couch.

It’s after one of our marathon meetings that I catch Cillian smirking at me.

“What?” I grunt.

He chuckles. “Nothing. I’m just remembering that hothead with a chip on his shoulder I met ten years ago and comparing him to the man I know today.”

I smirk. “Still got that chip on my shoulder.”

“Yeah. I think you’d have to have it surgically removed at this point.” He grins. “But who’d have thought it? You running the whole show now. A well-adjusted adult. *Married*.”

I roll my eyes. “Don’t start with that shit.”

He chuckles. “And how *is* married life?”

I shoot him a look. “Complicated.”

“I see. And at which point did you assume living with a woman was *not* going to be complicated?”

“Har har,” I grumble. “It’s not that part. It’s *her*.”

He frowns. “I thought you and Callie were friends.”

When my lips twist, his brow arches.

“Oh, now *this* is interesting—”

“No,” I snap, shaking my head. “No. We’re friends, and *that’s it*. But she...” My brows knit. “She’s not really my damn wife, Cillian.”

“True, but you also need to remember that she’s not a *mission*, either.”

“No, she’s a stubborn little brat and a lightning rod for trouble.”

He chuckles.

“She’s also obstinate, reckless, and vulnerable.”

“I’ve always gotten the impression that Calliope Drakos is far stronger than most people give her credit for.”

Same here, actually.

Again, if she was *just* the annoying little brat stereotype, this would be so much easier. Because it would be a walk in the park to ignore her and not be attracted to her.

The problem is, she is so much *more* than that: smart, calculating, and strong. She actually might be the strongest woman I’ve ever known.

Cillian shrugs, putting a hand on my shoulder. “All I’m saying is, try and remember that she’s not *just* a mission.” His face darkens a little, his mouth drawing to a line. “She’s not Kelly, either,” he adds quietly.

CALLIE IS SPRAWLED on the couch in a skirt and a tank top when I walk into the apartment close to thirteen hours after I left it.

“Sorry, the roast isn’t ready yet, *dear*,” she says with fake sweetness lacing her voice.

I just smirk, holding up the bag of takeout Thai food.

“Oh *fuck yeah*,” she groans, sniffing the air. “Pad Thai?”

“Plus spicy chicken laap, with mango and sticky rice for dessert.”

She makes a sound that is *far* too similar to the moans of pleasure I stole from her mouth the other day, and my cock responds accordingly.

We unpack the food onto the kitchen counter and dive in. Callie finds two beers in the fridge, but I frown and shake my head.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Callie,” I murmur quietly.

Her response, *of course*, is to shrug, set one down on the counter, and then crack open the second one. She takes a sip, keeping her eyes on mine as her lips curl into a smile.

“You know,” she sighs, sliding onto her stool and digging into her Pad Thai, “you were way less uptight when you were just number two.”

“Yeah, *weird* how a shitload more responsibilities can suddenly add pressure to your life,” I smirk, shooting her a look as she giggles and takes another sip of her beer. I eye the

bottle, sucking on my teeth as she takes another swig and sets it down.

A tiny smile graces her mouth as she wordlessly slides it my way without looking my way.

“Just have a fucking beer, Castle.”

I shake my head, sighing as I drag it over to my plate and as she cracks open the other one for herself.

“So, how is it, wearing the big boy pants?”

I exhale through my lips. “Weird. Taxing. Not terrible, though. It’s just...surreal.”

She nods. “Well, something tells me Cillian wouldn’t have asked you if he wasn’t sure you were the right one for the job.”

I tip my head back and forth meditatively. “We’ll see.” I turn to glance at her. “How ’bout you? What’d you get up to today?”

We’ve hardly talked for a week—as if we’re forcing ourselves to create this wall of silence between us. But it feels good to tear it down and actually have a conversation like this. Honestly, there are *far* worse women I could be forced to be married to.

Like, pretty much any of the women I’ve ever dated, for starters.

“Watched a lot of brainless television. Neve came over for a little bit.”

I nod as she looks at her plate.

“Got accepted to NYU’s MBA program. You know, how you do.”

I freeze, my brows arching as Callie casually chopsticks some noodles into her mouth.

“I’m sorry—what?”

Her lips curl up at the corners. Her eyes swivel to glance at me sidelong.

“I got accepted to NYU’s Stern School of Business. Well, it’s a preliminary acceptance. There’s an essay I have to submit and two different meetings with admissions before it’s official—”

She jumps when my hand lands on her, my long fingers almost circling her slim forearm as her skin prickles under my touch. Her cheeks heat as she turns to me.

“That’s incredible, Callie. Congratulations. You should be proud.”

She beams as she bites her lip. “Thanks,” she murmurs. “Not gonna lie, I’m pretty stoked. Especially because I’d already gotten rejected by like four other schools.”

“I didn’t even know you were trying to get an MBA.”

She shrugs. “I’ve been thinking about it for over a year. Ares doesn’t think I have enough undergraduate experience to make it at business school. Hades thinks I’m going to get bored within a month.”

I frown. “Well, personally I think you’re gonna crush it.”

She beams. “Thanks, Castle,” she says quietly. She takes a sip of her beer before glancing at me. “Okay, my turn. Tell me something about you I didn’t know.”

I frown. “What?”

“You didn’t know I was looking at MBA programs. Tell me something about you I don’t know.”

I shake my head. “Nothing to discover, Callie. I’m an open book.”

She snorts. “I’m sorry, that is legit the most egregious lie you’ve ever told in your motherfucking life. I don’t know a *thing* about you. How about, why did you join the army?”

I don’t like where this is going. “No reason.”

“You *joined the army* for no reason—?”

“No reason that needs to be *talked* about, Callie,” I add with an edge to my voice, willing her to drop it.

But, again, this is Callie Drakos we’re talking about. The queen of “not dropping anything, ever.”

“Huh. That sort of sounds like a reason to me.”

My jaw tightens as I glare at her. She shrugs innocently.

“What? I’m just asking.”

“Well, *don’t*.”

“Was it because your sister died?”

When I whirl on her with a dark fury in my eyes, it’s clear Callie realizes she just stepped way the *fuck* over a line.

“I’m sorry—”

“*Neve*, I assume?” I snap coldly.

Callie swallows. “Castle, I’m sorry, okay? I didn’t mean it like that. I just—”

“You just *what*, Callie?!” I snarl. “You just *don’t fucking listen?*”

“I just want to *know you!*” she hurls back, her eyes stormy.

“What the fuck for?”

“Because you’re my husband!”

“*No, I’m not!*” I spit back venomously.

“You’re stuck with me for a year!!” she barks, out of her chair now, jabbing a finger at me. “So maybe you could take down the walls *a little!* I mean are we seriously going to spend a twelve fucking months like this?”

“Trust me, baby girl...”

She shivers, paling a little as I slide off my stool, fury in my face as I loom over her.

“You *do not* want to see what’s behind my walls,” I hiss.

Her lips purse as her eyes lock with mine. “But I do. I’m asking you—”

“You’re asking questions you do not want to know the answers to,” I snarl.

“I’m asking questions because I’m going to be living with you for a fucking year and I don’t know the first thing about you!! You won’t even tell me who the fuck Loraine and Teagan are! Are they friends? More than friends? Are they women you *fuck?!?*”

Her screams turn into a gasp as I turn on her. Callie shudders, choking on her breath as I grab the front of her hoodie and slam her back against the counter.

“*Fine,*” I snarl, my eyes turning cold and dangerous as her big blue ones go wide and frightened. “You want to know the dark monsters that lurk behind this face?! *Fine!*” I swallow, lowering my face inches from hers. “But I fucking warned you.”

“And I’m still standing here,” she throws back.

“Loraine is my best friend’s wife. My *dead* best friend, by the way. Teagan is their *daughter*, who I’ve known since she was *five*.”

The fury on Callie’s face drops instantly. I’m not done.

“She texted that she was sorry she missed me the other night,” I growl, “because she wasn’t home when I called her mother to check in on them. ‘The big one’ that I owe her is a big *horse*, which is a running joke we’ve had since she was seven.”

Callie pales even more as I lean close, my teeth bared and my blood roaring in my ears. “And not that *any of this* is your fucking business,” I growl. “But the ‘big date’ is with a boy her own age, whom she really likes.”

Callie swallows.

“I *talk to* them because Loraine’s husband...Teagan’s father... was my best fucking friend in the entire world,” I spit. “And he fucking *died* in a shithole in the middle of the fucking desert because *I. Fucked. Up.*”

I don’t realize how badly I’m shaking until the room blurs around me. I don’t realize I’m bellowing in her face until I see how terrified she looks.

“*Sorry*,” I mutter.

“*Don’t be*,” she breathes.

My teeth grit as my hand releases her hoodie, and I whirl away from her, shoving my fingers through my hair.

“Three of my fucking friends died because of me, Callie,” I growl, turning back to level my gaze at her. “You want to know why I don’t have close friends? Why I don’t have a girlfriend?” I rasp, turning to face her again as she sinks against the counter. “Because I *lose people!* Because when

women see what's under my surface, if they have any brains, they run away screaming!"

The silence hums in the air between us.

"*Well, I'm not running.*"

"Only because you're trapped in here with me and don't have a choice," I growl.

She steps toward me.

"Callie—"

"Maybe *you're* the one trapped in here with *me?*" she whispers, only stopping when she's right in front of me. Her big blue eyes look up into mine. Her dark lashes flutter for a second as her tongue slips out to wet her lips.

The walls are crumbling.

The earth is shattering beneath my feet.

I'm losing control around her.

Her hand slowly extends, her palm resting gently on my chest. I stiffen, my muscles throbbing and twitching as my eyes lock with hers.

"*Goddammit, Callie,*" I hiss. I grab her wrist as if to shove her hand away. But her fingers tighten, grabbing onto my shirt.

"What are you so fucking afraid of, Castle?"

Everything's buzzing. I can taste the rocks of my collapsing walls as they come tumbling down.

"I'm afraid of destroying you," I choke darkly, making her flinch. "Of *breaking* you and grinding the pieces of you that are left into fucking *dust.*"

Time stops. She swallows, her throat bobbing slowly as she rises up on the balls of her feet and tilts her face toward mine. My eyes close, my skin thrumming with the sweetness of the forbidden as her scent and her heat envelop me.

“What if I want you to break me?”

I could say I pause and stand there, torn between right and wrong. I could say time ticks by as I weigh the consequences of my actions.

Those would be lies.

Because the second she says that, it’s like pulling a trigger. Throwing a match onto a pool of gasoline. Shoving a boulder that’ll never be stopped down a hill.

Those words leave her mouth, and within a quarter of a second, I’m grabbing her, spinning us, slamming her into the counter, my hand cupping her jaw, my lips crushing hers.

I kiss her like she belongs to me. Like I need to punish her. Like I don’t want her mouth to ever, in a hundred years, forget the bruising sensation of mine conquering it.

She moans into my lips, sinking against my chest as her tongue eagerly dances with mine. I devour her mouth, growling into her lips as my arms circle her small frame. Her hands shake as she runs them up and down my chest. And when my large hands slide down to grab her tight, firm ass, she whimpers eagerly as her hips roll into me.

The walls aren’t just cracking.

They’re fucking powder under our feet. And there’s no going back now.

She moans as my hands knead her ass, and she gasps sharply into my mouth as I pick her up. Her legs wrap around my hips,

and I groan as her skirt hitches up. I can feel the throbbing heat between her legs even through my pants—the soft lace of her panties and the slickness beneath them burning against my bulging erection.

I set her down on one of the kitchen stools, and my mouth drags down to nip at her neck as my hand slides up to cup her breasts through her tank top. Callie cries out, gasping and dropping her head back. Her chest arches into my palm as I roll one of her nipples under my thumb. Her fingers shake as she frantically undoes my shirt. With a growl, I yank her tank top right up over those pert little tits, and pinch a dark nipple between my thumb and forefinger.

Callie moans loudly, shuddering and shaking as I mercilessly tease her nipples. Her hips grind into me, and she whimpers when she feels how fucking big and hard and *ready* I am for her.

My hand drops between us, pushing her soaked panties aside and running my fingers up and down her dripping wet pussy.

“Look how fucking messy you are for me, baby girl,” I rasp into the hollow of her neck. “Can you feel how fucking drippy and slick you are?” My teeth rake across her earlobe. “*Such an eager, greedy little girl, so ready for my big, fat cock,*” I hiss.

She’s panting so hard I don’t even think she can even form words. Her body shakes and trembles, and when I sink a thick finger into her ridiculously tight pussy, she moans loudly and wriggles her hips around, dropping her face to my neck. Her teeth sink into me, and I groan as I plunge my finger deeper into her.

“Such a *tight* little fucking pussy,” I rasp into her hear. I tease a second finger against her opening, feeling her dripping onto my palm as I ease it into her alongside the first. “*Fuck, baby*

girl,” I groan. “Your little cunt is almost too tight for my fingers.”

“Make them fit,” she whimpers. *“I want them to fit.”*

My pulse roars.

Jesus fucking Christ, this girl.

With a groan, I slam my mouth to hers again, drowning in her moans as I curl two fingers in and out of her, stroking against her g-spot as my palm grinds against her clit. The obscene wet sounds of her eager pussy fill the kitchen as she rips my shirt open and drags her nails down my abs.

“Take my cock out.”

She whimpers, shuddering as her hands quickly drop to my belt and yank it open. She fumbles with my button and my fly, moaning as my fingers drive in and out of her velvety soft, vice-like pussy. I reach down and shove my boxers and my pants down together, letting my heavy cock spring free against her thigh.

Callie’s breath catches. Her eyes go wide as her gaze drops to where my thick cock is pulsing against her leg. She shivers, her chest rising and falling, just panting as she stares at my cock, and her face caves as I stroke my fingers against her g-spot. Slowly, her eyes raise to mine as her bottom lip sucks between her teeth.

She reaches for me and wraps her small hand around my dick.

The fingers don’t even come close to touching.

“Are you going to fuck me now?”

There’s no fucking way I’m going to fit. But slowly, she pulls me closer to her. She strokes my thickness, staring almost in a trance as she brings my swollen head to her pussy. My fingers

slip out of her, and I grit my teeth as she runs my crown up and down her slippery pink lips.

She shudders when I cup her face with one hand and wrap my other around my cock. I crush my mouth to hers, swallowing her moans as I feel her legs spread wide and wrap around my hips.

“*All of it. Make it all fit,*” she whimpers into my mouth.

Fire roars in my veins. My whole body feels tense and clenched as I center my head at her entrance and start to push.

“Fuck, you’re so fucking tight, baby girl,” I groan, gritting my teeth as I try to push my swollen head into her impossibly tight little pussy.

“I know,” she chokes, her breath coming in halting gasps as she stares wide-eyed at where her pussy is kissing the head of my cock. “Just...please...go slow.”

Her forehead drops to mine. The shuddering panting of her breath and the way her fingers dig into my hips spur me on. I grind my jaw tight as I push, slowly—*slowly*—easing myself between her pretty lips.

Suddenly, the head slips in. I groan, my eyes rolling back in my head as her little pussy clenches so fucking tight around me, her body rippling as she gasps loudly.

“Just...slow,” she chokes. “Go...*ahh*—”

I freeze. That wasn’t a sexy moan or whimper.

That was a *wince*.

I instantly stop, dragging my eyes up to where hers are full of concentration.

“Keep going,” she blurts, her face full of tension.

When I don't, her eyes snap up to mine, and her face goes red.

“Callie...”

“*Keep going—*”

Oh fuck.

Holy shit, no.

It isn't just that she's much so smaller than me, and so tight, or that I'm so big.

Callie flinches as I reach up and gently cup her face.

“Are you a virgin, baby girl?” I say gently.

Her cheeks burn hotly. Her throat bobs heavily. “I...”

Oh fuck.

“No, wait!”

I'm already pulling out.

CASTLE

A VIRGIN.

A fucking *virgin*.

How the fuck is that even possible? I mean *look* at her, she's fucking gorgeous. And on top of that, she's Little Miss Party Girl. The bad influence. The epicenter of trouble and poster girl for bad decisions. I mean obviously there was the arranged thing with Luca, and she couldn't outwardly or publicly *date* anyone.

But how in the ever-loving *fuck* does a girl like Callie hit twenty-one and still be a virgin? I shake my head as I back away from her.

“Wait, Castle—”

But I ignore her, somehow managing to push my swollen dick into my pants and zip up. I storm across the apartment to the bar cart by the wall of windows, pour a very heavy splash of whiskey and bring it to my lips.

I hear the sound of her bare feet padding on the carpet behind me. My eyes squeeze shut as the thought slams into my head again.

“You're a *virgin*.”

She says nothing. I pound back half my glass and then turn toward her. The living room area is darkened, except for the fireplace crackling to one side, sending orange light and stark shadows flickering over her face.

Callie nods, looking small and lost as she hugs herself and sucks on her bottom lip.

“*How?* I mean...”

She looks down. “Because of...the arrangement with Luca? Because guys around me were scared of my brothers? And also, I just...”

She trails off, looking away.

“What?”

Her eyes lift to mine, glinting in the firelight.

“I never wanted anyone like that. Until—”

I bark a cold laugh, shaking my head as I stomp over to the big leather chair by the window and sink into it.

“Trust me, Callie, you don’t want me,” I murmur darkly.

“I think it’s pretty obvious that I do.”

“I think it’s obvious that you’re *confused*.”

Her eyes narrow. “Don’t tell me what I am. And don’t you *dare* look at me differently now just because you’ve just found out I’d never done anything before you.”

My brows arch sharply. “Excuse me?”

She rakes her teeth over her lip again, looking away.

“Look at me.”

She doesn’t.

“Callie, *look at me*.”

Her face twists back to me, her brilliant blue eyes glinting as they lock with mine.

“What do you mean ‘anything’?”

“Exactly that. I’ve never done...anything,” she mumbles.

“With...anyone.”

Fucking Christ.

This should make me feel ashamed of myself.

It doesn’t.

Instead, hearing those words fills me with a fierce, possessive fire that quickly spreads to every single corner of my psyche.

I was the first one to taste her pussy.

Thinking that shouldn’t make me this fucking hard.

But it does.

Callie walks toward me, her eyes locked with mine.

“Callie—”

My teeth grind and my cock pulses as she climbs into my lap. Her legs spread to either side of mine, her skirt sliding dangerously high up until I can almost see her panties.

“I *want* this, Castle,” she says quietly as her arms wind around the back of my neck. My muscles tense, my hands twitching with the effort of *not* grabbing her, throwing her down onto the goddamn floor, and fucking the virginity out of her right this second.

“And I want *you*,” she murmurs, twisting her head as she leans into my neck.

I groan when I feel her teeth nip at my ear.

“You’d be my first,” she purrs.

Fuck.

My cock throbs, painfully hard: swollen and aching as it pulses against my zipper. Callie reaches down, and before I can stop her, she's peeled her tank top off and tossed it away, her smallish, braless tits beneath it high and perky. My jaw grinds as I watch her rosy-pink nipples pucker under my fierce gaze.

"The first man to fuck this pussy," she whispers in a sultry voice, leaning closer.

My shirt is still open, and I can feel her stiff, pebbled nipples drag over my bare chest.

"The first man to feel me come all over his cock."

It's hearing that word from her virgin lips that sets my blood ablaze, burning like napalm in my veins.

I'm going to ruin her.

"Callie—"

"Don't you want to feel this untouched, virgin pussy slide down your big, fat cock?" she murmurs thickly. "*Don't you want to fuck me, Castle?*"

A switch flips in me. My eyes burn hotly as they stab right into hers.

"Lift up your fucking skirt."

She shivers, her face heating as her mouth falls open, almost like she's shocked. But then she's biting that damn bottom lip again as her hand drops to the hem of her skirt. She lifts it as my gaze slides down to where her soaked panties cling to every little detail of her wet, swollen pussy.

"Good girl."

She whimpers.

“Now show me just how messy your greedy little pussy is for me.”

Callie’s shuddering and panting heavily. Her face reddens like it’s sunburned, and her nipples strain even harder as her fingers slip to the gusset of her panties. She pulls it to the side, and my gaze lands on her sweet, pink, puffy little pussy.

“Take them off.”

She’s trembling as she reaches back and pulls down the skirt zipper. I slip a hand into my pocket, and her eyes blaze when I pull out a switchblade and flick it open. She gasps as I slip the blade into the waistband of her panties, her skin prickling against the cold steel before I deftly cut one side and then the other, slicing them off and then tossing them away.

I grind my teeth as my eyes sweep over her nakedness. She blushes, but she doesn’t cower, or flinch, or try and hide herself. Instead, she melts against me, pushing my shirt from my shoulders and dipping her mouth to mine.

Before she can kiss me, I grab her hair in a fist, snarling and yanking her head back. My mouth drops to her soft neck, and she shudders and whimpers when my teeth rake over her earlobe and nip at the tender skin of her throat.

“I don’t play with the training wheels on, baby girl,” I rasp darkly.

“I don’t want training wheels,” she whimpers, shuddering as I open my pants and pull out my swollen, rock-hard cock. She lifts up from my lap just enough for me to shove my pants and boxers down and then settle the fat head of my dick against her slick little cunt.

Callie's eyes widen, her mouth falling open as I grab her hip and center my cock with the other hand.

"*So big...*" she blurts quietly, almost to herself as she stares down at me.

"Make it fit, baby girl. Take all of it."

She whimpers, shuddering on top of me. Slowly, I can feel her sinking down and easing her weight onto me. I groan as her pink lips open for me, kissing my swollen head and letting me in. She pushes down again, her face scrunching up and her breathing growing ragged. Her arms wrap around my neck, like she's hanging on for dear life as she sinks down another inch.

"*Oh fuckkk...*"

"Make it fit, Callie," I growl. "Let me feel that wet little pussy open up for me. If you think you want—"

"*I want it.*"

She drops down. Instantly, half of my cock sinks into her, and a strangled cry of pleasure explodes from her mouth.

"*Oh my fucking GOD...*" she blurts, shuddering and moaning.

My hands grip her hips and her ass. My mouth claims hers, swallowing her whimpers and moans as I slowly guide her down further and further, feeling every single inch sink into her impossibly tight, slick heat as she opens up for me. Until finally, I feel her ass against my balls.

"*Good. Fucking. Girl,*" I growl into her ear.

She's shaking and groaning, her body writhing and her hips grinding on my lap with every inch of me buried in her to the fucking hilt. Her face tenses up, her brows caving as she chokes.

I flinch, frowning for a second. “Fuck, are you ok—”

“*Oh GOD!*”

She spasms, her nails digging into my back and her mouth slamming to mine as she cries out. Her pussy clamps down around me, strangling my cock as she sobs into my lips.

She’s coming.

I haven’t even started fucking her yet, and she’s coming all over my cock. When I realize that, I swear I swell even bigger and harder inside of her. I groan, gritting my teeth and grabbing her ass. I slide her up, feeling the way her greedy little pussy clings to me like it never wants to let me go. And then, slowly, I pull her right back down, impaling her on my swollen dick as she moans wildly.

“*Castle...*”

“Such a gorgeously. Fucking. Tight. Pussy,” I groan, punctuating each word with a thrust of my hips as I start to fuck up into her. She’s so tiny compared to me, and yet she’s so womanly it drives me insane. The way her hips flare and her tight ass cheeks fill my hands. The way her back arches and her nipples drag electrically over my chest muscles. The way her long dark hair spills over her shoulders and into her eyes, begging me to wrap it in my fist.

Which is exactly what I do.

I tangle my fingers in her hair, gripping her ass with my other hand and lifting her up and down. The sounds coming from Callie’s lips are nothing short of demonic, her high-pitched whines of pleasure echoing through the apartment as she bounces on my cock.

“Such a good girl,” I rasp into her ear, losing myself in her as her pussy swallows my dick over and over again. “Taking

every inch and making it fit in that tight little virgin pussy.”

“Am I doing a good job...?” She whimpers as her lips brush my ear. “*Daddy?*”

Holy fucking hell.

In one motion, I’m standing, wrapping her legs around my hips, and crushing my mouth to hers as she squeals. I kick my pants off and storm through the apartment into the bedroom. My cock never once leaves her pussy as I sink onto the bed with me on top of her and her ankles locked behind my back.

And then, I truly start to *fuck* her.

I know it’s her first time. I know I should be as gentle as I can. But that’s fucking impossible when she’s writhing against me like this and milking my cock with her tight little cunt so eagerly. Not when she’s urging me, and egging me on, and moaning even louder the harder I fuck her, until I’m nailing her to the fucking mattress as her fingernails rake down my back and her moans fill my ears.

“It this what you wanted, baby girl?” I hiss, bruising my lips to hers. “Is this what you’ve been waiting for?”

“*Fuck yes!*” she shrieks, her body wrenching and shuddering as she cries out with another orgasm.

I keep pounding into her, pushing both of us further and further back on the bed until we’re right against the headboard. I reach up, gripping the headboard in an iron grip as I roll my hips and plunge my cock into her sweet heaven over and over again.

Callie is right there with me, raising her hips to meet every thrust. Digging her nails into my back with her ankles locked behind me. Arching her spine and urging me on as I kiss her fiercely.

I drop one hand to her jaw, gripping it tightly as she twists her head and moans as she sucks my thumb into her mouth. She rolls her tongue over it, her eyes wild and fierce as they lock with mine.

“*Come for me, Callie,*” I growl, demanding it as a savageness I *never* reveal comes roaring to the surface. “Be a good fucking girl and *come* on that fat cock.”

Callie’s eyes hood with lust as they roll back. Her face heats as her mouth falls open and a wrenching sob bubbles from her chest.

“Your pussy is *all mine*, baby girl,” I snarl savagely “Now, and fucking *always*. There won’t be any other boys from school, or ones you meet at bars, do you fucking understand me?”

“*Yes, Daddy!*” she chokes as she moans.

“*No one else* will ever fucking touch you. No one else will ever taste this pretty pussy. No one else will ever feel you fucking come all over their cock. *Not ever.*”

I sound possessed. I feel insane, like I’m actually losing myself and all control as I drive into her.

“*Now come on that big fucking cock like a good girl.*”

It’s like pulling a trigger. Callie *erupts* as she comes, like I’m watching a hurricane make landfall behind her eyes. She arches her back, screaming in pleasure before I slam my lips to hers and swallow her release. I roll my hips and bury every last inch of me deep in her clenching, milking, rippling pussy until there’s no holding back.

I come like a gunshot, my whole body jerking and clenching as my cum fucking *explodes* out of me. Rope after rope spills deep in her sweet pussy as our tongues duel and my arms wrap around her.

“The rules” lie in shattered ruins around us.
And they can fucking well stay like that.

CALLIE

I WAKE UP TO PLEASURE.

My eyes are still closed, and the remnants of the *very* hot dream I was just having involving Castle are still teasing through my head. But as consciousness begins to filter in, I'm aware of a very real, very non-dreaming, sinful sensation melting through my core.

Between my legs.

I gasp in pleasure as a tongue drags up through my lips and dances over my clit. My eyes fly open.

"Oh fuck..."

I push the sheet back and whimper as I lock eyes with Castle, who's between my thighs with his mouth to my pussy.

What a way to wake up.

I make a face as my hands go to push him away. "Wait, I haven't showered—"

He raises his mouth from me momentarily. "Does it really look like I give the smallest fuck?" Then he goes back to my pussy. My eyes roll back, and a long sigh of pleasure shudders from my lips.

I'm still sore from last night. I'm still *really* sore, honestly, even if it's the good kind of sore. But the way he's licking me, and the way his tongue seems to massage my pussy, has that soreness melting away. He wraps his lips around my clit, humming deeply and sending vibrations through my core. His tongue swirls around the aching bud as I gasp in fresh pleasure.

My body tingles everywhere, waves of excitement and heat rippling out in every direction from my core. The way his powerful, strong hands are so tender and soft on me has me aching for him. And the way his tongue maintains this constant pleasure on my clit has me seeing stars and feeling like I'm floating.

It builds and builds, until suddenly, the pleasure is forcing me over the edge. I cry out, twisting my face into the pillow as my body writhes with the orgasm. I'm still squirming in the sheets and gasping for air when Castle rolls me onto my side and slides up next to me.

His muscled, gorgeous body takes my freaking breath away. I mean what the fuck, the man is *perfect*. He's built like a fucking god.

He fucks like one, too.

I shiver as I remember the way he took me last night, the pleasure he wrung from every square inch of my body. And sweet Jesus, now I'm getting a repeat. I whimper as he pushes my knee up, lifting my thigh and guiding his *massive*, rock-hard cock over my pussy from behind. I moan, looking down to see that thick cock spear in between my legs.

I don't have any idea how the hell he fit inside me last night. But I don't need to know the mechanics of it right now.

I just need him.

He wraps a fist around his cock, guiding the head between my pink, puffy, aching lips before he rolls his hips forward. I wince at the momentary tightness. But as my pussy remembers him, and spreads wider for him, the slickness coats his head, and he slips inside easily.

Oh God yes...

I moan softly as Castle wraps his arms around me and sinks inch after magnificent inch of his cock into me from behind. His mouth nibbles and bites at my neck and earlobes. His big hands cup my breasts, and pinch and roll my nipples.

One of his hands slides slowly down my body to cup my pussy as he starts to fuck me. He rolls my clit with his fingers as his teeth rake over my neck. His fat cock begins to move faster, thrusting into me and making me squeal with pleasure as he fucks me deeply.

He's tender this morning. It's not like the hardcore fucking he gave me that made me explode last night. But it's so, so fucking good. There's something so hot about our size difference, too—the way he's like a foot and a half taller than me and probably twice my weight. The way his massive frame just cocoons my much smaller one is *outrageously* sexy. And the way it feels like his huge cock is so deep in me that it's in my throat turns me into a freaking puddle. It feels like he's impaling me with every thrust.

And I *love it*.

I'm moaning deliriously, not even able to form words when he suddenly rolls me fully onto my front. He never slides his cock out as he mounts me from behind—my legs together with his

knees on either side of my hips. His fingers entwine with mine, pinning my hands to the mattress.

I moan deeply, the friction that this added tightness brings driving me fucking wild. He's so deep, but he's also going at a maddeningly slow pace that's keeping me riding this knife edge without ever being able to go over it.

"Castle..." I whimper.

He leans down to nip at my ear, still rolling his hips agonizingly slowly.

"Tell me," he growls.

"Faster!"

"Ask nicely, baby girl."

I moan, shuddering as my eyes roll back and my breath catches.

"Please...fuck me faster..."

I cry out when he picks up the pace without warning, his cock sliding in and out of me quicker with that same friction, driving me wild.

"Harder!"

"What would you like me to do harder, baby girl," he rasps into my ear.

I moan. *"Fuck me hard—ooh, fuck!"*

I cry out in pleasure when he spans my ass.

"I told you to ask nicely."

I whimper as I bite my lip and turn to the side.

"Please fuck me harder, Daddy."

His eyes blaze with fiery heat. His jaw ripples with a power that has me melting underneath him, and then whimpering as his hand grabs a fistful of my hair.

This is a kink I never knew I had. I have no idea what possessed me to call him daddy last night. But it drove me *wild* when I did, and I think it did the same to him.

It also seems to be having the same effect on both of us this morning.

Castle spans my ass again before speeding up even more. His gorgeous, fat cock rams into me from behind, pushing the air from my lungs and making my eyes roll back as I twist the sheets in my fists. I scream into the mattress, pleasure exploding deep in my core as I start to clench and clamp down around him.

“Come on my fucking cock, Callie,” he growls right into my ear as I start to explode. *“Fucking come for me.”*

The orgasm slams through me, wrenching a wail of release from my throat as I explode around him. Castle groans, tugging my hair even harder, spanking me once more, and then thrusting his cock deep into my clenching pussy.

I can feel him twitching and throbbing deep inside, his hot cum spilling into me as I whine and moan into the bedsheets and ripple my way into another orgasm.

He slowly slides out of me and rolls onto the bed next to me. I pull close, then gasp as his hand cups my pussy. I mewl softly as he sinks a finger into me and drags it up my pussy lips before bringing it up.

“Open your mouth, baby girl.”

Holy fuck.

My face flushes as my eyes lock on the sight of his fingertip, which is glistening with his pearly white cum, and mine, too.

Open your mouth.

I know what he's asking, and I know it shouldn't be this ridiculously fucking hot. It should be gross.

But... It's not, at all.

And so I part my lips and dip my head forward, wrapping them around his finger and sucking. My tongue swirls over the tip, and I flush even more as I taste the two of us together.

Castle's jaw clenches and his eyes blaze hotly.

"*Such a good girl,*" he murmurs as he pulls me against his chiseled, huge body and his still very, *very* hard cock.

More.

I want fucking *more*.

The mood shatters when my phone dings on the bedside table next to us. Scowling, I glance at it, then blush when I realize it's my brother calling me. Castle clearly sees Ares' name on the screen, too, because he instantly pulls away from me.

Which I really don't like.

"Hey, what's up?" I grumble as I hit the answer button.

Ares sighs. "Are you both fucking deaf??"

My brow knits. "What?"

"I've been knocking on your fucking door and calling Castle for like ten minutes. What the fuck."

Knocking on your fucking door.

My face pales. "Wait—you're *here*?"

Castle springs from the bed and bolts to the living room as my pulse spikes.

“Yeah! Let me the fuck in already.”

Oh shit.

CASTLE

“WHAT THE FUCK, MAN?”

My jaw is tight and my muscles coiled as Ares storms into the apartment past me. I’m dressed, and I’ve had the presence of mind to wet my hair in the kitchen sink. “Sorry. I was in the shower and Callie must’ve still been sleeping or had her damned AirPods in or something.”

Ares sighs. “Yeah. Sorry about the tight quarters. I know this isn’t ideal at all.”

“Eh, it’s fine,” I shrug as I turn to go make some coffee.

“Castle.”

I tense, glancing back at Ares. “Yeah.”

“I really can’t thank you enough for what you’re doing, protecting Callie like this.”

I bite back a smile, trying not to replay I my mind the way I *fucked* his sister—twice last night and once just now.

My pulse sizzles at the memory.

“You don’t have to thank me,” I growl.

Seriously.

“Well, I am anyway,” he grins. “Also, I’ve got some good news.”

Just then, Callie sidles out of the bedroom in a hoodie and yoga pants.

“Hey,” she mumbles to her brother, quickly walking past him and into the kitchen to hide the flush on her face. “What are you doing here?”

Ares rolls his eyes. “Wow, great to see you too, Cals.” He turns to chuckle at me. “As I was saying, I’ve got good news. Great news, actually.”

“Please tell me you found him,” I mutter.

Ares winces. “I wish. But I’ve got the next best thing.” He grins. “He’s gone.”

My brows furrow. “Gone as in dead?”

“No, but as in gone-gone.”

When I lift a curious brow, he grins and pulls out his phone.

“Deimos got in touch with some people he knows, and Cillian pulled some stuff from Shane Dorsey. Here.”

Callie crowds in next to me to see too, which instantly wreaks havoc on my brain and its ability to think straight or function correctly. Like, the way she smells and the way her skin feels when it brushes against mine has been genetically programmed to fuck with *me* specifically.

I can’t help it. I steal a glance at her out of the corner of my eye. She’s looking right at me, an impish, cat-who-caught-the-canary grin on her face. Christ. I yank my gaze away to focus again on Ares’ phone.

The video looks like it was pulled from a CCTV camera somewhere in a stairwell, facing a door. In the footage, a man in black with a mask and holding a rifle case yanks open the door and comes stumbling into the stairwell. You can't see his face, but it's clear he's wounded by the way he's walking and clutching at his shoulder.

"I fuckin' *knew* I winged that motherfucker," I mutter.

"Yeah, well, keep watching."

The video changes to footage from another CCTV camera, this one showing the same man crashing out a side door into an alley before tossing his bag and the fifty-caliber into the trunk of a car, getting in, and roaring off.

"Please tell me you traced that fucking plate," I grunt.

"Do I look like an idiot?" Ares mutters. "It's a rental, which was returned to a location at JFK International." He glances at me. "Rented under a fake name, of course."

"*Shit.*"

"Here he is again..." Ares thumbs to a new video. "Going through security, and then boarding a flight to Houston."

I frown. "What the fuck is in Houston?"

Ares shrugs. "I dunno. Decent BBQ? But what this tells me is that this *was* a hit."

"So why leave town?"

I turn at the sound of Callie's voice, our eyes locking before hers slip past me to her brother.

"Could be he got spooked by Castle shooting back," Ares shrugs. "Or sometimes, a contract is just for an *attempt.*"

“There could be a million reasons,” I growl. “The problem is, we don’t know which one it is.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve got us a way to find out.” Ares glances at me as he puts his phone away.

“Elaborate?”

“Ever heard of Ken Aoki? Also goes by the street name The Broker?”

I exhale slowly. “Yeah, actually.”

I have an especially deep-seated dislike for professional hitmen. I knew *a lot* of guys from the service who went on to work for mercenary outfits. And I hate to judge, but...well, I judge.

The way I see it, if you’re going to be a soldier, you’d damn well better be fighting for more than just a paycheck. When I was a Ranger, I fought for the men next to me. I fought because if I *didn’t*, they’d die. After that, I was a different kind of soldier in a different kind of army. But working as muscle and a trigger man for the Kildares wasn’t about the paycheck either. It was about fighting for and protecting an adoptive family I didn’t deserve—a family I’d die for.

Mercenaries are bad enough. Hitmen take the murder-for-pay thing to another level, and I have nothing but contempt for people like that.

I have even *more* contempt for the people who don’t even have the stones to get their hands dirty and merely facilitate the dark trade. People like Ken Aoki, aka The Broker. Ken’s sole purpose is to act as a neutral middleman connecting someone who wants someone else killed with the guy who’ll take money to make that happen.

To me, he’s a stain on humanity.

“I got you a meeting with him this afternoon.”

I raise my brow. “Oh yeah?”

He nods. “Just you by yourself. Aoki’s a pretty cautious guy.”

“I would be, too, if I was that big a piece of shit.”

Ares smirks. “Well, he might also be a lead. Look man, I’m not trying to tell you how to do your job...”

“But?”

He shrugs. “But diplomacy sometimes works a lot better than a jamming a gun between someone’s teeth.”

“I’ll do my best to keep that in mind,” I grunt.

Ares nods. “If there *was* a hit out on one of you, or anyone from either of our families for that matter, Aoki would know. Which means he might be able to tell you what the shooter running and getting on a plane means—specifically, if the contract is closed or not.”

“So, diplomacy then,” I mutter.

Ares shakes his head. “Hey, you do you, Castle.”

When he’s gone, I take a quick shower so that I can go get some work shit done before my meeting with The Broker. I’m just rinsing the soap off when I hear a scream.

I don’t think, I just fucking *move*. In less than a heartbeat, I’ve lunged from the shower and bolted from the bathroom into the bedroom.

...To see that Callie is perfectly fine, lying on the bed.

Fuck. I really need to stop reacting like this to this girl’s shrieks.

She looks up and instantly flushes pink as her eyes land right on my dick.

“Uh...*hi?*” she giggles.

I frown as I grab a towel off a hook on the connecting door and wrap it around my waist. Callie grins.

“Right, because that’s nothing I’ve seen before...”

I shoot her a stern look. “What the fuck was the shriek for?”

Her face lights up with a huge grin. “I got the appointment time for my interview!!” she blurts.

I scrub my face. “For?”

“For the MBA program at NYU!!!”

I can’t stop the smile that spreads over my face at the sheer excitement on hers as she beams at me. “I mean, I know I *technically* already got accepted. But the interviews are *really* tough, and they can change that acceptance status from a yes to a no if they doesn’t go well.”

She’s bubbling with so much excitement and nervous energy that she’s literally bouncing on the bed as she talks a mile a minute. I grin, running my hand over my jaw. Her enthusiasm is infectious.

“That’s fucking great, Callie,” I smile. “I’m excited for you.”

She ducks her chin as she grins back. “Thanks,” she says softly.

“So, when is it?”

She winces. “Uh, today, actually. This afternoon.”

The smile falls from her lips and the spark dims in her eyes when she sees the expression on my face darken.

“Callie...”

“Oh, what the actual *fuck!*” she yells. “Are you joking?”

I frown. “Look, I’m sorry, and I hate doing this, but we don’t know if it’s actually safe yet.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” she snaps. “Ares literally *just* showed us videos of the guy leaving the damn state!”

“We don’t *know* it means the threat is gone.”

“Bullshit!” she blurts. “That’s fucking bullshit!”

I grit my teeth. “We *also* don’t know if there’s still a hit out there with your name on it until I meet with this jackass later today. I’m really, truly sorry, Callie. But it’s too dangerous.”

“*You’re* going out!” she yells. “You go out every fucking *day* while I’m stuck here in this fucking apartment!”

“I’m *me*,” I grunt.

“*And?!?*”

“And you’re you. I’m legitimately sorry, but until I know it’s safe, you’re not leaving.”

“The hell I’m not!”

“Callie. This isn’t a discussion.”

She glares at me, her mouth pursed shut. “This is sheer *bullshit.*”

I sigh, stepping into the walk-in closet that now contains both of our wardrobes. I pull on what has become my go-to outfit of dress pants, matching vest, and white dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up.

When I step back into the bedroom a few minutes later, Callie looks as if she’s calmed down a bit.

“Hey.”

She lifts her eyes as I walk over to where she’s sitting glumly on the edge of the bed. I cup her jaw and tip her chin up to me.

“I’m sorry, baby girl. But I’m going to figure this out so we know for sure, okay?”

She nods. “It’s fine. I get it. I’ll just email the advisor I’m supposed to meet with about rescheduling. It’ll be okay.”

I nod as she stands. Suddenly, she’s stepping right up to me and leaning in close.

“Callie—”

My hand lands on her hip, stopping her.

“Look, I—”

“I’m a big girl, Castle,” she grins, rolling her eyes. “I already promised I wasn’t going to fall in love with you.”

“We’ve crossed a few lines since then,” I growl quietly, secretly relishing the way her face heats.

She’s thinking about last night.

So am I.

“And they were *very* fun, *very* nice, lines,” she says quietly, blushing. “But it doesn’t really change anything, right?”

I frown.

“You’re still emotionally unavailable. I’m still trying to figure out what I want...” She shrugs. “We’re stuck with each other for a year, and we’ve made it clear there won’t be other people involved. Right?”

“Right,” I growl, a bit more grit to my voice than I intended.

Callie grins and spreads her arms. “So? It’s the perfect arrangement!”

My teeth grind. Yeah, a perfect arrangement except for the fact that I get the distinct impression it’s more like Callie moving the goal posts.

“Callie—”

“It’s *just sex*, Castle,” she says flatly. “No emotional stuff. I swear, I won’t even kiss you goodbye or anything when you leave for the day. Okay?”

I frown even more deeply. She sighs.

“Marriage is built on trust, isn’t that what they say?”

I smirk, shaking my head. “Point taken. Okay.”

She grins, a sultry heat burning in her eyes. “Yeah?”

I chuckle. “I mean, I can’t right this *second*.”

She blushes fiercely.

“But when I get home tonight...”

She sucks that damned bottom lip between her teeth, which is a move I’ve realized is my kryptonite.

“Shall I have the roast and a *cocktail* ready for you, dear?”

My cock pulses.

“You can definitely have *something* ready for me...”

“See you tonight then, *dear*.”

She leans up. I open my mouth to say something, but at the last second, she darts her head to the side and kisses my cheek instead.

“What? On the cheek doesn’t count,” she shrugs, smirking at me as she steps away. “It’s good luck.”

I eye her as she skips past me to the bathroom.

“Don’t worry, Castle. I won’t give you cooties.”

ARES WAS RIGHT. Diplomacy *can* work much better than threats of violence and loss of life.

Unfortunately, four minutes into my meeting with Ken Aoki, it’s clear diplomacy is *not* going to work here. Which is how it comes to pass that after being smirked at, taunted, and stonewalled by this fucking dipshit, I’ve got him by the throat and shoved halfway over the balcony of his Upper West Side condo.

I’d like to say it’s because he may have facilitated the scenario that led to someone shooting at me in the house I’ve called home for ten years. But I’ve been shot at plenty of times, and I know damn well that’s not where the rage is coming from.

It’s because Callie was there, too.

“C’mon, man!!” Ken squeals like a stuck pig as his feet leave the ground and his back arches dangerously over the railing of his balcony. “Are you fucking *stupid*?!”

“What I *am*, Ken,” I snarl, “is impatient. And if we’re being honest, I’m also a little fucking insulted.”

He trembles.

“Ken—I’m sure by now you’ve heard through the grapevine about certain...administrative changes within my organization.”

Ken’s lips curl into a sneer. “Yeah, I heard you’re playing substitute teacher for that psycho Cillian—”

He screams when I reach around, yank the gun from the back of my pants, and press the barrel against the underside his chin.

“I’m sure you’d agree that insulting my family while you’re in this particular position is a *supremely* fucking stupid decision, Ken.”

His face pales. “Look, man. I don’t know who you talked to, but I didn’t have shit to do with—”

“Someone tried to kill *my wife!*”

The words roar out of me with a fury so venomous that it actually shocks me.

“Hang on, man! Castle—!”

“Here’s the fucking thing, dickhead,” I snarl, my eyes drawing to slits. “I’m done playing fucking games with you. So how about instead I just drop you and we’ll see what sort of secrets spill out all over the street down there?”

My grip on him loosens almost imperceptibly. Ken instantly screams bloody murder and scrabbles to grab my forearm tightly.

“It wasn’t me!!”

“Then *who was it?*” I hiss.

“I don’t know, man!” he sobs, choking as his legs kick and scramble for footing he won’t find. “But if there was a hit out on your woman, it wasn’t through me, okay?! I swear to Christ —”

“Swear to *me,*” I spit venomously.

“I am! I fucking swear to you, man! If there was an official hit out on you or Calliope Drakos, I *swear*... In this city? I’d

fucking *know about it!*”

My hand twists the collar of his shirt tightly as he quails under my glare.

“And there’s not! Not on either of you, not on anyone from either of your families!”

Ken has a reputation for being an vault of secrecy more impenetrable than Fort Knox. Part of me considers he might be bullshitting me about this. But then I truly drink in the sight of this man fearing for his life as he hangs over the edge of the building, sobbing and literally pissing himself.

Yeah, no. He might be good at keeping secrets. But Ken isn’t this good of an actor. *No one* is that good of an actor when they’re being dangled fourteen stories above Broadway and West 79th.

He almost weeps in relief when I yank him back over to safety and slam him down into one of his fucking patio chairs.

“What about closed contracts?”

He shudders. “You mean *were* there any hits out on you and yours, but not anymore?” He quickly shakes his head. “No. No, I swear.”

“And you really know every single hit that goes down in this city.”

Ken nods vigorously. His eyes dart longingly to the table next to him, to the pack of cigarettes and a lighter sitting there. I nod, and he reaches for them with shaky hands, only managing to light the tip of his smoke on the third try.

“Honestly, Castle. If it’s going down in New York, it’s going down through me.”

“Then explain this.”

He flinches when I shove the phone into his face. On it, the surveillance videos that Ares showed me play. Ken's brows furrow.

"Wait—what am I looking at?"

"The man who put two mags of fifty-cal BMG ammo through my fucking house from a neighboring rooftop."

Ken shakes his head slowly. It's still clear he's not acting. He watches the video once, then again.

"Wait. Pause it?"

I tap the screen, watching his brows knit as he peers more closely.

"*Huh.*"

I glare at him. "What the fuck is *huh* supposed to mean?"

Ken shudders and points at the phone with a trembling finger. "That's fucking El Cirujano, man."

I frown. "Excuse me?"

Ken gestures with his chin. "Lapel, right side."

I flip the phone back to me, getting in close to see what he's talking about. And fuck me, I have no idea how I missed it before, but there's a small patch on the guy's collar with the Panamanian flag.

"And...?"

"Ken stares at me in disbelief. "You don't know about this guy?"

"I think hitmen and the men who facilitate their work are a fucking cancer on the world," I say icily.

Ken drops his eyes. “Well, he’s a fucking legend, man. Panamanian—”

“No shit.”

Ken smiles weakly. “They call him ‘The Surgeon’ because he’s so surgical with a fifty-cal. Like, he could trim the hair on your balls from a hundred yards.”

“Think I’ll pass,” I growl dryly. “You’re saying someone’s hired him to kill me or my wife?”

Ken shakes his head. “*Hired*, past tense, finito.”

“Neither of us is dead,” I growl.

Ken draws a shaky breath. “Yeah, but he’s a one-shot gun. You hire this guy, you get one chance. If it doesn’t work out—and let me tell you, that’s rare—or if he gets spooked, he’s fucking *gone*.”

“Until...?” I growl.

Ken shakes his head again. “Until never. That’s it. He never goes after the same target twice. It’s baked into the deal. And El Cirujano is the *one* motherfucker who could do business in this city without going through me. I mean that.”

Ken looks up at me, nervously eying the gun in my hand. “Look, if I can promise you something, will you let me go?”

“Can’t hurt your chances, Ken,” I mutter. “Scared?”

His face pales. “Fuckin’ right I am. Look, what I’m saying is, if he’s gone...that’s it. You and that wife of yours are in the clear—”

My face comes closer to his. “What’s this about a deal, Ken?”

He laughs nervously, dragging on his cigarette as he spreads his arms. “It’s what I do, Castle. And right now, yeah, I’ve got

one for you.”

“Speak.”

His Adam’s apple bobs up and down as he eyes my gun again. “You let me go and we forget about this whole thing. And on my end, if I get even a whiff of someone looking to put a price out on you or yours, I’ll shut it down and make you aware of it.” He looks up at me hopefully as he sticks a still-shaking hand out. “We got a deal?”

I grasp his hand so hard he winces. “Just so long as you’re aware that if you try and fuck with me, Ken, they’ll be scraping you off Broadway with a spatula.”

Not only is Ken no actor. He’s also, above all else, looking out for his own neck. So when I leave his place and head back down to the street, I’m not worried about being played. He knows damn well he’s a dead man if he fucks with me on this.

I’m just getting into my car when my cell rings.

“Boss—” It’s Patrick, one of my men I’ve got watching Konstantin’s place. Instantly, I’m on edge at the sharpness in his tone.

“Talk to me,” I growl.

“She got out, Boss.”

“*What?!*” I hiss, my eyes narrowing dangerously as my hands grip the steering wheel hard.

“Fire alarm went off in the apartment. She wasn’t answering her phone or the door, so we had Gavan’s men who run the building open up. She must’ve been hiding out in the coat closet right inside the apartment door, and when we were clearing the rest of the place, she slipped out. One of the Tsarenko guys saw her getting into a taxi a block away.”

“Find her,” I growl before hanging up sharply.

My pulse thuds and my teeth grind as my knuckles whiten on the steering wheel.

Callie’s just defied me for the last fucking time.

CALLIE

THERE'S a huge grin on my face and spring in my step as I walk out of the administrative building. I'm shaking all over, but it's not from nerves, like it was when I walked in here earlier, popping an extra Ativan to calm my raging anxiety. This time, I'm shaking from pure excitement.

Because I just fucking *nailed* my interview. Like, absolutely crushed it. My pulse hums loudly, my grin stretching from ear to ear as I look up at the sky and the towering buildings around me.

Fuck yeah.

There was no damn way I was missing this. These things are *not* reschedulable, no matter what I told Castle, and even asking to do that would look horrible to the acceptance board. Easily a third of my anxiety on the way here and walking into the interview was worrying about Castle after he expressly forbade me to leave the apartment.

But screw that. We literally just watched video footage of the man who shot at us getting on a plane and flying clear across the country. And I mean, I grew up in this world. Even *I* know that most hitmen won't come back for a second shot if they need to bail on the first.

That doesn't mean that leaving the house today, especially in the rather questionable manner that I did, doesn't carry a risk. But again, there was no fucking way I was missing this interview just because Castle's being his usual overprotective, overly worrywart self. Which is *exactly* why I took a wad of paper towels, lit it on fire, held it up to the smoke alarm, and then hid in the closet by the front door.

After all, as they say, it's easier to ask for forgiveness than it is to get permission.

He'll be pissed. I know he will. But he can get over himself. This is my entire future we're talking about here.

I brush the worries away as I take a seat on a bench outside the admin building and pull my phone out of my bag. Instantly, I wince. I put it on silent for the interview, obviously. So I've missed *twenty* calls and over a dozen texts from Castle. My gaze freezes as it lands on the most recent one.

CASTLE

There are going to be serious fucking consequences for this

It's obviously *supposed* to freak me the fuck out, make me scared, or get me to call him blurting an apology.

It doesn't.

Instead, when I read it and then *re-read* it five more times, all it does it light a little fire inside of me. A little flame that makes the heat balling in my core throb and pulse, and my blood run hotter in my veins.

It makes me *wet*.

My fantasies involving Castle have always involved him taking charge. I mean, duh. But all the daydreams *paled* in

comparison to the real thing. And now I'm apparently addicted to him taking control.

To him positioning me exactly how he wants, and telling me exactly what to do.

I've been called defiant my entire life. Even with Castle, I know I dig my heels in. *Except*, it would seem, when it comes to the bedroom. Because when he gets his hands or his mouth on me, my bratty nature and my defiance go right out the window.

It's as if when he touches me, it pulls a trigger in me, turning me into his compliant little toy.

His eagerly submissive plaything.

And maybe that should weird me out, or speaks to something even more messed up in my head. But it is what it is, and there's no denying it.

My face breaks into a saucy grin as I text a reply.

ME

What sort of consequences?

CASTLE

I'm not playing fucking games, Callie. This is serious. Where the fuck are you

ME

My interview. I just finished

I shiver at his instant reply.

CASTLE

I'm coming to get you. Stay where you are

I chew on my bottom lip thoughtfully. It *should* annoy me how...I don't know, demanding...he is? How gruff and maybe a little controlling he gets when he gives me orders like this. And it *does* annoy me, a little.

But.

It also lights a fire in me. It's like I enjoy winding him up just to get a taste of that dominant vibe of his, like I'm a junky jonesing for a hit.

ME

It went great, by the way. Thanks for asking

CASTLE

I'm in the car. Drop me a pin of your location

I glare at the phone, more than a little pissed that he still hasn't commented on the interview itself.

"Callie?"

I'm jolted out of my stormy thoughts when I hear my name. I look up, my brows arching when I see Stavros walking over to me with a small group of people, all of whom look like students.

I smile widely as I stand. "Hey! What're you doing here?"

Stavros rolls his eyes. "Figured it was time for me to go back to school and actually finish my degree. So I've been taking a few classes here and there." He frowns. "You?"

"I just had my interview for the MBA program."

His brow arch. “Oh *shit*, seriously?” He beams at me. “Amazing! How’d it go?”

I can’t help but beam back. “*Fantastic*, actually. You know when you just *know* you nailed it? Yeah. That.”

“That’s great!”

Before I know what’s happening, Stavros is giving me a huge hug and then stepping back. He turns and gestures to the group of people with him.

“A bunch of us are going out for drinks. You gotta come with and celebrate!”

“Yeah!” One of the girls with him beams at me. “You totally should! We’re going to Heartbeat for 80’s night.”

I groan in frustration. I *love* that club, and I fucking seriously love me a good retro 80’s night.

“And congrats on the interview!” the girl gushes. “That’s so fucking awesome!”

I allow myself a smug smile.

At least someone’s congratulating me.

Then I sigh. I’m already obviously in deeper-than-deep shit with Castle. Ignoring his last text and going off to a bar—especially with Stavros, of all people—is guaranteed to piss him the fuck off.

“I...” My mouth twists. “I’d love to, honestly. But I really should head home.”

“To your fake husband?” Stavros smirks.

I shoot him a dire look and he grins as he shakes his head and pats my shoulder.

“C’mon, I’m just giving you a hard time, Callie. But we’d honestly love to have you with us.”

I sigh. “It sounds tempting, seriously. But I’m...” I glance down at the formal blouse and pencil skirt I wore for the interview. “I’m also not really dressed for dancing.”

“My place is on the way,” the same girl says with a grin, sticking her hand out. “Michelle, by the way, hi.”

“Callie, hey.”

She smiles again. “Are you *sure* we can’t convince you? You and I are like the same size. I’ve gotta change, too. And I’ve got tons of stuff you could borrow.”

Shit.

This is *such* a bad idea.

“C’mon, Callie,” Stavros grins. “You crushed your interview and deserve to blow off a little steam. Let’s fucking celebrate!”

A really, *really* bad idea.

I glance down at my phone.

CASTLE

Where the fuck are you? This isn’t a fucking game, Callie

Congratulations, Callie. So proud of you for nailing the interview, Callie.

I scowl before I shake it off and look up with a grin on my face, shoving my phone away.

“You know what? I’d love to.”

TWO HOURS, twenty more missed calls, and maybe *thirty* texts from Castle later, I am *drunk*. But I'm also having an absolute blast.

For one, I've been cooped up in that damn apartment for two weeks like a shut-in. On top of that, the fact that I seriously just aced that interview has my adrenaline humming and a smile on my face.

Well, that and the four strong cocktails I've had. And the eighties themed dance night, *obviously*.

The dress I borrowed from Michelle is, admittedly, a little much—a bright purple, ultra-tight bodycon thing with just two thread-thin straps and a hemline that is *definitely* turning more heads than I intended.

But I'm having a blast with Stavros and his friends, two of whom are actually first years in the MBA program, and who have been giving me all sorts of fantastic tips about professors to seek out, and the best study groups.

“Girls Just Wanna Have Fun” is starting to blast over the sound system as I fling myself back onto the dance floor. Three of the girls we're with, Stavros, and one other guy start dancing again, too. I throw my hands in the air, feeling the sweat drip down the small of my back as I lose myself in the music and the vibe.

The guy we're with slides up close all of a sudden, ready to dance with me. But suddenly Stavros is yanking him back, hard. I frown, because, fuck, it's just dancing, and it's not like he even touched me or anything. I watch as Stavros pulls him

close and mutters something into the guy's ear while pointing at his ring finger.

I sigh. Right, *that*.

The guy's eyes snap to my hand and then up to my face. He smiles politely, then turns abruptly and starts dancing with Michelle instead.

Whatever.

I keep dancing my ass off solo, throwing my head back and letting out a whoop as the music really takes hold of me.

Then something else takes hold. I jolt, my head whipping around to focus on Stavros, whose hand is on my hip. He leans close, and I stiffen, thinking he's about to kiss me. But instead, his mouth hovers by my ear.

"Wanna come outside for a bit?" he all but yells in my ear. "I'm going to spark a joint."

Well, that's another terrible idea. But I'm feeling wild. And I'm still riding the high of the interview, and of being out for the first time in weeks, and—yeah. I'm a little pissed still that Castle's only response to my interview was demanding to know where I was. Not "Wow, congratulations, Callie" or "That's so exciting, Callie. Good for you".

So, screw him.

You already did, girl. Twice last night and once this morning.

I flush, remembering the intoxicatingly sinful feel of him and the all-consuming way he had me twisting and writhing for him, and begging for more.

"Coming?"

What? I blink back to the present and focus on Stavros as the memory retreats. “Oh. Yeah, sure.”

Outside, I realize just how freaking hot it was inside the club. The coolish fall air is refreshing on my sweat-slicked skin as I follow Stavros around the corner to the side of the building. He pulls a joint out of his pocket and lights it, puffing gently as the tip glows.

It’s not something I do regularly. But it *is* legal in New York at my age, and it does usually calm the jangling live-wires of my anxiety if it ever gets really bad.

I pluck the joint from his fingers when he passes it to me, inhaling the acrid smoke. I cough a little, which make Stavros chuckle as he takes the joint back.

“You all right?”

I wheeze, laughing as I exhale. “Yeah, I’m just...a little out of practice.”

“Well, welcome back,” he grins, taking another hit and then passing it back to me.

I take a much smaller puff this time, but I can already feel the pot going straight to my head. A goofy grin spreads across my lips as I lean against the brick wall behind me.

“So, how’s your asshole fake husband?”

I swivel my gaze to Stavros. “Hey, c’mon, that’s mean.”

He shrugs. “What? He’s a fucking *dick*, Callie.”

I smirk, thinking of all the texts today. “He...has his moments.”

Stavros frowns as he pulls on the joint. “I mean, I know it’s fake, and I get why. But still. That dude was a fucking prick to

me that time at the bar. Like I get the image thing, but Jesus Christ.”

I shrug apologetically. “He’s just...Castle. That’s kind of his default setting.” I smile privately. “He’s actually a really good guy. The overly protective thing is just sort of—how he is. I don’t think he can help it.”

Stavros is quiet. When I glance back at him, I see his brows are knitted deeply.

“What?”

“Fucking hell, Callie,” he growls. “You’re not seriously fucking him, are you?”

Instantly, part of me wants to say yes. Hell, I want to *scream* yes, to the whole fucking city. I want to stand on the top of the Empire State Building and yell that I, Calliope Drakos, am having the best sex in the history of the world with a *god* of a man.

But I know I can’t do that. Or, at least, that I *shouldn’t* do that.

It’s supposed to be fake. A meaningless ruse to get us all out of a jam. And I know deep down that my brothers—or Neve and Eilish, for that matter—finding out that Castle and I are... well, sharing a bit more than a luxury apartment together... would probably be a bad thing.

So instead of screaming yes and breaking into a song and dance worthy of a hit Broadway musical about how ridiculously fantastic getting fucked by Castle is, I just shake my head.

“No. Of course not,” I mumble, shrugging.

Stavros grins widely. “Well... That’s good to hear.”

He takes another hit of the joint and then passes it my way. My head is already in the clouds, and I've still got a dumbass grin on my face. I wave it away, but Stavros just shakes his head, grinning as he pushes it toward me.

With a sigh, I relent, taking another hit I don't need. As I exhale, I dimly realize Stavros is suddenly *way* closer to me—like, so close that his body is almost touching mine as I sink against the bricks at my back.

“Whoa, Stavros...”

“C'mon, Callie,” he growls quietly. His hands go to either side of me, flat to the wall, boxing me in as my pulse jumps. “What are we doing?”

I smile nervously. “I think we're going back inside. I'm getting cold.”

He just smiles, shaking his head. “You know what I mean. We keep dancing around this...this *thing* between us.”

Shit.

I clear my throat uncomfortably. “Look, Stavros ...you're a great guy. You know that. And I like hanging out with you, but...”

“It's a *fake fucking marriage*, Callie,” he growls, his eyes narrowing at me. “And c'mon. Castle? You know the guy is out there doing whoever he wants. Why should you have to play the faithful card while he doesn't?”

“It's...” I shake my loopy head, blinking unsteadily as the high escalates. “I...it's not like that.”

“Callie,” Stavros breathes. I flinch when he sinks heavily against me, pinning me to the wall with his body.

“Stavros, stop—”

“You know how I feel about you, Callie,” he murmurs darkly.
“And you have to know what you fucking do to me.”

I tense, the whine in my head growing louder and throbbing harder at the base of my skull. A pressure starts to grow, and my thoughts begin to circle and spiral.

Fuck. *Fuck fuck fuck.*

I’m having an anxiety attack.

“Stavros, I need to go inside—”

“*Feel* what you do to me, Callie,” he groans. I wince, my breath catching and the anxiety mounting as he pushes his body against mine. I can feel his erection. But unlike with Castle, where the feel of him wanting me makes me burn with desire and ache with need, when Stavros grinds into me, all I feel is sheer panic.

“Stavros, *please*—”

“Let me worship you, Callie,” he murmurs, totally heedless of the way my eyes are unfocused and darting left and right; of the way my breath is catching in my throat as I struggle to fill my lungs; of the way my whole body is pulled tight as a drum as the panic and anxiety roar through my head.

“*Stop...*”

“Callie,” he growls as his hand grips my hip. Suddenly, he slides it lower. I want to scream. I want to hit him in the face or knee him in the balls.

But I can’t. I’m frozen. I’m unable to move or talk at all as the anxiety explodes into a full-on attack.

Stavros groans as he pushes against me, taking my silence as consent. His hand grips the hem of my short-short dress, and

my vision starts to darken at the edges as he begins to lift it while leaning close, his breath hot in my face.

“*Fuck, Callie,*” he growls. “I’ve wanted you for so fucking long...”

He moves in closer to kiss me as his hand drifts higher up my thigh.

And then suddenly, he’s not anywhere close to me. Because he’s flying through the air and slamming down onto the sidewalk with a groan.

My eyes go wide as I whip my head around, my mouth falling open in an “O” shape as I find myself staring right into Castle’s lethally sharp blue eyes.

His teeth are bared. His shoulders seem even bigger than usual, like they’re flexing so hard they might rip his dress shirt. There’s a fierceness etched into his face as he lances his gaze right through me, eviscerating me.

“Castle, I—”

“I’ll fucking deal with *you* in a second.”

Before I can say another word, he’s storming past me and yanking Stavros off the ground. The younger man cries out as Castle slams a fist into his nose, spraying blood everywhere. He hits him again, and again, and then slams him against the wall for good measure and lets him slide down to the ground.

“*I was taught,*” Castle snarls, yanking Stavros back up by the collar, “that when a lady says no, or stop, *it means fucking no and fucking stop,* you little fuck.”

I gasp as he leans in and head-butts Stavros in the nose, making the younger man scream in pain.

“And that’s enough for me to think you need some manners beaten into you as it is,” Castle rasps, punching Stavros in the stomach, hard, and doubling him over. “But you see, Stavros,” he hisses, leaning down so that he’s growling right into Stavros’s ear. “The thing is, the woman you just put your fucking hands on is my fucking *wife!*”

The way he roars it is just....

Yikes.

Hot. It’s fucking *hot*. Like this caveman, primordial, evolutionary response that instantly triggers something deep inside of me.

It’s like there’s two Callie’s trapped in my body. The first is the girl who rolls her eyes at overly macho guys and would never in a million years feel *anything*—except maybe contempt—if a guy were to talk about me like I was his possession.

But then, there’s the other Callie who’s been hanging around more and more these days. The Callie who comes apart at the seams whenever this man even walks into a room, and *craves* his possessive touch and his dominant control. The Callie who remembers him kissing her like she *did* belong to him, or cutting her panties off with a fucking knife. Or wrapping her hair in a fist and fucking her hard and deep, like he was making sure not a single inch of her body or psyche could ever forget his power over her.

And it’s that second Callie that rises up inside me when Castle roars that I’m his wife.

That I’m *his*.

Castle ignores Stavros’s pleas for mercy, making the younger man cry out as he drives his fist into his face once, twice, three

times more, before finally letting him fall to the ground in a bloodied heap.

Castle whirls on me with a savagery that sucks the air from my lungs and sends fire through my veins. And when he storms over and cups my jaw possessively, lifting my wide eyes to his fierce ones, it's all I can do not to moan.

"Let's get one fucking thing straight," Castle snaps, yanking me hard to his body. "*You. Are. MINE.*"

My core quivers.

"Not *his*," he rasps. "Not any other man's. And the next one who touches you as if that is not an iron-clad, irrefutable *fact* will not be getting back up again. Ever. Is that clear?"

All I can do is nod as heat pools between my thighs and my nipples harden to two pink pebbles under my dress.

"*Answer me, baby girl*," he growls thickly.

"Yes," I blurt breathlessly, shivering as I nod. "It's clear."

His eyes flash blue fire as he nods.

"Get in the fucking car."

CALLIE

THE STREETLIGHTS FLICKER over his sharp features, glinting off his blue, flinty eyes and casting dark shadows in the hollow of his cheekbones.

My heart is still racing as he drives through the city at a speed just this side of reckless. I turn and watch him, my eyes tracing over his clenched jaw and the way his hands grip the steering wheel like iron, his forearms tense and bulging.

My pulse might still be hammering, and my breath still coming fast and shallow, but I'm not spiraling anymore. I'm not begging him to drive me home as fast as he can so I can pop an Ativan to stop the screaming in my head.

And that's all Castle, who I'm realizing more and more just has this effect on me. It's not necessarily that he *calms* me, because the last thing I feel around him is "calm". But he takes away the crushing anxiety. He makes the white noise shut up.

With Castle, I feel safe enough to let go and breathe.

"You're fucking trouble, baby girl," he growls tersely.

"I know," I whisper. My bottom lip disappears between my teeth as my eyes drag over his gorgeous profile. "I did warn you."

His jaw grinds, and his eyes glint in the passing neon as they swivel toward me.

“Take off your panties.”

My eyes fly wide, and heat spreads from my core and dances all the way across my skin.

Holy shit.

“W-what?”

“I said. Take. Your fucking. Panties. *Off.*”

His hand extends out across the shifter, palm up.

“And then give them to me.”

My thighs clench. I can feel my nipples hardening as they electrically press against the inside of the tight dress.

“I...I don't—”

“*Take off your fucking panties,*” he hisses dangerously, staring at the road as he seamlessly weaves through traffic like a deranged maniac. “And put them in my fucking hand. *Now, Callie.*”

Suddenly, that's exactly what I'm doing. My face heats with a mix of excitement, pot, and alcohol as I slip my hands under the short dress and hook my fingers into my panties. I peel them down, lifting my legs in the passenger seat of his Range Rover to slip them over my heels. Blushing furiously, I turn and slip them into his hand.

Instantly, my mouth falls open and heat explodes across my face as Castle brings the hand holding my panties to his nose. He inhales slowly as I stare at him as if he's lost his mind.

“W-what—”

“I’m seeing if they’re *wet*,” he growls icily. “I’m seeing if that little fucking dipshit turned you on enough for your slutty pussy to drip all over your panties.”

Sweet. Fucking. Jesus.

My face turns to molten lava as I stammer to find my voice.

“I—” I shake my head. “*No*,” I breathe. “He didn’t.”

Castle inhales again. “Are you fucking sure?”

“No one makes me wet...” My teeth rake over my lip. “No one...except you.”

I tremble as his gaze drags over to me, the streetlights flickering intermittently in his stormy blues.

“*Show me.*”

Oh fuck...

“You want me to—”

“Lift up your fucking dress and *show me* how wet that pussy gets for me. *Now*, Callie.”

Fire surges through my veins. My hands move by themselves, slipping up my thighs and taking hold of the hem of my dress. My skin tingles as I peel the fabric up, my heart racing as I lift my ass to pull the dress all the way up to my waist.

Power and raw desire throb under my skin as I slowly turn to him. I shift in the seat, and before I know what I’m doing—maybe fueled by the night I’ve had so far—I’m spreading my legs as I twist toward him.

Castle glances over at me again, his eyes glinting with hunger as they stab between my thighs.

I know he can see me glistening as each streetlight flickers over us. I wasn’t before, from Stavros.

...But holy fuck, I'm *soaked* right now.

Castle looks back to the road. But slowly, his right hand reaches over the shifter. His strong fingers grip my thigh, teasing the skin and making my breath catch. I bite down on my lip, throbbing with need as his hand pushes up my thigh, inching closer and closer to my dripping pussy.

Suddenly, he's touching me. I moan softly when he cups my sex, dragging one thick finger up my slick lips and letting it bump over my clit. He does it again, dragging my wetness up and down my slit and teasing a finger around and around my aching button.

His hand twists, and suddenly, he's sinking a thick finger right into me.

I cry out, my hands instantly flying to his wrist, which I grab like a handle to hold onto for dear life. I can feel his forearm rippling under my fingers as his finger curls deep inside of me, stroking against my g-spot. My head swims, and I gasp as my hips roll, desperate for more.

"*Greedy girl*," he growls thickly. "Humping my finger like a horny little cock slut."

Holy *fuck*. The filthy way he's talking to me is pushing every single button I have. And when he sinks a second finger into me, filling me so much that my breath catches, I cry out for more.

"Hands off me, baby girl," Castle murmurs, looking at the road as he ducks and weaves through traffic.

I obey instantly, pulling my hands from his forearm.

"I want you to pull your dress down and play with your nipples while I finger this messy little cunt."

It's embarrassing how quickly I comply, yanking the dress down and whimpering as I cup my own breasts. My fingers tease and pinch my aching nipples, and my hips rock eagerly against his hand as he plunges two fingers in and out of me and rolls my clit under his thumb.

"What the fuck did that little shit want," he snarls quietly as I bite my lip, trying not to moan.

"He..." I lose the battle, and a moan escapes my lips. "He wanted to fuck me."

I cry out, gasping in pleasure as Castle rubs my clit even harder with his thumb and rams his fingers into me with a dominance that has me aching for more.

"And what did you tell him?"

"I told him no," I moan, my eyes rolling back as I pinch my nipples.

"And why is that, baby girl," Castle rasps.

"Because..."

"Because I fucking *own* this pussy," He growls thickly. "And I *do not* fucking share. Isn't that right?"

I moan, rolling my hips against his hand as I lose myself in the sensations his fingers and mine are wringing from my body.

"Did he try to rub his pathetic little excuse for a dick on you?"

I stammer as the pleasure washes over me, nodding. "Yeah, h-he tried."

Castle snarls darkly, his fingers stroking deep in my pussy. My gaze slides across to him, landing on the *huge* bulge in his pants.

Pure desire explodes through me. It mixes with wildness, and a complete loss of inhibitions. Before I can stop myself, I'm unbuckling my seatbelt.

“What the fuck are you—”

Castle groans when I lean over the center console and put my hand on his gigantic erection, and I moan myself just as loudly as I start to stroke him through his pants. My fingers eagerly tug at his belt, pop the top button of his dress pants, and pull down his zipper.

My pulse is pounding in my ears as I get up on my knees, deeply thankful for the heavy tint on the windows, since my dress is now pulled down to my ribs and up to my waist. I lean all the way over the console, my breasts pressing against his thigh as I reach into his pants and curl my small fingers around his fat, pulsing cock.

Castle groans, moving his hand in and out, sinking two fingers into my eager pussy. He continues to finger me as I pull his cock out of his boxers, my jaw dropping as my eyes widen.

Jesus fucking *Christ*, he's so big. My gaze slides up to his face, and the look of barely contained restraint I see there is so fucking hot that my thighs involuntarily squeeze together.

“I don't want anyone else,” I purr. “And I don't want any other dicks but this one.”

I moan as Castle's two fingers curl deep into me again, his palm grinding against my clit as he dodges through traffic.

“Then open your pretty mouth and show me how much you want this big cock, baby girl.”

“*Yes, Daddy.*”

My mouth descends to his cock, my lips stretching wide as I take his swollen head as deep as I can. I moan around him, sucking hard. My mouth slips off him with a wet, popping sound, and the way he groans when he hears it sets me ablaze.

I whimper, wrapping a hand around his shaft and stroking him as I tongue his head. I look up at his gorgeous face again, heat exploding through my core as I run my tongue down his shaft and then back up to swirl it around the top.

His hips rise, his jaw grinding as he groans loudly. He jerks the wheel sharply, gunning the engine as he dodges the other cars, all while fingering my pussy until my legs start to shake. I moan around him even more, drooling and slobbering on his cock as I try and swallow him right down my throat. I stroke him faster, my hand sliding over my own spit as his fingers plunge in and out of me with an obscenely wet squelching sound.

“Fuck it, we’re not making it home.”

A jolt of adrenaline zings through my body as Castle yanks the wheel, turns it sharply, and then brakes hard. He cuts the engine, and suddenly, we’re in darkness.

In one motion, he’s pulling me up off his cock and crushing his rough lips to my swollen, puffy ones. His tongue delves into my mouth, dueling with mine as he curls his fingers deep inside of me.

Then he’s pulling back, opening his door, and sliding out before shutting it behind him.

Wait, what?

I look around, realizing as my eyes adjust that we’re in a dark, slightly creepy alleyway as Castle marches around the front of the car and then yanks my door open.

“Get out, baby girl,” he growls, pulling me from the Range Rover and all but dragging me by the wrist around to the front of the car. I flush, glancing around nervously, trying to push and pull my dress back into place to cover myself. But before I can do so, I’m letting out a yelp as he suddenly spins me around and shoves me up against the front of the car, facing the windshield.

I moan as he roughly bends me over it, his palm smacking my ass hard as his knee forces my thighs apart. All I can do is whimper and arch my back, pure desire sizzling through my veins like napalm as he spanks my ass again.

“Since you seem to insist on perpetually acting like a bad girl,” he growls into my ear, making my breath catch as desire sizzles down my back, “then I’m going to *fuck you* like a bad girl.”

I moan as I feel the swollen head of his cock nestle against my dripping wet, needy pussy.

“I’d hang on tight if I were you.”

He drives into me in one brutal thrust, burying his thick cock balls deep. I cry out, clawing at the hood of his Range Rover and wailing in ecstasy as he fills me to the brim. Castle groans loudly, which for me is like throwing gasoline on the fire already raging in my core. I moan, arching my back and pushing my ass back eagerly to meet his thrusts.

He slides a hand up my spine and grabs a fist of my hair. He tugs, pulling my head back as the cries of pleasure rip from my throat. His abs slap against my ass as he fucks into me, occasionally bringing his hand from its possessive grip on my hip to spank my ass hard.

Part of me is totally freaked out that we might get caught— anyone could walk by at any moment or come down this alley and see me getting fucked over the hood of a car like a cheap whore.

The other part of me comes *alive* at that thrill. It's a hit of pure adrenaline flooding veins, making me feel everything just... *more*.

His fingers on my skin.

His muscles flexing against my ass.

His swollen cock ramming so deep and so hard that it lifts me up onto the balls of my feet.

“You want to go out dancing with other boys?” he rasps darkly into my ear. “Dressed up like a little cock-tease?” He slams into me hard, making me squeal in pleasure. “Let me show you what happens to little cock-teases.”

He fucks into me even harder, his balls slapping my clit as he tugs on my hair. It's not like anyone's ever accused Castle of being particularly *soft*, but I'm suddenly realizing that I'm seeing a side to his harshness and his darkness that I've never seen before.

I wonder briefly if *anyone* has.

But just like I'm able to let go of my anxiety when I'm around him, it's like he's able to ditch his facade of normalcy when he's around *me*. Like he can drop the mask and let go of any restraint. And slowly, I do, too.

I let *go*.

I let myself fall forward onto the hood of the car, my tender nipples burning on the hot metal and my hips bruised by the front grille as Castle fucks me hard. His open palm spans my

ass, sending electric jolts down my spine as he utterly dominates me.

“*All of you is mine, baby girl,*” he growls savagely, slapping my ass again as I yelp for more. “Your pretty little mouth. Your greedy little pussy...”

His hand slips between us, and when I feel his thumb slide between the cheeks of my ass and slowly tease over my asshole, the sound that rips from my throat is inhuman. Forbidden sparks explode through my core as he teases my most intimate, private place.

“And *this* will be mine, too,” he murmurs darkly.

His thumb pushes lower, gathering wetness from where his cock is stretching my pussy open. When it slides back up to my ass, I whimper as I feel his slick thumb begin to open me up. My face caves, my breath coming in gulping, halting gasps as I feel him slowly, *slowly* pry me open. His thumb slips inside, and I whine loudly in pleasure as he starts to fuck me again, both my pussy and my ass filled with him.

“I’m going to fuck this ass one day soon, baby girl. I’ll take every fucking virginity you have. I’ll take *every* first.”

His thumb begins to slide in and out of me in time with his cock sawing in and out of my pussy. It’s too much. It’s like I’m suddenly engulfed in flames, and every alarm and siren in the world is exploding through my body as my core tightens.

“*Castle...*”

“Come all over my fucking cock like a good girl, baby. You better fucking come for me if you want my fucking cum filling this pretty pussy.”

It’s as if reality glitches around me. I scream a silent scream, my entire body clenching, writhing, twisting, and then

shattering around him. I moan loudly, not giving a single fuck if the entire city hears me as I come hard on his dick. My toes curl, my legs shake and threaten to give out entirely, and I'm trembling *everywhere* as the orgasm explodes through me.

Castle groans, fucking me all the way through my climax. I can feel him swelling even bigger inside of me as his thrusts get harder and rougher.

"*Good girl,*" he snarls. "Coming all over that big dick like a greedy little cock slut. You want my cum, baby girl?"

Yeah, I fucking do.

Just as I feel him drive into me, I'm pushing him back, whirling and dropping to my knees. Castle's jaw clenches violently as I wrap both hands around his cock, open my mouth, and wrap my lips around the slick, glistening head.

The second my tongue touches him, he explodes.

He lets out a loud roar, his hands tangling in my hair and his hips thrusting as he fucks my mouth. His hot cum explodes in thick ropes across my tongue and down my throat, filling my mouth to overflowing as I moan around him.

I keep stroking him slowly, running my tongue around and around his head as he stares at me with utter possessiveness in his eyes. Slowly, I pull away. I look him right in the eye, open my mouth, and let him see the cum on my tongue before I close my lips, make a big show of swallowing, and then open up again to let him see that it's gone.

"Did I do a good job, *Daddy?*"

His only response is to yank me up, crush his mouth to mine, and wrap my legs around his muscled waist. He thrusts back into me, knocking the air from my lungs and sending me into orbit as I moan into his lips.

CALLIE

IT'S dark out when I open my eyes. For a second, I'm completely disoriented, and have no idea where I am. Then panic explodes, and I bolt upright with the anxiety instantly starting to churn in the back of my head.

“Here, drink this.”

Gradually my eyes adjust to the darkness, and I realize I'm in bed back at the apartment. Castle is sitting on the edge of it next to me holding a glass of fizzing, bubbly water.

His hair is wet and slicked back, like he's just taken a shower or something, and he's in a white tank-top and gray sweatpants.

I make a face. “Did I...”

“Fall asleep snoring in the car? Yes.”

Oh my God. I crumple in embarrassment.

“It was a cute snore, though.”

I groan, covering my face with my hands. Then I wince at the stab of headache behind my eyes.

“Drink, Callie.”

I take the glass from his hand, wrinkling my nose as I look at it.

“It’s Alka-Seltzer. I’m guessing you’re feeling a little hungover?”

I groan, nodding. “How long was I out?”

“A few hours. It’s two-thirty in the morning.” He peers at me as I start to drink the fizzy water and frowns. “I don’t want you drinking like that anymore.”

I shoot him a look. “I’m a big girl, Castle.”

His eyes lock with mine, and I feel a prickle of that comforting feeling I always get from him.

“You can’t drink like that when you’re taking SSRIs like Lexapro. It can fuck with your system and get you way drunker than you normally would.”

I chew on my lip as my eyes lift to his.

“You weren’t complaining earlier.”

He smirks that damn Brando smirk at me, which of course just melts me.

“No, you’re right, I wasn’t,” he says quietly, smirking again before his brow furrows. “But enough is enough. I don’t like you out of control like that. Especially around little fuckheads like whatshisname.”

I look away.

“Callie. Seriously.”

“Okay,” I mumble, turning back to him. When he arches a skeptical brow, I roll my eyes. “I’ll...slow down, okay?”

“Good. Now come with me.”

I frown. “Where?”

“To take a bath.”

I groan. “Can’t I just go back to sleep?”

“Look at your knees.”

I glance down, my eyes adjusting more to the darkness as I look at my legs. My face heats when I realize just how smudged and dirty they are.

...And I know *exactly* how my knees got like that.

My lip retreats between my teeth as I look up at him shyly. Castle just grins hungrily, running his fingers softly through my hair and leaning close as he brushes it back from my ear.

“Again,” he murmurs, making me shiver, “I’m *not* complaining. Come on.”

He plucks the glass from my hand and sets it on the bedside table. Then I’m gasping as he suddenly picks me up in his arms, cradling me tenderly.

“I can *walk*.”

“I know you can. And I can carry you.”

In the bathroom, the deep tub is already filled with steaming water and mountains of fragrant white bubbles.

I stand, blushing a little awkwardly as Castle peels my dress off my shoulders and lets it drop to my feet. He holds my hand as I step into the tub and settle down into it, groaning as the heat seeps into my sore muscles.

Castle sits on the edge of the tub, and I jolt a little when he starts to pour water down the back of my hair.

“What are you doing?”

“Washing your hair. Sit still.”

I grin. There’s something both comical and sexy about his bossy way. On the one hand, yeah, maybe it’s a little silly that I’m a grown adult and he’s ordering me into the tub and washing my hair. But on the other hand?

Super fucking hot. And there’s something very relaxing about just letting go and letting him take over.

When my hair is wet enough, he shampoos it, his strong fingers massaging my scalp as I exhale and let go of any residual tension. He rinses the shampoo from my hair and then conditions it, running his fingers down the long strands.

“How are you so good at this?”

The second I say it, I almost don’t want to know the answer. But then, me being me, I barge ahead anyway.

“Did you do this for Neve and Eilish?”

It’s always been there, even when I try to tell myself it’s not: this weird sort of jealousy of their history with Castle.

Obviously, it was never a romantic thing. But try telling that to my weird Crazytown brain. It doesn’t matter that they were basically family to him. It’s not that I’m jealous of any feelings there. I’m jealous that they *had him*. They had all these years with Castle, and all these memories, while I was just pining for him from a distance.

Castle stops for a second behind me. “What?”

“Neve and Eilish. Did you ever wash their—”

“Ugh, *no*,” he blanches. And when I turn to glance at him, I grin when I see the ick look on his face. “Jesus, they were fourteen and eleven when I started working for the Kildare

family. That would be fucking weird and gross on a hundred different levels.”

“Well, you’re always saying they’re like sisters to you.”

“They are,” he smirks at me. “Tell me, did you do a lot of washing Ares’ or Hades’ hair when you were kids?”

I make a puke face. “Okay, valid.”

He goes back to conditioning my hair before reaching for the cup off to the side and rinsing it out.

“I used to wash Kelly’s hair when she was little.”

The sudden break in the silence startles me. I half-turn to look at him again.

“My little sister,” he grunts quietly. “Like, my real one.”

I smile. “I didn’t even know you had a sister.”

He says nothing as he pours water down the back of my hair.

“Where does she live now—”

“All done,” he announces abruptly. And by his tone, it’s clear the conversation is over. My curiosity is seriously piqued, but I let it go.

Well... for now, at least.

“Stand up.”

I bite my lip. “Why?”

“Because I said so.”

I blush. “You’re seriously bossy, you know that?.”

“Well, now you see why I never got married.”

I grin. Slowly, my face burning even though he’s already seen me naked on more than a few occasions, I stand. Castle uses a

loofah to start gently scrubbing my back and my arms.

“I really can bathe myself.”

“I really believe you. Stand still.”

I bite back a grin and do as he says, standing there as he washes every inch of me—and I do mean *every* inch. I flush when the loofah slips over my breasts, then shiver when he soaps my ass, remembering his promise to “take every first.”

I mean fuck, that’s pretty hot.

He turns me around, and my legs shake a little when the loofah slips between them to gently wash my pussy. I press my lips together as his gaze lingers on the stubble over my mound. Slowly, his eyes slide up to mine.

“Do you prefer your pussy shaved, or do you just do it because you think it’s what men want?”

The question throws me for a second, because I’ve never actually thought about it. I’ve been shaving basically since I was old enough to, and maybe it *is* a societal thing? But I also do love the way it feels.

I flush as I lift a shoulder. “Both, I guess? But...I think I like it smooth.”

Castle nods, his eyes dropping back between my legs as something hot burns in his gaze.

“Sit on the edge. Spread your legs.”

I frown as he turns and grabs something off the countertop.

“Wait, what—” My eyes bulge and my face goes white when I realize he’s holding a dish of shaving soap, a big brush, and a *straight razor*.

“Uhhh...yeah, *no*,” I blurt, staring at the lethal blade in his hands before my eyes dart nervously to his. “Are you joking?”

He shrugs. “No?”

“Please tell me this doesn’t also come from your sister?”

He rolls his eyes. “Don’t be disgusting. The military.”

“Shave a lot of pussies in the Rangers, did you?”

He chuckles. “Just my own face...usually with a combat knife and bar soap in the middle of a desert.”

I swallow, my pulse thudding quietly in my ears. “I...I don’t know...”

“I thought you said you want to be smooth.”

My lip sucks between my teeth as our eyes lock. Slowly, I nod.

“Yeah. I did.”

“Then sit.”

I do as he says, sitting on the edge of the tub in front of him with my feet on the bathmat.

“Spread your legs, baby girl.”

I gulp, and open my thighs. Castle kneels between them. He wets the brush in the tub behind me and then swirls it around the dish of lather, making it all foamy and thick. He brings the brush to my pussy, and my breath sucks in sharply when he gently starts to lather it over my lips and my mound.

Holy *fuck*, that feels good—like little sensual teases tickling over my most intimate skin.

When I’m all white and foamy down there, he reaches past me and cranks on the hot water. He waits for it to come up to temperature and then sticks the blade under the water for a few

seconds until it's hot as well. Very gently, very slowly, he brings the knife to my skin and then looks up at me.

“Do you trust me?”

“Yes.”

The answer is instant. And I love that I didn't even have to think about it.

Then, we begin.

It's weird at first—and frankly *terrifying*—as he drags the blade over my most intimate skin. But slowly and surely, rinsing the blade off every other stroke, Castle begins to shave the stubble from my pussy. He's so close to me that I can feel his warm breath on my thighs. And the whole time, I'm fucking *dripping* wet.

He does the sides, then—sweet Jesus—my *lips* ever so carefully. Then he shaves the top smooth. When he's done, I whimper as he runs his fingers over me, feeling for any stray hairs. When he finds none, he rubs creamy moisturizer into my skin, his slick fingers running over my pussy lips until I'm squirming and trying not to moan.

“And now I need you to stop fucking holding that back,” he growls. In one motion, he runs his fingers over my slit, leans close, and then drags his tongue over the same place.

“*Oh, fuuuuck...*”

His mouth felt amazing before. But now, with my skin so smooth and tender, it's like fucking *heaven*. It's like the tip of every raw nerve is exposed, and when his tongue dances over my pussy, I'm instantly transported to cloud nine.

“*Oh shit, Castle...*”

My fingers slide into his hair, shamelessly pulling him to me—needing and craving more of him. He groans against me, sending vibrations humming through me and making me gasp loudly. His tongue pushes deep, sliding in and out like he’s fucking me with it. His fingers tease and dance over my tender skin and his tongue delicately licks and swirls around my clit, until my whole fucking world and reality itself is blurring around me.

“Castle...Castle...Castle...”

When I come, it’s like sinking into absolute oblivion. My whole body tenses up before going limp, and it feels like I’m melting as I explode against his mouth. Castle catches me before I slip off the edge of the tub. His mouth crashes down on mine, letting me taste my own sweetness as he lifts me up in his arms and carries me to bed.

He sits me on the edge of the bed and dries me as I eye the bulge in his sweatpants hungrily, even though I’m so exhausted at this point it feels like I might honestly pass out right now.

Castle lifts me up and pulls back the covers before sliding me under them.

“Just sleep, Callie,” he growls quietly, leaning down to kiss me as he strokes my hair.

He stands, but my hand catches his before he can leave.

“Would you...” I bite my lip. “I mean, nothing implied. I just...”

“Yes.”

I stay awake just long enough to feel him slide into bed next to me. My back cocoons into the warmth of his chest as his muscled arms encircle me tenderly.

Then, it's lights out for me.

CASTLE

Ten years ago:

“MR. FARRELL—”

“You don’t have to thank me, kid. You’re doing *me* a favor, here. I could use a man with your skills.”

Dominic Farrell is a big man—big in physical size, sure. But also big in the sense that he fills a room when he enters it. He firmly shakes my hand.

“We’ll speak soon, yeah?”

I nod as he claps me on the shoulder and then turns to fade into the crowd of mourners.

This is the fourth funeral I’ve been to in as many weeks. The first two were memorial services for Matt and Bryce. I’ve said my own goodbyes in my own way to Jason, though if Megan is holding an actual service for him is anyone’s guess, since she’s dropped out of contact with pretty much everyone.

Next was my mother’s. Not because I felt any real urge to mourn her passing, or to say goodbye. But because there are documents that needed signing and affairs that needed settling.

I put my signature down where I had to at the funeral itself, but that was it. I won’t even be going back to that godforsaken

apartment where Kelly was taken from this world. If my mother has things of importance still there?

Well, then she should've taken them with her when she did the world a favor and left it. Our old landlord can burn them all for all I care.

Burying my mother entailed me, the priest at St. Michael's, which I guess she still went to often enough for him to know she was dead, and the lawyer who needed me to settle her affairs.

That was it, and the entire thing took less than fifteen minutes.

The service today, for Mary Foley, Owen Foley's mother, is of a much larger scale. Like Dominic Farrell, Owen's a big player in the Kildare empire. And his mother was a battle-axe just about everyone in the organization knew, feared, and respected. Which is why the crowd at today's service is *massive* as it spills out of St. Patrick's Cathedral onto 5th Avenue.

I'm mulling over Dominic's offer just now to employ me in his ranks, when a dark shape slips from my peripheral vision to the center of my focus.

I stiffen as my eyes lock onto the man in black with a sharp jaw and venomously piercing green eyes as he stands right in front of me. His gaze seems to flay me open as he casually slips a metal case from his jacket pocket, pulls out a cigarette, and deftly lights it with a gleaming Zippo.

"Do you know who I am?" He murmurs in an Irish accent.

My father was a brawler for the Kildares. My mother did some secretarial work for Declan Kildare himself. I grew up in this world, before the Rangers.

Yeah, I damn well know who Cillian Kildare is.

“Yes sir, Mr. Kildare,” I say firmly, bowing my head in respect.

People fear Cillian, who sits above even Declan as the king of the Kildare empire. And if the rumors are to be believed, they have every right to.

We’ve never met, but as I eye him right back, it’s not fear that I feel.

It’s respect.

“You’ve recently parted ways with the Army. Do I have that correct?”

I nod. “You do, sir.”

But it’s clear from the glint in his eyes that he already knew unequivocally that he was right.

“In that case, I have a job for you.”

My brows knit. “Thank you, Mr. Kildare. But Mr. Farrell—”

“Dom is a good man. But he wants you to be a trigger man, yes?”

I nod.

“But that’s not what you want.”

My mouth thins. “It’s what I’m good at.”

“That isn’t what I asked.”

My shoulder lifts. “It’s what I am, Mr. Kildare.”

“But you’re not a killer.”

Yes I am.

I clear my throat. “I’m not sure you know my history—”

“I know it clearly, actually,” he growls quietly, dragging slowly on his cigarette. His piercing green eyes haven’t once blinked or looked away from stabbing through me the entire time we’ve been speaking so far.

“But I know killers, believe me,” he continues, taking another slow drag of his smoke. “There are killers who are good at what they do. And there are killers who do what they do because it’s in their blood. Like a compulsion. A disease. An *addiction*.”

I swallow as he smiles grimly.

“You are not the latter of those two,” Cillian murmurs. “You just happen to have skills. But I think we both know it’s not all you want from this world, is it?”

I clear my throat, looking away as I rake my fingers down my jaw.

“What’s the job?”

Cillian nods past me. I turn, looking curiously to where two girls are sitting on a park bench. The older of the two, a redhead who looks about middle-school age, is laid back across the bench, blowing ginger bangs out of her face as she swings her arms in a bored, restless fashion.

In contrast, the younger blonde one sits primly, shoulders back as she reads a battered copy of Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. Which is amusing, considering she looks all of ten or eleven.

“Do you know who those two are?”

I nod as I swivel my gaze back to Cillian.

“Your nieces; Declan’s daughters.”

“Indeed.” Cillian’s green eyes sink into me. “And I’d like you to be their bodyguard.”

I blink, stunned confusion settling into my head.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“You heard me.”

I shake my head. “No.”

Cillian smirks. “That was a fast answer.”

“All due respect, Mr. Kildare, but you don’t want me in charge of them. Or anyone.”

“I said what I said.”

“Well then you really don’t know my history.”

“I know you killed your own father for killing your little sister.”

I flinch, my molars grinding as our eyes lock. Anger flashes behind my face, but Cillian just holds my gaze with an unblinking, unrepentant, almost freakishly calm look.

“I know why you did it, too.”

My eyes narrow. “You don’t know a goddamn thing about—”

“Because I did the same fucking thing, Castle. To my own father, for my own sister.”

We stare at each other in silence for a moment, a strange sort of unspoken understanding flickering between us.

“You called me Castle,” I growl quietly.

“It’s your name, isn’t it.” He shrugs. “You were Christopher before. But we both know what you’ve gone through has changed you. Now, you’re Castle. Right?”

I nod, swallowing.

“Then it’s Castle. So, tell me, Castle.” Cillian takes a step towards me, his slightly off-putting, supernaturally piercing green eyes stabbing right into my very soul.

“Do you want a job?”

Present:

PEACE IS a weird sensation when you’ve been at war for longer than you can remember.

I’ve been fighting battles since I was a kid. Trying to keep my father from beating on my mother, even though she resented me for it. Trying to keep him from beating on me. From beating on Kelly. Then came battles of a different kind, in desert wars around the world.

I suppose I knew peace to some extent when I first started working for the Kildare family—at least, when Declan with his seemingly perpetual sour mood wasn’t around. But even then, the peace was only partly there. Back then, I was still permanently in this soldier mindset. Those two girls I was tasked with watching over were *everything* to me, and they became a mission I knew I’d never falter in.

But then, a week after Callie’s interview for the MBA program and me going more than slightly postal on that little shit who tried to put his hands on her, me and peace finally get well acquainted.

It’s Deimos who shoots me a text letting me know he’s coming up to the apartment. Callie’s in the shower when I open the door for her brother and shake his hand.

I won't lie, there's something freaky about Deimos. I mean I like the guy...I think. He's extremely intelligent, calculating, and well-mannered, if a little cold. And yeah, physically I get that he's a little imposing to most people—tall and built, dark black hair, piercing dark eyes, the almost supernaturally pale skin in contrast, the high cheekbones and chiseled jaw. But it's not the physical about him that spooks me.

It's that I recognize deep-seated and well-covered inner darkness when I see it. Damaged recognizes damaged. What Deimos' hidden demons are and what caused them, I can only guess. But whatever it is, those scars run *deep*.

"Castle," he growls in that slightly roughened voice of his as he steps into the apartment and glances around. "Callie?"

"Shower," I say casually, walking over to the kitchen area. I'm *obviously* not going to add that she's showering because not twenty minutes ago, she was bent over the very kitchen counter I'm currently leaning against and moaning as she came all over my cock.

I raise a brow to Deimos as he follows me into the kitchen. "Want a beer or coffee or something?"

He shakes his head. "No, thank you," he growls quietly. He rolls his neck, giving me a peek of the myriad of tattoos that creep up from his collar. "I just wanted to drop by to give you the good news in person."

"I'm all ears."

He smirks, folding his arms over his chest and leaning against the fridge. "You're in the clear, on all fronts."

My brows furrow. "Meaning?"

Deimos pulls two file folders out of his jacket. He thumbs one open and then tosses it onto the kitchen island in front of me.

“This won’t be made public until next week. But...” He shrugs eloquently. “I’ve got lots of little birdy friends who chirp all sorts of secrets to me.”

I nod as I reach for the file. I’ve heard that about Deimos. He doesn’t really advertise it, but he’s a bit of a spymaster in the criminal world, not unlike Dante Sartorre.

I open the file and my eyes drop to the photos inside—a bit blurry, and clearly shot with a drone. When I peer closer, I realize I’m looking at what looks like an outdoor wedding.

With Massimo Carveli standing at the altar next to a pretty girl all in white.

My eyes raise to Deimos. “That’s who I think it is, right?”

He nods. “Yup. And the victim, by which I mean the blushing bride, is Eloise LeBlanc.”

I frown, racking my brain for how I know the name before it finally clicks. “As in Andre LeBlanc’s daughter?”

I only know them slightly through reputation, but the LeBlancs are French Mafia. The same French Mafia who have historically been in a bloody all-out war with the Italians. Deimos clearly reads my expression, because he dips his chin.

“Yeah,” he snorts. “*That* should be an interesting story.”

“I mean...” I shake my head in bewilderment. “*How?*”

“Who knows,” he mutters. “But, on the bright side...”

“This completely removes any interest the Carveli family might have in Callie.”

Deimos nods slowly. “Exactly. Now, that doesn’t mean the *other* Commission families won’t be highly invested in seeing

this marriage of yours and my sisters through for the next year, I'm sorry to say."

Funny, because I'm not.

I almost flinch the split second that thought enters my head. It bursts in without warning, and when it does, it leaves me tense and frowning at a spot on the floor past the file folder in my hands.

I want to say it's the soldier in me talking—that I signed up for a year-long mission, and I'll damn well see it through to the end. But I know that's bullshit.

It's not that I *can't* walk away from Callie at this point. It's that I don't *want* to. Even if what we've become is possibly wrong, not to mention probably dangerous in terms of the peace between our families and all the business we're doing together.

After the other day, something's solidified between us. Something that I can't pretend isn't there anymore, and *definitely* can't pretend is "just an arrangement". I think that became perfectly clear to both of us when I almost killed that fucking kid outside that bar for touching her.

For touching what I see as mine, and mine alone.

"I know Michael Genovisi told you flat out that the Scaliami family had no vested interest in this when you met with him," Deimos adds. "And I believe him. But don't get me started on all the inner conflict and drama with some of the other Commission families—the Barones, Amatos, and Marchettis."

I nod, not trusting myself to even comment on the situation, given that the only thing filling my head right now is thoughts of Callie.

Of her lips. Of her smile. Of that laugh of hers and the chaos that inevitably follows her into every room. Of the way there's a certain peace in my world now with her in it, even if she tilts it upside down and inside out on a damn near hourly basis.

“What's in the other folder?”

Deimos smiles smugly. “Oh, I think you're going to like this one.”

He tosses it onto the counter as well, half-spilling out what looks like an official Interpol document. I frown as I pick it up and open the folder to a photo of a body, face-down in a pool of blood in a grimy apartment.

“What am I look—”

I freeze when I see the document next to the photo. I can read enough Spanish to understand that the document is a Mexican coroner's report, documenting in gruesome detail the death by two handgun shots to the head at point-blank range...

...of an international assassin known only as El Cirujano.

My eyes snap up to Deimos'.

“Is this fucking for real?”

He nods. “It's real, and I trust my source implicitly. Looks like he was on a job to take out a cartel boss when someone got the drop on him.”

I exhale slowly, shoving my fingers through my hair. “Well, *shit*.”

Deimos dips his chin again. “Like I said, it looks like you're both in the clear, on all fronts.”

“Aside from the matter of who *hired* El Cirujano.”

“Well, yeah, there’s that,” Deimos says thoughtfully. “And I’m looking into it. But to be honest, I’m beginning to wonder if it was Massimo, and the order never *was* to actually kill either of you.”

“You mean just a shot across the bow to make a point? Let everyone know he’s a big tough dipshit throwing a tantrum because someone else married Callie?”

Deimos smirks. “That’s exactly my guess, the more I think about it. But I’ll keep digging just to make sure. In the meantime, while I think we should all keep security on guard, I think it’s safe to say that Callie doesn’t need to stay cooped up in this place day and night. Which is probably a relief to you.”

I chuckle. “It’s *has* been a little like living with a caged tiger.”

When Deimos doesn’t laugh at the joke with me, I glance up and instantly stiffen at the cold, stern look on his face. His eyes stab into mine, his left fingers drumming the bicep of the opposite arm.

“Castle.”

There’s an edge to his voice. I draw myself up from where I’ve been lounging against the counter, squaring my shoulders as I face him.

“Is she happy?”

I raise one brow. “Being cooped up here? Not exactly—”

“We both know that’s not what I’m asking.”

Silence settles over the kitchen.

“Ares hasn’t guessed. And if Hades had, he’d probably already be over here trying to cut your balls and your head off, in that order.”

“Deimos—”

“But there’s not much *I* don’t see,” he growls quietly. “I like you, Castle. I mean that. You saved Ares’ life, and Callie’s, too. You respect family, and you carry yourself with honor.”

My jaw sets as he walks forward, stopping right in front of me.

“So I’m asking you again: *is she happy?*”

“Yes.”

I don’t have to think about it. And I’m not going to stand here trying to come up with bullshit to feed him. We’re obviously well past the point of denying anything anyways.

“Yeah,” I growl again. “She’s happy.”

“And when this year-long commitment is over?”

“That’ll be up to her, of course. For my part, I don’t plan on ever making her *unhappy*, Deimos,” I say quietly.

He flashes a cool, shark-like smile, his dark eyes glinting with just a touch of malice. “So... I don’t need to detail the ways I would make your life—”

“How about you don’t threaten me *at all*,” I grunt. “And we stay on good terms.”

Deimos cocks his head, looking halfway between amused and about to explode at any second. Then the expression fades as he nods.

“Tell my sister I said hello?”

“That I will.”

He cocks his head again, smiling that slightly off-putting smile before he reaches out and claps me on the shoulder.

“Good. Take care of her, Castle.”

She's still in the shower when he leaves. I walk right in, shedding my clothes on the bathroom floor and slipping into the steamy heat behind her. She grins as she turns and sinks against my chest. And when I tell her about the dead assassin and Massimo's marriage, she shrieks and jumps up into my arms and kisses me deeply.

Maybe I don't know exactly what this is. But I do know that with her, the roaring in my head goes quiet. The wars fade into the distance.

And for the first time in a long time—maybe in forever—I don't feel like I'm on a mission.

It just feels like I'm living.

CASTLE

“MORNING.”

In what’s become my favorite chair by the windows, I look up from my phone and my coffee when I hear her voice. A grin spreads over my face as Callie saunters to a stop in front of me in a loose tank top and panties.

“Morning yourself.”

She’s still bleary-eyed, and her hair is in a comic state of bed head. But still...

I mean *fuck*, is this girl beautiful. And I’ve come to realize that it’s precisely the chaotic nature twisting through her like a hurricane that attracts me to her. *Me*, the rule-master. The guy who still makes his bed with crisp, sharp right angles every damn morning. The man who can’t even enter a room without scoping out two exits and any blind spots.

She’s a splash of chaos in my life of straight lines and rigid timetables. And I like that.

She grins a sleepy grin at me as she plucks the mug from my hand and takes a sip. Her face wrinkles instantly.

“Fucking *hell*, what is that?”

“That would be coffee. Also known as, that mysterious dark liquid hiding somewhere underneath all that fake milk and sugar you typically dump in.”

She rolls her eyes and flips me off. I watch with amusement as she tries to take another sip of the black coffee, but the mug doesn't even make it all the way to her lips before she shakes her head with finality and gives it back.

“Nope. That's straight up nasty. How the fuck do you drink it like that?”

“I'm a purist?”

“More like a masochist.”

I chuckle as she turns to frown out the window at the morning light.

“And what freaking time is it?”

“Almost eight-thirty, Sunshine. Day's a-wasting.”

She groans. “I don't know how you get up so fucking early.”

“Yeah, you're really chasing the dawn at eight-twenty in the morning, aren't you?”

I'll give Callie this much: she *has* been waking up earlier than she used to. But I'm a usually-up-by-six-at-the-latest type of guy. So when sleeping beauty stumbles into the living room two and a half hours later acting like it's the ass-crack of dawn, yeah, that's comedy gold to me.

“Well,” she stretches her arms up luxuriously, lifting the tank-top up her body as her nipples pebble against it. My eyes slip down, shamelessly tracing over the taut lines of her stomach and hips, drinking in the way her panties mold to her pussy.

“I mean, *someone* kept me up last night.”

My eyes raise to hers, relishing the way the heat rises in her cheeks.

I *did* keep her up last night. Just I have pretty much every night for the past month, ever since the day of her MBA interview where I almost killed that fucking kid outside the club that evening.

Between Massimo marrying Eloise LeBlanc and the hitman that tried to kill us getting offed himself, the threat levels for us have been lowered. Which means we're a little more back to normal. Callie's back in the world, where she's hard at work getting her ducks in a line for business school. She's also been getting things ready for the eventual relaunch of The Banshee, the Irish bar she, Neve, and Eilish are opening together. That'll probably happen in the next year.

On my end, the transition from Cillian to me at the head of the organization has gone so seamlessly that we're both frankly almost holding our breath waiting for another shoe to drop.

But I've also been going full steam ahead with a wide range of plans that'll make the Kildare family even stronger and more secure. We've started making the alliances that will facilitate our expansion into Boston. And through Hades, I've had a sit down with Jayden Robinson, the head of the Jamaican Mafia here in New York, and signed an official pact between our families.

Thanks to Gavan making introductions, I've also had meetings with the heads of some of the major Bratva families to hammer out some handshake agreements. After all, when Eilish and Gavan marry in a few months' time, the Kildares will become family with the Tsarenko/Reznikov family.

It's been an intense crash course in diplomacy and leadership. But Cillian was right: I'd been doing this from over his

shoulder for years. So officially stepping into the role isn't *quite* as much of a near-drowning experience as I thought it might be.

Ostensibly, Callie and I are still living together here in Konstantin and Mara Reznikov's apartment because one, it's easier than finding our own place, and it *is* a goddamn fortress. And two, because even if Massimo is married now, no one quite knows how the other Italian Mafia families would feel about Callie and I not adhering to the original terms laid out in the blood-marker saying we're supposed to remain married for a year.

It's probably nothing any of them would give a shit about if we divorced tomorrow. But Italian families have a lot of convoluted histories. If we were to end things prematurely, there is a possibility that former allies of Luca could foment enough anger and push Massimo hard enough to seek reprisal for the perceived slight of being duped out of his father's promised bride.

So that's all *ostensibly* why I'm still living here with Callie. The reality is a lot more complicated.

For the first time in my entire life, it actually feels like I'm in a relationship. That's a conversation we haven't had, and a label we've never used out loud. But, I mean, for a month, I've shared a bed with her every night.

We eat together. We *go out* to eat together. We work on our laptops on the couch next to each other, and we brush our teeth next to each other.

I mean, for fuck's sake, the girl walked into the bathroom and took a piss the other day while I was shaving.

If *that's* not a relationship, I'm not sure what the fuck is.

But aside from Deimos, we're still keeping it a secret. And even between the two of us it's left unsaid. But for now, whatever this is, it feels *good*. It feels like I know peace for the first time maybe in my entire life.

And that's gotta count for something.

"What've you got going on today?"

I sigh. "Meetings, followed by more meetings. But then I get a change of pace with—wait for it—"

"More meetings?"

I scowl as I look up at her. "I feel like Cillian didn't really mention how much of the gig was sitting in goddamn meetings."

She laughs, her eyes twinkling in a way that sends a bolt of something electric through my chest.

"What about you?"

She groans, turning to nod with her chin at her laptop sitting on the couch. "My stupid fucking essay. It's almost there, but I want it to be perfect."

"Need a hand?"

Her lips pull back in a smile. "Got a lot of experience with writing MBA application essays?"

"None."

She giggles, then gasps when I reach out, grab her by the waist of her panties, and yank her close.

"But I'm *very* good at making you come on my tongue, which I hear is great for clearing your head before working on said MBA application essay."

Heat blooms across her cheeks as I lean close and softly kiss the inside of her thigh. She whimpers, looking down at me as I slip my fingers inside her panties and slowly pull them aside.

“Is that a fact—*oh shit...*”

She moans in ecstasy as my tongue drags up through her folds. My hands grip her ass, pulling her tight against my mouth as I groan into her sweetness. I drive my tongue into her, tasting her honey and relishing her soft moans and whimpers. I tease the tip up to her clit, swirling my tongue around the throbbing little button as she cries out and rocks her hips shamelessly against my face.

I growl, hungrily devouring her until her legs are shaking and gasped moans fill my ears.

...Which is exactly when I pull her into my lap, center my cock at her slick, tight entrance, and slide her down onto every thick inch of me.

My mouth slams to hers and my hand grabs her long hair in my fist as she explodes around me. I can feel her pussy milking me as she comes, grabbing my face and kissing me hard as she grinds her ass in my lap.

She doesn't slow down. She just starts to ride me faster, bouncing that sweet cunt up and down my dick as she moans into my mouth. I can feel her pussy lips stretching tight around my hot, swollen cock, and I groan as my hand grips her ass tight. I center a finger at her tight back hole, and Callie starts to go wild. Her hips start to buck faster, her panting moans filling my ears as I slowly sink my finger into her ass.

“*Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me...* oh FUCK!”

When she comes again, I let go, too. I bruise my lips to hers, swallowing her cries of pleasure as my cock spills rope after

rope of sticky cum deep inside of her as she spasms around me.

Good morning, indeed.

I'M ABOUT to sit down for a meeting with Dominic Farrell later when my phone buzzes in my pocket. Pleased surprise lifts my brows when I see Jeremy's name on the screen.

"I dunno, man," he sighs when I answer. "I mean, I help you out in Paris, get your mess all cleaned up lickety-split, don't ask no awkward questions. And what do I get? Not even a fuckin' phone call."

I chuckle. "You miss me or something, Jer?"

He laughs back. "I was seeing if you actually wanted to grab that drink. I'm in New York for a couple of days for some work shit. But I'm free tonight, if you're around and feel like catching up with an old friend."

"Oh yeah?" I grin into the phone. "What's his name?"

He snorts. "Still an asshole, I see. Look, I know you're this bigshot player now and everything..."

It's funny. Jeremy's known that I've worked for the Kildare family for the last ten years. But we've mutually agreed to leave work at the door whenever we talk. Besides, he might be CIA...and he is...but Jeremy's focus is on international espionage, not your run-of-the-mill domestic mafia shit.

"And I know you're all married and settled down now, too... congrats, by the way."

"Yeah, I don't remember getting a gift from you yet."

He snickers. “And *I* don’t remember getting an invitation to my own friend’s fuckin’ wedding. Prick.”

I roll my eyes. “C’mon, you know...”

That it’s fake.

I don’t say that part out loud. Actually, I’ve been having a hard time even thinking of Callie and I as “fake” lately.

“Yeah yeah yeah, I know, you and your mafia shit. So listen, we getting this drink or not?”

“How’d you feel about having it at my place? I’ve got meetings until late, and I promised Callie we’d have dinner together.”

He chuckles. “Well shit, you really are married.”

I grin.

“But yeah, man,” he says. “Your place works for me. How about you supply the booze and I bring over dinner? I mean I’m in the city, I gotta grab some New York pizza while I’m here.”

“Sounds perfect, buddy,” I chuckle. “I’ll text you the address.”

“HOLY *FUCK*, BROTHER...”

Jeremy’s jaw drops as he shoves the pizza box into my hands and hobbles past me into the apartment. He stares up at the high vaulted ceiling, the fireplace, the *insane* views of the city through the walls of glass. He turns to slowly shake his head at me.

“I mean, I knew you were the king and all now, but *fuck*, Castle. This is some next level Godfather shit.”

I shake my head, frowning in concern as I drag my gaze unhappily over his arm in a sling, his foot in a walking cast, and the cane in his good hand.

“What the *fuck* happened to you, Jer?”

He rolls his eyes. “Much as I want to lie and say it was some cool Jason Bourne spy shit...” He sighs. “No such luck. Just shitty fuck-head DC drivers, man. Motherfucker t-boned me a few weeks back. *And* he totally fucked up my car. Asshole.”

I grin as I walk over to him and give him as big a bear hug as I can while still making sure I don't put pressure on his arm.

“Castle, this fucking place, man...”

I chuckle. “Yeah, it ain't mine.”

“Yours or not, it sure looks like it's fucking good to be king.”

It's funny. Old friends can lose track of each other, or not talk for a year. You can each separately be processing the grief and the survivor's guilt of mourning lost brothers in arms. But when you get back together, it's like no time has passed and nothing has change.

We don't talk about Kabul. Out on the patio, we simply make a toast and clink our beers together for Bryce, Matty, and Jason.

“So, how is it being at the top?”

I sigh and shake my head. “Meetings, man. Jesus *fuck*, so many meetings.”

He chuckles. “Welcome to my world, buddy. You think the CIA is gonna be car chases and gun fights and hot foreign women with sexy accents all day long. They don't mention that ninety-nine percent of the job is emails, Excel spreadsheets, and proofreading reports on which piece of shit

killed some *other* piece of shit in a country fuck-knows-where. The only accent I hear these days is from my falafel guy down the street.”

“What, and that’s not sexy enough for you?”

He chuckles.

Inside the apartment, I see the front door open as Callie walks in. She’s in a cute skirt and a cardigan with medium heels and her hair pulled back, giving her almost this sort of sexy-cute librarian look.

It’s something I’ve started noticing about her recently. She’s dressing more “adult”. Not that I give a shit what she wears, and I personally think she looks *fantastic* in her usual go-to of cutoff shorts and an old rock t-shirt. But there’s a classy elegance that radiates off her now that she’s started dressing more like someone in their twenties than someone in their teens.

I’ve already told her about Jeremy coming over, obviously, since that’s what a considerate husband does. So when she spots us outside, she gives us a wave and flashes a big smile as she walks over and slides open the glass door.

“Hi!” she beams at Jeremy.

There’s no one to put on an act for here. We don’t need to “sell” anything.

But still, she walks right over to me, cups my jaw, and leans down to kiss me softly.

Jeremy whistles.

“Well, shit. And who might you be?”

She blushes, rolling her eyes. “The wife. You?”

He chuckles. “The obnoxious old army buddy crashing your dinner date night.”

He starts to stand, but Callie stops him as she notices his cane.

“Please don’t get up.” She walks over and shakes his hand. “And you’re not crashing anything.” She turns to eye the pizza sitting on the table between us hungrily. “I’m going to grab a beer. You guys need another round?”

“Wouldn’t say no to that,” Jeremy grins.

Callie slips back inside, turning to wink at me before waltzing over to the kitchen.

Jeremy sighs, shaking his head as he grins at me. “Well, the apartment might not be yours. But that?” He whistles. “That *clearly* is.” He smiles, raising a brow. “Congrats, brother. I’m happy for you.”

“Thank you. It’s...” I tip my head back and forth. “It’s not quite what you think—”

“Massimo Carveli...the Drakos family blood-marker...” He snorts. “C’mon, dipshit. Like I don’t know the backstory here. I’m a fucking professional spy, remember?”

“Does the CIA know you’re using agency resources to pry into the personal life of an old friend?”

“Yeah, I think they’d be more concerned about my ex-girlfriends that I stalk.”

I chuckle as he grins. Callie steps back out with three beers as Jeremy winces and creaks to his feet with help from his cane.

“You got a bathroom I could use?”

“Yeah, through the bedroom. Handicap stall is at the end.”

“Asshat,” he grins at me as he heads inside.

Callie comes over to sit on my knee.

“He seems nice. How long did you guys serve together?”

I shake my head. “Pretty much the whole time I was a Ranger. Jeremy was like a big brother to me when I was a newbie. We were in the same unit together along with three other good friends.”

“Was Loraine’s husband part of—”

“Callie.”

She bites her lip, frowning. “Sorry, I—”

“Don’t be,” I murmur quietly, leaning in to kiss her softly. “I just don’t want to talk about it, that’s all.”

She nods. “Okay. If you ever change your mind, though...” she shrugs.

“I won’t.”

Her lips twist, but she nods and leans in to kiss my cheek just as Jeremy walks back out.

“Well, Wife,” he sighs, settling back into his chair. “Wanna hear about the time this motherfucker got dysentery in Somalia?”

CALLIE

I SHIFT UNCOMFORTABLY in the booth at the back of the diner in Brooklyn. I'm wearing a baseball hat and big sunglasses, and I glance around the place, anxiously looking to see if anyone is watching me.

Which is ridiculous. I mean, it's not like I'm doing anything wrong.

So why does it feel like I am?

Why does it feel like I'm committing a crime, or cheating on Castle? Maybe it's because I *am* meeting another man here. And it does involve breaking Castle's trust.

"Mrs. Kildare?"

I start, almost spilling my coffee as I yank my gaze up to the portly older man with a bushy gray mustache standing over me. He slides into the booth across from me.

"Thanks for meeting me."

Bill Grenshaw is the private investigator Elsa referred me to about six weeks ago. I'd actually almost forgotten I'd even hired him until yesterday, when he reached out to ask if I was available to meet up today to go over what he'd discovered.

...About Castle.

Bill smiles, glancing around the room. “I can appreciate the discretion, Mrs. Kildare—”

“Just Callie is fine.”

He nods. “Callie, of course. But I think you might actually be calling *more* attention to yourself wearing sunglasses indoors.”

Shit.

I pull them off, flushing as my lips twist together.

“So...” Bill clears his throat and pulls a file folder out of a backpack. He sets it on the table, frowning as he keeps a hand on top of it.

“Look, to be honest, you’re paying for this either way. But I *always* like to double check with people before they open Pandora’s box. Especially when it’s a spouse.”

I nod.

“Like, maybe you were mad at the time, but now everything’s fine. The toothpaste doesn’t go back in the tube, know what I’m saying? So... You sure?”

I chew on my lip and raise my eyes to his. “I’m sure.”

“Okay.” He nods as he opens the folder.

“Christopher Michael James.” He smirks. “I mean how fuckin’ Irish Catholic can you get, right?”

When I don’t return the smile, his immediately drops and he clears his throat again. “Right, well... Also known as Castle, thirty-three years old, born in New York City. Parents Robert and Cynthia. One sibling, a sister, Kelly. The word on the street is that he’s...”

He glances up at me and smiles weakly.

“Well, being that I know your maiden name, miss, can I assume you already know what he does for a living?”

I just nod mutely.

“Okay, moving on... He’s got five years in the Army as a Ranger. A couple of tours on record, more than a few redacted —”

“Redacted?” I frown.

“Usually means black ops stuff.”

Holy shit.

“Looks like he was in an elite unit, so that makes sense. Joined at seventeen, after...” Bill frowns as he glances up at me.

“Look, I’m just gonna ask again. Are you *sure* you want to go down this rabbit hole?”

He’s looking at my ring when he says it.

“Just tell me,” I blurt.

“You’re the boss,” he mutters. “Okay... Your husband enlisted because it was that or prison.”

My heart drops.

“Prison for what?”

“Homicide.”

Something cold settles over me. I mean, I know Castle’s killed. Of *course* he has, and I know my brothers have too. But at *seventeen*?

“It gets worse, I’m afraid,” Bill sighs. “The victim was his own father.”

My throat closes around the bile rising up in it as I stare at the horrible file in Bill’s hands.

“*W-why?*” I croak.

He shrugs. “Unclear. He never made an official statement when he was booked. Looks like his mother was a raging drunk, though, and would only testify *against* your husband.”

Jesus fucking Christ.

“She actually pushed for jail time.”

My heart breaks a little, and I wince.

“You go back further than that, well, it’s not a very pretty picture. It doesn’t look like there was a great home life. Twelve domestic disturbance calls in about five years. Seems like Robert worked muscle for Declan Kildare, meanwhile Cynthia had three DUIs and lost her license.” He makes a face. “The sister, Kelly, died young, I’m afraid.”

“What happened?” I breathe in a croaked voice.

“The report I read said she fell off the roof of an apartment building.”

A stabbing feeling rips into my chest. If my heart was breaking a little before for the man I’m married to, it’s shattering now. I mean holy *fuck*. With that sort of history, it’s astonishing he’s capable of smiling at all.

“Anyway,” Bill shrugs, closing the folder and passing it my way, “this is all yours. Feel free to give me a call if you need anything else.”

I nod quietly, staring at the folder as I take the envelope of cash out of my bag and discreetly pass it to him. When he’s gone, I quietly thumb through Castle’s broken, scorched past, feeling my heart sink and go cold.

I feel like a complete piece of shit for doing this—for prying into his secrets and his past, knowing full well there’s a reason

he doesn't talk about it. Because obviously, he wants to forget it, and leave it buried where it lies. I can see why, now.

But still, I want to know. I *have* to know.

My eyes land on an address, the one that appears on all the domestic disturbance reports, as well as the heartbreaking one about Castle's sister's death.

I stand, drop some money on the table for my coffee, pick up the file folder, and walk out the door, still numb.

“HERE—YOU MIGHT WANT THIS, SWEETHEART.”

Mrs. Jacoby hands me a paper face mask as she fishes a large ring of keys from her pocket. We're standing in front of the door to the basement unit of the Alphabet City apartment building she owns, manages, and lives in.

“For?” I ask in a worried tone.

The older woman shrugs. “Dust, mostly. I mean no one's been in here for probably ten years, and I'm no cleaning lady.”

She jangles the keyring in her hand, sorting through them one by one.

“Nobody's wanted to rent it?”

She snorts out a laugh. “Oh, everyone and their damn *mother* wants to rent this place. The city kicked out all the punks and junkies in the neighborhood, and suddenly it's hip to live in the Lower East Side.” She shrugs. “But the lease was paid in full for forty damn years, so there you go.[BP1] ”

I frown. “I'm sorry, it was paid in advance for *forty years*?”

“Yep. Up front, in cash, and taking into account rent increases and inflation,” she smirks, looking pretty pleased with herself. “Bought me a nice Caribbean cruise and a sweet little Corvette, before those goddamn punks stripped it for parts one night. Lowlife junkies,” she mutters darkly. “Ah, here we go.”

She slips a key into the lock and opens the door to the home Castle grew up in.

She was right. It’s not like the place stinks or anything. But when she opens the door, you can instantly tell nobody’s lived here for a decade. Dust and the smell of stale air hit me, and I slip the mask on to cover my nose and mouth, stifling a cough.

“Was it the James family who paid up in full?”

Mrs. Jacoby shoots me a sidelong look. I pull the mask down just enough to give her my best disarming smile. “Any detail helps, you know?”

Okay, confession time. I’m here under false pretenses. I’ve told Delores Jacoby that I’m a lawyer working to find the living relations of a billionaire who recently passed, trying to make sure the inheritance ends up with the right people, blah, blah, blah. I also greased her palm with two hundred bucks from a “discretionary fund” that I totally made up, telling her there was plenty more of it for anyone who could help with the investigation.

Delores frowns. “You’re pretty young to be a lawyer, aren’t you?”

I sigh. “Can I be honest with you?” I pull the mask down again and give her my best puppy dog face. “I’ve just been hired by the firm, and it’s my first big assignment for them, and I’m so nervous about living up to their expectations. You know how it

is. The legal world is *still* such an old boys' club." I shake my head sadly.

I'm playing so dirty it almost makes me sick. I'm grabbing onto the fact that Delores has a "smash the patriarchy" sticker on the front door of her unit, and is wearing a t-shirt with the feminist flag and the words "rights are taken, not asked for", and leveraging them both like there's no tomorrow.

Sure enough, her mouth purses as she shakes her head right back. "Ain't that the truth. Well, honey, you take all the time you need. Would you mind locking up and bringing the keys back up when you're done?"

Game, set and match to me. "Absolutely," I gush. "And thank you *so much*."

She nods and turns to leave.

"Mrs. Jacoby?" I smile weakly when she turns back. "*Was it* the James family who paid you in full for forty years of rent? Can I ask that?"

She looks worried for a second. Then she clears her throat.

"No, it wasn't. It was Mr. James' employer," she says tersely. "Declan Kildare."

I blink rapidly at her departing figure.

What?

When she's gone and I'm alone, I step into Castle's past. The mask does come in handy, because the place is covered in dust that hangs in the still air. The apartment itself may have been paid in full, but it's clear by the non-functioning lights that the utility bills weren't.

There's some light slanting in through a few high windows in the front room, though. And as I walk down the hallway

toward the back of the tiny apartment, there are two more barred windows in a kitchen and dining area that look out over a tiny, grubby backyard filled with trash and gravel. No grass.

Slowly, I look around the place. It's all terribly depressing.

He grew up here.

A shiver runs over me unbidden.

He killed his father here, too. At least, according to the report that Bill managed to get his hands on. It seems Castle wasn't charged, though. And right after that, he joined the army at seventeen, and basically disappeared for the next six years. Then his mother died, which seems to have brought him back to New York, with an honorable discharge from the army.

That's all I know. But I want to know more. I *need* to know more about this man.

My heart sinks more and more as I wander around the apartment. It's not just the dust, it's the fact that everything in here seems to have just been *abandoned*. Like his mother died, but even though Castle came back for the funeral and to say goodbye, he didn't even set foot in here, let alone come to clean it out or look for any childhood mementos.

She testified against him. Asked for jail time.

My face turns to steel as my heart twists.

No *shit*, he didn't. I mean my dad was an asshole, but I can't even imagine Castle's home life in a place like this, with parents like his. There's this overwhelming feeling of sadness hanging over this whole apartment.

The place has only two bedrooms. The one that I'm in has two small beds, with posters of football players and sports cars on

the wall on one side, and ones of pink unicorns and childish drawings of rainbows and birds on the other wall.

My heart twists again as my hand flies to my mouth.

This was Castle and his sister's room.

Part of me wants to go over and touch the bed where he once slept. But it's too sad in here to stay, and the sense of tragedy poisons the air.

I move on to the other bedroom, which was clearly their parents'. My eyes land on a framed photograph, and when I walk over to it, I wince as I realize something: it's a small apartment, and I've just walked through the whole thing without seeing *one picture* of any of the people who once lived here as a family.

Except this one.

In it, a sour-looking woman with dark red hair stands next to a gruff, dark-haired man with the short, stocky build, tattoos on his arms, and cauliflower ears that clearly mark him as a street thug for the Irish Mafia.

In front of them are two kids—a little girl who looks maybe three with darkish red hair who must be Kelly, and a tall, strapping young teenager with a shock of blonde hair and piercing blue eyes.

Castle.

I smile fondly at the young man, but then my brows knit as I stare at the family photo.

He looks nothing like them.

Robert is maybe an inch taller than Castle in the picture, and Castle can't be more than maybe thirteen or fourteen. Kelly

has her mother's hair and facial features, and the same dark eyes as both of her parents.

And then there's Castle: tall, lanky, blonde, and blue-eyed.

My shoulders prickle. This is weird.

I turn away, picking my way through the room, looking for *anything* that might shed some more light on the gaps of his life he clearly doesn't want to talk about. And yes, I feel *terrible* for doing this, and it *absolutely* feels like I'm breaking his trust...because, well, I am.

But there's *no fucking way* I'm going to spend the next ten months living with him and not knowing about these holes in his past. I just can't.

That said, there's nothing here. No trophies or awards from school activities. No family albums. No report cards, college acceptance letters, *nothing*.

Only ghosts and the tragedies of the past.

I do one more pass through the tiny apartment before the overwhelming sadness of the place is too much, and I step out, feeling more than a little defeated.

Upstairs, I knock on Delores' door to return the keys.

"Find anything useful, hon?"

I smile as much as I can after that dark tour of Castle's bleak childhood.

"Unfortunately, not much. But thank you so much for your help anyway—"

"Oh!" She brightens, looking excited. "I almost forgot. Hang on."

She turns away from the door and bustles off through her living room and around the corner. A minute later, she comes back struggling with a big cardboard box.

“Oh! Let me get that for you!”

I rush to take the heavy thing from her arms as she exhales with a puff.

“Thank you, hon.” She clears her throat. “This junk has been taking up space in my back closet for years. If it was anyone else, I’d have thrown this crap away as it came. But, being who it was who paid for the apartment...”

I frown, looking at the closed-up moving box.

“What is this?”

“Old mail. It pretty much stopped a year or two after Cynthia died. But I still get the odd piece of junk. Again, it’d toss it, but...” She shrugs. “Well, I don’t know if you know, but the Kildare name still carries a little bit of *weight* around this neighborhood.” She waggles a brow. “Irish Mafia, you know,” she mutters conspiratorially in a stage whisper.

I stare at the box. “Do you mind if I...”

“Nope, go right ahead. Here, come on in and have a seat. I’ll just be in the kitchen fixing some dinner.”

I thank her again as I step into her apartment and take a seat on her sofa. I leaf through the box, but whatever last hope I was clinging to fades when I realize it’s basically just junk mail—coupon books, catalogs, and the like.

I’m about to give up and thank Delores once more, when I get to the very bottom, where I find four envelopes dated from about eleven years ago. One has no return addresses at all—delivery or sender. The other three make my heart go still.

They're from Declan Kildare, addressed to Cynthia James.

Without giving it a second thought, I stuff them into my bag, close up the box, and stand. In the kitchen, I thank Delores profusely again, telling her she can ditch the contents of the box. Then I'm out the door and hailing a taxi.

In the back seat, heading back uptown, my hands shake as I yank the envelopes out of my purse and open the first one. My pulse skips when all I find inside is a check made out to Cynthia, from Declan, in the amount of five thousand dollars.

In the memo field, it just says "August."

I swallow as I open the second envelope. Again, all I find is another check from Declan to Cynthia for the same amount, this one with "September" in the memo field. The next envelope repeats the pattern: same five grand, with "October" for the memo.

I frown. What the fuck are these for? And why was Neve and Eilish's father paying for Castle's parents' apartment in the first place?

I slowly open the fourth envelope, feeling my heart thud against my chest as I pull out a handwritten letter addressed to no one.

Consider this your one and only warning. Do not ever come to my home again. Do not contact me. Do not write, or call. I am sorry for your loss, but it is not my problem.

He is not my son anymore, he's yours, and I know you've been paid well for that, so don't even try to come crying poverty to me. If he gets himself killed over there in the army, I'm sure you can go whine to Declan for more money.

Again, this is your only warning. If you ever come near me again, I'll have you killed.

-S. T.

My hands shake as I reread the letter twice more. My heart begins to thump louder, my pulse jangling in my ears as the words blur and the pieces of the horrible puzzle begin to fall into place.

A few months ago, as part of a deal Eilish and Gavan made with the Bratva kingpin Drazen Krylov, Gavan received a hard drive full of information collected on rivals and other Bratva families. Included in that information was proof positive that Declan Kildare had been having a long-time affair with Svetlana Tsarenko, Gavan's adoptive father's sister.

Also that there was a child that came from that affair.

Declan was sending monthly checks to the family of one of his regular street-level enforcers...whose apartment he was also paying for... A family with two short parents with dark and red hair and dark eyes, with a daughter who was the spitting image of them.

...And a son who looked *nothing* like them.

A son with Declan Kildare's bright blue eyes and broad shoulders, and Svetlana Tsarenko's blonde hair and height.

My head swims and my heart climbs into my throat as the letter drops to my feet in the back of the taxi.

"I always like to double check with people before they open Pandora's box. The toothpaste doesn't go back in the tube, know what I'm saying?"

My face goes white as my throat closes off.

Oh my fucking God.

CALLIE

I'M SITTING in the dark when the door to the apartment opens with a soft click.

“What, are you having a seance or something?”

My face is lined and haggard as I slowly raise my eyes from the glass of vodka in my hand. Castle's smirk instantly drops, his brow furrowing as he catches my eye.

“What's going on?”

I swallow thickly. “I...”

I don't know how to tell you.

I don't know how to tell him his life and everything he knows about it is a lie.

I don't how to look at a man I'm completely and hopelessly head over heels in love with and turn his whole world upside down.

“Callie.”

I flinch, my breath shuddering as I draw it in. My hands shake as I bring the glass to my lips and take a deep sip.

“I...”

He frowns, crossing the apartment until he's right in front of me, dropping to his knee. He snatches the glass from my shaking hands, which only spikes my anxiety and makes me flinch again.

"*Talk to me, baby girl,*" he growls quietly, taking my hands in his and squeezing. "Tell me what—"

"I went to your house today."

His brows furrow. "You—"

"The apartment in Alphabet City, Castle," I whisper, a single tear trickling down my cheek as I see darkness start to pool in his eyes. His jaw clenches, and his nostrils flare as his hands tighten hard on mine.

"You fucking *what?*"

"I..." Another tear slides down my face. "I had to know..."

My eyes blur with tears as my gaze drops past him, to the coffee table. He frowns, turning, going suddenly rigid when his eyes land on the open file folder on it.

His hands drop mine as if they've burned him. And when he stands abruptly, my heart begins to shatter.

"Castle, *please*—"

"Stop talking."

I flinch at the utter coldness in his voice as he reaches for the folder. He walks slowly away from me toward the windows, his eyes flickering dangerously in the lights of the city as they scan the pages.

"*Please,*" I choke, crying. "Please, talk to me—"

"You had *no. Fucking. Right,*" he snarls, suddenly whirling on me with so much anger and hurt in his eyes that it breaks my

heart.

“I’m sorry!” I blurt. “I’m so fucking sor—”

“I don’t want your fucking sympathy or a fucking apology!!”

He roars the words, making me choke as I scramble back on the couch with tears running down my face. His lips pull back in a snarl as he storms toward me, brandishing the file like a weapon.

“Well now you *do* fucking know, Callie!” he bellows, ripping another sob from my throat as he looms over me with fury in his eyes. “Now you *finally* fucking get it! I’m not a fucking hero, *baby girl*,” he hisses. “I’m a monster! I killed my own father—”

“Castle—”

“And then I got three men killed in Kabul!”

“*No*, Castle!” I’m openly sobbing now, shaking everywhere as my breath hitches on my words. “No, it was war! That’s different! You didn’t get anyone—”

“It was bad intel that I acted on without checking. I was reckless, and cocky—”

“Please, I need to tell—”

“And I wanted to die too!”

Whatever warmth was left in the room vanishes, turning it frosty and numb. Castle laughs bleakly, turning away from me.

“You want to know why I was a black ops Ranger? *Constantly* behind enemy lines, *constantly* putting myself in shitty, dangerous situations, *constantly* a hair’s breadth away from death?! He roars, whirling on me. “*You want to know, Callie?!*”

I shake my head, tears flowing hot down my cheeks.

“Because I wanted to fucking *die*,” he snaps coldly. “*Literally*. It wasn’t any adrenaline addiction, or doing it for God and country, or any of that bullshit. I wanted to eat a fucking bullet, Callie,” he hisses. “And I was *so fucking close!* I was right there! Face to fucking face with Death when we breached that fucking house!”

His shoulders are shaking. His eyes look manic and wild—red-rimmed and brimming with moisture as rage explodes across his face.

“Only those assholes went in first!” He chokes as he bellows out the words. “They went in first, and they *stole that fucking death from me!*”

His voice breaks, his whole frame crumbling as he whirls to look at me with so much haggard, venomous darkness that it strikes sheer terror into my very core.

“So, whatever the *fuck* you want to tell me, Callie,” he snarls. “*Save it!* I don’t want your fucking sympathy. I don’t want your empathy. And I sure as *fuck* don’t want you digging up the graves of shit I buried years ago!!!”

I sob as I stagger to my feet. “*Castle—*”

His voice suddenly goes dangerously quiet. “Stay the fuck away from me.”

It feels like a knife sliding into my heart. The hatred on his face and the brutal coldness in his tone almost bring me to my knees. I choke, my throat opening and closing as my heart wrenches in my chest, watching helpless and heartbroken as he whirls and storms out of the apartment.

Then I do fall to my knees and onto my side in a fetal position on the floor, curled up, sobbing and sobbing, until all I know is

pain.

At some point, maybe an hour or two later, I drag myself to bed. I try calling him over and over again, but it goes straight to voicemail every time. He reads my texts but doesn't reply.

I jerk awake hours later to the sound of the apartment door opening and closing. I sit up in the darkness of the bedroom, waiting for him to come in, even if it's to yell at me again.

But he doesn't come.

After a while, I creep to the bedroom door and open it. I look out, but all I see is him lying on the couch with his eyes closed and a sweatshirt thrown over his torso for a blanket.

What the fuck have I done?

I break again, sinking to the floor right there and crying against the door between us until darkness overtakes me.

CASTLE

IN MY DREAMS, I'm back at war.

It's obviously not the first time my sleep has been invaded by the horrors of my past. But tonight, it's with a vengeance.

Tonight, I watch in slow motion, over and over again, as the device strapped to the bottom of that rickety, shitty little kitchen table in the rundown shack on the outskirts of Kabul turns to liquid fire. I watch it expand, frame by frame, blooming like something utterly beautiful before it suddenly explodes and fills the room with fire and death.

I feel the heat and force of it punch through the air, vaporizing the three men I've called brothers for the last five years before it slams into me and knocks me backward out into the cool desert night. In a daze, unable to breathe, I watch that little house on the outskirts of hell burst into a million pieces before the darkness overtakes me.

Then all I hear is screaming.

And more screaming.

I sit bolt upright on the couch, my chest heaving and slick with sweat as the screams tear the sleep from my eyes.

I'm not dreaming. The screams are *Callie's*.

Just as I'm about to bolt from the couch, my eyes suddenly focus, and my heart clenches. Right outside the glass door, standing on the patio, is a woman dressed all in black, with a hoodie pulled up over her head, shadowing her face.

She's looking *right at me*.

Then I hear Callie scream again, and a roar.

And I smell smoke.

I don't have time for ghosts right now.

I whirl, ripping my eyes away from the spooky figure standing outside as I hurdle the couch and bolt across the apartment. I crash into the bedroom and instantly choke as acrid black smoke smelling like sulfur fills my lungs and the throbbing heat of flames slam into me.

The entire wall by the bathroom and closet doors is on fire, half blown out. Liquid flame ripples up to the ceiling and snakes across it, belching smoke and ash across the room.

Callie's screaming, huddled into the far corner of the room with abject terror and shock on her face. I rush to her, grabbing her face as my eyes stab into hers. But she looks right through me, shock turning her eyes blank and horrified.

We need to get the fuck out of here. *Now*.

"Callie!" I roar in her face, momentarily snapping her out of it as she focuses on me with pure fear in her eyes. "We're getting out of here!"

I go to grab her into my arms, but she jerks away.

"Wait!"

"Callie—"

She bolts across the room and grabs her laptop bag before rushing back to me.

“Are you fucking *serious*?!”

“I can’t leave it—!”

“Let’s go!”

Just as I’m yanking her into my arms, something slams against the window next to me with a dull *thwap*. My head jerks around, and I frown as my brain tries to make sense of what looks like a white splatter of paint against the glass.

The *thwap* comes again, and another splatter explodes across the outside of the reinforced glass.

Oh fuck.

Not splatters. *Smashes*. The white isn’t paint, it’s fucking *spider cracks* of the bullet-proof glass shattering.

This isn’t a random fire.

We’re under attack.

Callie screams as I scoop her and the goddamn laptop bag into my arms and turn to bolt for the door *just* as a third shot comes smashing into the window, shattering it. The shots come faster then, exploding through the ruined window and reducing the bed and the sheetrock behind it to dust and feathers as I charge out of the room with her clinging to me.

I pause only long enough to grab my gun from the cupboard above the kitchen sink as more rifle shots from what I’m sure has to be a fifty-cal come slamming into the wall of windows in the living room. Then I’m charging out the door, roaring for help.

Patrick and two other men come barreling out of the stairwell, faces red from running and their guns drawn.

“Shooter on the far roof!” I bellow at him. “And there’s a fire in the bedroom. Smells like an incendiary grenade.”

Patrick nods firmly. “I’ll have them clear the garage entrance downstairs. Get outta here!”

I take the stairs two at a time all the way down to garage with Callie in my arms. She’s still in shock, her eyes wide and her face white as I buckle her into the passenger seat of the Ranger Rover. When I go to pull away, she screams and clings to me in terror.

I cup her face tightly, my eyes locking with hers.

“I’m not going anywhere!” I assure her. “Not without you.”

It’s not until I’m behind the wheel that I realize I’m bleeding from the arm—a graze shot, maybe, or possibly glass from the exploding bedroom window.

But I don’t have time to dwell on it. And it’s not going to kill me.

Not right now, anyway.

I gun the Range Rover engine before peeling out. Patrick’s already called down, and the men I’ve had guarding the ground floor of Konstantin’s building are already in defensive positions near the garage exit, guns out and at the ready.

I go roaring past them and out into the streets of Manhattan, my pulse thudding in my ears as I yank on the wheel and floor it. We’ve only gone a block before a black SUV peels out from the curb right behind us and lurches right up onto my back bumper.

Fuck.

I jerk the wheel side to side, making Callie scream as I barely miss a passing taxi and roar down a side street. The SUV smashes through a city trash can as it follows us, and when I glance back and see a gloved hand stick a gun out the driver's side window, I slam hard on the accelerator.

“HEAD! DOWN!” I roar at Callie, just as the back window of the Range Rover explodes in a hail of tempered glass. She screams again, yanking her seatbelt off and sliding to the floor of the car in a huddled ball, the laptop bag over her head.

Good girl.

I yank the wheel left and right, cutting down avenues and narrowly avoiding hitting anyone. I head east, then double back toward the west side before roaring down Broadway at insane speeds. Then I'm cutting up Chambers Street and heading to the Brooklyn Bridge. When I glance back, I let out a silent breath of relief when I don't see the SUV anymore.

We hit the bridge at top speed, dodging and weaving through traffic. I wince at the pain lancing through my arm, glancing down at the blood seeping down my arm from the rip in my t-shirt before I yank out my phone and call Ares.

“Is she safe?!” he roars the second he answers. “I just heard —”

“*She's fine,*” I hiss back. “We're out, and we're on the move. Some motherfucker was waiting for us and just chased us through fucking midtown.”

“Where are you now?!”

“Headed east...” My eyes drag over to Callie, who's still curled up in a ball on the floor of the passenger side. “*Way* east, actually.”

“What?! Castle—”

“I have to get her out of this fucking city, Ares,” I hiss.
“Whoever that was just got to us in a goddamn *fortress* of an apartment. If Konstantin’s fucking over-engineered Bratva stronghold of a place isn’t safe—”

“Then nowhere is,” he finishes. “I agree.”

“I’m going to text you an address. Memorize it, delete the text, and tell *no one*, okay? That’s where we’ll be. I’m going to ditch our phones, too. I’ll let you know when I’ve got a burner.”

“Castle—”

“Nothing is going to happen to her, Ares,” I growl quietly, turning to lock my eyes with hers, my heart clenching in my chest. “*Nothing*. I can promise you that on my fucking life.”

CALLIE

IT'S the gentle sound of waves lapping against a shore that wakes me.

Consciousness filters in as my eyes flutter beneath closed lids, feeling the soft warmth of sunlight streaming across my face. Slowly, I open my eyes as sleep fades away.

I have no idea where I am. But the loft-like room is clean and bright, and the bed I'm lying in is beyond cozy, especially with the quilt pulled up over me. I let my gaze play over the white shiplap walls, stopping for a second on a large framed black and white photo on the wall of a huge sailboat.

Next to it, there's a dresser made of blonde wood and a dormer-style window with gauzy white curtains. Beyond that, I can see the ocean lazily splashing against a rocky, sandy coast.

It's all beautiful, but...

Where the heck am I?

I remember the utter chaos and terror of waking up to a fire consuming the wall of the bedroom. I remember the gunshots and my own screaming, then roaring over the Brooklyn Bridge in the Range Rover, then heading east into Long Island. I can recall climbing back into the car seat and buckling up, and

Castle's hand holding mine tightly as we drove through the night.

Then I fell asleep.

I sit up, realizing I'm still in the sleep shorts and tank top I wore to bed last night. I hug my knees to my chest, looking around the small, quaint bedroom again before the smell of coffee invades my senses.

Wrapped in the quilt, I step out of the bedroom and walk down a flight of stairs into a gorgeous if simple, whitewashed, and beach-themed house. The living room is sparsely furnished, as is the fairly modern kitchen. There's a bathroom, a guest room, and a library, almost all with the same white, Nantucket-style shiplap on the walls and various framed nautical-themed posters and photographs.

I find Castle sitting outside on a screened-in porch. He looks up when I step out, still wrapped in the quilt, holding a mug of coffee. I frown in concern when I see the bandage under the sleeve of his t-shirt, around his bicep. But then my eyes drop to what he's been looking at, and my stomach knots as it all rushes back to me.

It's everything I had in the laptop bag, which is why I *had* to grab it before we ran. Not just all the documents on him and his past, but also the checks from Declan and the letter from "S. T.". It might've been unaddressed, but it's pretty clear who it's from.

Svetlana Tsarenko.

When I drag my eyes up to his, I wait to see the same fury I saw in them last night, before everything went to hell. But instead, he just holds my gaze without flinching, without a single trace of malice or anger.

“Fresh out of oat milk and sugar, sorry,” he smirks, nodding his chin at the mug in my hand.

I blush, grinning back as I bite my lip.

“I think I’ll survive.”

We don’t say anything for a few seconds, before I can’t take the silence anymore.

“I’m so fucking sorry,” I blurt. “I had no right to—”

“We’re in Montauk, in case you’re wondering,” he says quietly. He glances around the screened-in porch and then looks out at the ocean lapping gently at the rocky shore in the distance. “I bought this place years ago as an escape...” He smiles, shaking his head ruefully. “Then I ran out of time to escape.” He lifts a shoulder. “No one really knows about this place, and I bought it through a front. So, we’ll be good to hide out here until we can figure out our next move.”

I swallow and lick my lips as his gaze drifts back to me. He raises a hand and beckons with two fingers.

“Come here, baby girl.”

My cheeks heat as I cross to him, and when he pats his thigh for me to sit, I settle into his lap with my heart soaring.

“Castle—”

The word muffles as he cups my face, leans in, and kisses me softly.

“I had no right to get so angry at you,” he growls quietly.

I smile wryly. “You, uh...kind of did, I think. I had a PI dig into your privacy. I went to your *house*, like a fucking psycho —”

“Is that where you found these?”

His voice is calm, but there's still an edge to it. His jaw tightens, and I want to hold him close and never let go when I see the darkness and the pain in his eyes.

"Castle..."

"Just tell me, Callie," he murmurs.

I nod. "Yeah," I choke. "Yeah, that's where I found them."

He looks away, his eyes stabbing out into the ocean.

"*I'm sorry*," I whisper, wincing as I pull close and kiss his cheek. "I'm so sorry."

He swallows.

"So Robert wasn't my real father..."

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to even imagine what's going through his mind and his heart right now as I shake my head.

"*No*," I whisper. "I don't think so."

Castle nods slowly as the seconds tick by.

"Good," he finally growls. "*Good*." He looks up at the ceiling, exhaling slowly as his eyes close. "I'm glad." He shakes his head. "He was a bastard. And I don't mean he was just mean, or a jerk. I mean he was a fucking *monster*. Beat me, beat my mom—" He flinches. "Well, *not* my mom, I guess," he growls quietly. "Cynthia. She'd always forgive him, for all of it, and usually blame me instead. I didn't have any forgiveness for that man. But I could look past it. I could bury it. Then he started in on Kelly."

He looks away as my heart starts to break for him all over again.

"He beat her to death in the back yard, right in front of the woman who was supposed to be our mother."

I choke back the sob that wrenches through my chest, clinging to him tightly as I wrap my arms tight around him.

“I walked in right afterward, and I just...snapped. I was done. I had no reason left to hold myself back. So I killed him.” He draws in a slow breath. “I killed him right there in our kitchen with my bare fucking hands. Cynthia called the cops, and told them Kelly fell off the roof, and that I had killed my father while high on drugs.”

His eyes close as he draws in another slow breath.

“Dominic Farrell...you’ve probably met him before through Eilish or Neve...I’d done some work for him before. So when I got hauled down to the local precinct, some of the Kildare-loyal cops down there let him know, and he came down and pulled some strings. He couldn’t work miracles, though, so it basically came down to prison or the army. I chose army.”

He turns to smile sadly at me as I lean my forehead to his.

“Did you really want to die?”

“*Yeah*,” he says quietly, nodding. “Yeah. It’s what made me a good Ranger, actually,” he smirks. “I didn’t fear death. I went actively looking for it. But somehow, I kept on fucking living. I kept making it back from one mission after another, more than anyone has any right to. Because death clearly wanted to fuck with me some more,” he growls bitterly. “He wouldn’t fucking *let me die*—”

“*Castle*—”

“You have to know I’m not like that anymore, Callie,” he says firmly, eyes locked on mine. “On my last mission...I mean, I didn’t know it was the last one at the time, but it was...we were breaching this house on the edge of Kabul looking for a

local warlord shithead named Mahdi Ramin who was strapping bombs to fucking kids.”

My face goes white as I hold him tighter.

“My team and I... We were like brothers. Me, Jeremy who you’ve met now, Jason, Bryce—Lorraine’s husband and Teagan’s dad—and Matt, who actually *were* brothers.” His face twists with grief and he takes a shaky breath. “We had bad intel on the house, though. The motherfucker knew we were coming and rigged the place with an IED.”

He looks away, remembering.

“I was supposed to go in first. It was supposed to be *me* who took that blast. But Bryce was always the cowboy. He was also team leader that night and decided for whatever reason to put me in fourth. They all went in before me...”

I don’t have any words. All I can do is hold him and kiss his face as he holds me tight in his arms.

“After that, I was just...” he shakes his head. “Sort of done. I spent two months at a rehab hospital in Germany plotting all the ways I’d find that motherfucker Mahdi and fantasizing about what I’d do to him once I did. And then the idiot goes and drives drunk without a seatbelt, crashes through the windshield, and dies instantly on fucking impact,” he snaps bitterly before turning his gaze back to the ocean. “Lucky fucker. I’d have made it last *a year*.”

He exhales and then turns to smile wryly at me. “For some weird reason I came home to bury my mom. Closure or something, I guess. Then Cillian found me, tasked me with guarding his nieces, and that was it.”

He snorts, shaking his head and turning to look pointedly at the letter and the uncashed checks on the table.

“I should have guessed. My whole life, I never felt like they were a real mother and father to me,” he says quietly. “I never felt a drop of love, not a single act of selflessness. Nothing.” He laughs coldly. “Seems like I was right. I wasn’t their kid at all. I was just their meal ticket.”

“Castle...”

“Neve and Eilish...” his head slowly shakes side to side as he exhales and looks out over the ocean. “I’ve been thinking of them as my little sisters for ten years.”

A sad smile twists his lips, and he laughs quietly to himself.

“And go figure, they damn well were this whole fucking time.” He exhales slowly, bringing a hand up and shoving his fingers through his hair. “I mean holy *fuck*...” His eyes drop to the letter and the checks again. “Declan was such a cold prick to me, when Cillian forced him to take me on as bodyguard for the girls. I always figured it was because I was a physical reminder, living in his damn house, that Cillian was at the top of the food chain instead of him. But now...” He exhales again. “Fuck. I wonder if he knew who I was.”

When his eyes, so full of sadness and confusion and pain, find mine, I cup his face as I shake mine slowly.

“I don’t know,” I whisper.

He laughs bitterly. “I don’t know which is worse, the man who pretended to be my father and fucking sucked at it, or the man who threw me away and then treated me like the fucking help when I was forced back on him.” His eyes narrow. “And that psycho *Svetlana*? With everything that she did?” His face twists in rage and pain. “*That’s* my fucking blood? *That* is what I’ve got flowing in my goddamn veins?!”

“We’re not our parents.” I grab his face, forcing his eyes to meet mine. “We’re *not*. Trust me on this. You are who you are, not who they were. My father sold me to a monster in exchange for a fucking *drug smuggling route*. And that is *not* who I am,” I hiss fiercely. “That’s *never* who I’d be. Believe me, you’re not Declan, or Svetlana. You’re *you*.”

He smiles wryly at me before his eyes slip past me to the ocean.

“I felt so lost,” he growls quietly. “I mean I had the Rangers, and mission after mission as a reason to get out of bed in the morning. And then I had the most important mission: the one where I was supposed to guard those two little girls. But they grew up, and now each of them has found a new protector to take over that job. I just felt...so lost.”

He turns to level his eyes at me.

“And then I found you.”

I press my forehead to his, and then I start to cry. For the little boy who was thrown away. For the young man avenging the death of an innocent little girl, and being forced to go to war to pay for his sins. For the man who wanted to die and kept looking for death, only for it to take his brothers instead.

For the man who then found his way to me, and wrapped his hands around my heart.

“*What can I do?*” I whisper.

“You can let me love you.”

The happiest sob in the world wrenches from my throat as I wrap my arms tight around him and start to laugh through my tears as my mouth sears to his.

“*I can do that.*”

CASTLE

“DID YOU KNOW?”

My words finally break the long silence that’s settled over the phone. I’ve just told Cillian everything that Callie’s PI found out about me, and who my real parents were. I can hear him exhale slowly.

“*Cillian...*”

“No,” he finally growls quietly.

My jaw grinds. “I swear to fucking God—”

“Did I know my brother was a philandering piece of shit who cheated on Erin with anything that had a pulse? Yeah,” he hisses. “*That* I knew. And yes, there were times I wondered if one day some kid from one of those affairs would come wandering back looking for—”

“Looking for what?! The keys to the fucking kingdom?” I snap coldly. “Because I *never wanted them*, Cillian! And I didn’t come ‘wandering fucking back’, you goddamn *brought me* into this family!”

“*Breathe, Castle,*” he murmurs darkly. “If you’re wondering if I placed you in that house with Neve and Eilish to play fucking mind games with Declan, the answer is unequivocally

no. I had no idea whose son you were. I just knew you were a man not so different than me. I knew you were loyal, and honorable. And yeah, I knew about Kelly, and what happened there. But all that did was let me know without question that you were the perfect person to protect Neve and Eilish. Not because I knew they *were* you sisters—”

“But because you knew I’d see Kelly in them,” I say quietly. “Because you knew that pain would drive me to *always* put myself between them and danger.”

“Exactly.”

He says it without apology. And that’s fine. Because I get it. And he’s right.

“I knew that anyone with your kind of background could carry a gun, check corners, and look for threats, Castle,” he growls. “But I didn’t want Rambo for my nieces’ bodyguard. I wanted something more than a walking weapon. Someone with empathy and strength. With intelligence and honor, not just a fast trigger finger. I wanted someone to be *their friend*, not just their guard.”

I exhale slowly as I lower myself to sit on the rock I’ve been standing on. “I just don’t know how the fuck to tell them.”

Cillian sighs. “I wish I had an answer for you on that, I really do. But what I can tell you is, I think you know them both well enough to figure it out.”

I smile wryly. “Yeah, well, I’m thinking the way to tell them is just fucking tell them.”

He chuckles. “They’re both pretty fluent in bluntness, aren’t they?”

I smile. “Fucking native speakers.”

“You don’t have to tell them right now, you know. Take your time. I know you’ve jokingly called them sister for years, and they’ve jokingly called you brother. When it’s real, it might suddenly feel different.”

Yeah. That’s exactly what I’m afraid of.

What I have with Neve and Eilish is the best personal relationship I’ve ever had. They’re my best friends, my little sisters, and my partners in crime, all rolled into one.

And I don’t want a single thing to change with that. I don’t want the way they talk to me, or see me, or think of me in the grand scheme of their lives to change one iota. But when I tell them that I *really am* their half-brother?

It can’t *not* change things.

“You’re both good, though?” Cillian says, changing the subject.

I nod as I look out over the ocean, sitting on the rocky shore as I talk to Cillian on my new burner phone. Since Callie and I got here two days ago, Cillian’s been acting as *my* number two, running things back in New York.

Under different circumstances, this would be hilarious to me.

I’m not ready to laugh about it yet.

“Yeah, we’re good.”

There’s a long pause before he speaks again.

“*Callie* is good?”

There’s no missing the amusement in his tone.

“Something you wanna ask me, Cil?” I growl.

He chuckles. “I don’t make it a habit to pry into people’s personal lives.”

“It *really* feels like you’re trying to say something without saying it.”

“And it *really* feels like you’re being rather defensive over a simple question, Castle.”

I grin, glancing back toward the house. Callie is sitting on the screen porch reading an old paperback copy of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. She looks up, as if sensing me looking at her, and smiles.

“You’re both grownups, Castle,” Cillian sighs. “And you’re capable of making your own decisions in life.”

“Except if those decisions impact an important relationship between two major crime families—”

“For fuck’s sake, Castle.” he growls, “If what you’ve told me is true, then you do realize that you’re *actually* the rightful heir to the Kildare throne...right?”

Fuck. Me.

I hadn’t actually thought of it like that.

“Bastard or not, you’re Declan Kildare’s eldest and only son.” He chuckles. “You’re the rightful king, Castle. And you also stopped Calliope from marrying that supreme piece of shit Luca. Exactly how would it mess *anything* up between our family and the Drakos family if you two were to have feelings for each other? I mean you’re already married, in case you’ve fucking forgotten.”

“Cool, so I should just walk right up to Hades and casually mention that I’ve fallen for his sis—”

My mouth snaps shut.

“That’s...ahh...not what I meant,” I mutter.

“Oh, I think it is.” Cillian chuckles quietly before he sighs. “I’m happy for you. I mean that. You deserve happiness, Castle. And Callie is...”

“Tempestuous? Tenacious? An agent of chaos?”

“Your words, my friend, not mine.”

I chuckle, glancing back at her.

“She quiets the roaring in my head, Cil.”

“And *that* is a feeling I can understand perfectly, believe me,” he mutters. “Because it’s how I feel about Una. That said?” I can practically hear him grinning. “When you *do* tell Hades, maybe make sure he’s not armed before you do.”

I shake my head, rolling my eyes. “I’ll be in touch soon, Cil.”

“I’ll keep you posted on what’s going on back here, *boss*,” he chuckles with a deep, dark laugh before he hangs up.

I slip my phone into the pocket of my jeans and head back up the shore to the house.

“Given that you don’t have a single streaming service or cable TV in this house, you seriously need a better DVD collection, you know.”

I grin, arching a brow at her. “Do I really, now?”

“Uh, *yeah*. And I don’t know which of your hoes left that copy of *Dirty Dancing*, but—”

“Okay, first of all,” I grunt. “That’s a classic. Show some respect.”

She frowns. But then slowly, her lips turn up at the corners.

“Hang on...”

“Yes?”

She grins. “That’s not some girl’s DVD, is it?”

“I’ve never brought a single person to this house before you.”

Her grin widens. “So, you’re saying that’s *your* copy of *Dirty Dancing*?”

“Which part of ‘it’s a classic’ did you gloss over?”

She snickers. “That DVD has seen some *use*, Castle.”

“Okay, a, Swayze was a fucking God, and b, Jennifer Grey was, and is, a babe.”

She giggles, standing and wrapping her arms around my chest.

“Just admit it. You love a good chick-flick.”

“*Dirty Dancing* is *not* a chick-flick.”

She snorts. “It most definitely is.”

“Which part?”

She shrugs. “I dunno. Like, the whole thing?”

My brow arches. “You’ve *seen* the movie before, right?”

Callie rolls her eyes. “I mean, I’ve seen that lift thing in *Crazy, Stupid, Love*, when Ryan Gosling takes Emma Stone and—”

She gasps as I grab her hand and yank her after me as I storm into the house.

“Where are we—”

“To give you an education.”

FOR THE NEXT WEEK, we fall into a haze of just...bliss, I suppose, for lack of a better word. No work. No drama. No one trying to kill us.

Nothing but her and me and the sound of the waves crashing against the shore.

We cook meals together. We stay up till all hours talking—well, not *just* talking. We sleep late. We fuck in the shower and on the beach. We go skinny dipping under the full moon, wrapped in each other's arms.

And for the first time in my entire life, I truly—and I do mean *truly*—know peace. And it's not just the location, or the forced break from work.

It's her.

But as we enter the second week out here, I can tell Callie's starting to pace the house like a caged animal. I've gone out exactly once, just to the grocery store. She doesn't say anything, but it's clear we're both going to go fucking nuts if we don't even leave the property.

It's risky. But then again, it *is* fall in Montauk, which means the summer tourist crowd is long gone. In my opinion, it's actually the best time of year to come out here, because it's pretty much deserted.

We're cutting up vegetables in the kitchen for dinner when I set my knife down and turn to her.

"If we were to go out and do something—"

"You mean *out* out?!" she shrieks, whirling on me with so much excitement on her face that I can't help but laugh.

"Hang on, I did just say *if*," I chuckle. "But if we *were*, what would you want to—"

"Cocktails and dancing."

I frown. "What?"

“Cocktails and dancing. That’s what I’d want to do.”

My brows knit. “There’s a movie theater—”

“What, and hurt Swayze’s feelings?”

I smirk. When I went to the grocery store, I expanded our DVD collection beyond *Dirty Dancing*. Except all that I bought, deliberately to tease her, was more Patrick Swayze movies.

She got a pass on calling *Red Dawn* “goofy” only because of how much she gushed over *Roadhouse* and *Point Break*.

...And also because she apologized by climbing into my lap and bouncing on my cock while we watched it a second time.

“We could go out to dinner.”

Callie just smirks, folding her arms over her chest and shaking her head.

“You asked what I’d want to do if we were to go out. It’s cocktails and dancing.”

I sigh. “There’s not exactly a classic cocktail scene out here, especially this time of year—”

“Are there *bars*?”

“It’s a town full of fisherman, baby girl, what do you think?”

“I think you’re taking me out, that’s what I think.”

I could, and probably *should*, say no. But the impish grin and excitement on her face is too much.

Also, I might be slightly incapable at this point of saying no to this girl. Which is exactly how, two hours later, we find ourselves at The Surf Dock, a dive of a locals’ spot perched on a pier by the harbor.

It's not exactly the classic Manhattan speakeasy or high energy nightclub Callie meant when she said cocktails and dancing. But they do serve alcohol, and there's a jukebox in the corner. I am not a dancer, like, at *all*. But that doesn't stop Callie from tugging on my arm after about half a drink.

"C'mon. Dance with me."

My brow furrows. "We should probably keep a fairly low profile."

As I said, my house out here isn't traceable to me, and nobody except Cillian and Ares even knows we're out here. On top of that, we're dressed inconspicuously, courtesy of the local Walmart—me in jeans, boots, a button-up plaid shirt and a Yankees hat, Callie in a knee-length skirt, flats, and a long-sleeved sweater.

The look on her face tells me she's not buying my "low profile" shit at all.

"Well don't be a sucky dancer and our profile will be just fine."

I roll my eyes, keeping myself planted on my barstool as I take a sip of the whiskey in my glass. Callie sighs.

"Well, I guess if you're too scared to dance in front of all these guys..."

I cast a sidelong glance at the collection of grizzled, local fisherman types nursing their beers at the bar before I turn to level a piercing look right at Callie. She shivers, her breath catching as I slide my hand over her hip and lean in close to her ear.

"I'm the fucking king of the Irish Mafia, baby girl," I growl quietly. "I'm not afraid of *shit*."

In one move, I'm off my stool, pulling her off hers, and sweeping her into my arms. There's some cheesy 80's pop shit on the jukebox, and Callie giggles as I yank her across the floor and start dancing with her.

Again, I am really *not* a dancer. But with her in my arms, who fucking cares?

So we dance. She's great, I'm a fucking mess. But I'm having the proverbial time of my life doing it. And for a little while, everything else just fades away—all the drama, all the danger, who we are, even the snickering jeers from a few douchebags at the bar.

All I know and care about is the grin on her face and the feel of her dancing in my arms.

I'm at the bar getting another round when I turn to see Callie messing around with the jukebox. Instantly, my eyes narrow murderously as one of the guys from the bar sidles up next to her with a predatory grin on his face and starts trying to chat her up.

Something red surges inside me. I know I said we were supposed to keep a low profile, and starting a fight with this motherfucker is the exact opposite of that. But I'm still just two seconds away from storming over there and breaking his fucking jaw...when Callie holds up her hand, gestures firmly at her ring, and then smiles as she flips him off.

I burst out laughing.

Atta girl.

But suddenly, he's grabbing her wrist.

Wrong fucking move.

I snarl, lurching from my stool. Before I can launch myself at him, though, Callie just takes the vodka martini in her hand and chucks it right in his face.

The guy howls, swearing and sputtering and mopping his face with his sleeve. But eventually he turns and skulks back over to his buddies at the bar as they roar with laughter.

Callie turns and catches my eye. She winks at me, and I grin. Then a new song comes on, and I groan as she starts to smile widely at me.

“No...”

“C’mon!” She yells from across the bar as the opening bars of “Time of My Life” from *Dirty Dancing* begin to play over the speakers.

I groan as she dances over to me, takes my hands, and pulls me onto the dance floor.

“Whatever happened to low profile?” I mutter.

She just twirls in my arms, sinking back against my chest with my arms crossed over hers, our hands locked together. She glances up at me over her shoulder as she starts to dance against me seductively, rubbing her ass into me and grinning like the queen of breaking the rules that she is.

“Are you going to dance with me or—”

She shrieks, laughing when I spin her, dip her, and then fall right into dancing with her. The song plays on, and while it might not exactly be the choreographed dance from the movie itself—or anywhere remotely close to it—goddamn, is it fun to watch her face light up like this.

I’m confused when she suddenly slips from my arms and runs across the room before turning and beaming at me just as the

big buildup begins to swell. Then I get it.

You've gotta be fucking kidding me.

“Do it!” she laughs.

I shake my head. “No, Callie—”

“We’re doing the lift!”

I start to shake my head again. But then suddenly, she’s bolting right for me, and before I know it, I’m grabbing her hips and lifting her right up into the air as she shrieks with laughter.

And fuck me, if my heart doesn’t swell three sizes bigger, just like the Grinch.

Ten minutes later, after I’ve paid our tab and we’ve left the bar, something else is swelling bigger. She moans into my mouth as I kiss her deeply, pinning her to the side of the old pickup I’ve had at the house since I bought it. Can’t exactly be driving around town in a Range Rover with bullet holes in the back of it.

Callie gasps as I slide a hand between us, slipping it under her skirt to run a finger over her slick, wet panties.

“*Castle...*”

“You need to teach your bitch some fucking manners.”

I whirl, instantly pulling away from Callie as she gasps.

Shit.

The dipshit from the bar who got a face full of Callie’s martini is glaring at us with four of his friends semi-circled around him, all of them sneering.

“*Let’s just go,*” Callie murmurs quickly, tugging on my hand.

“She didn’t want to talk to you, you had a hard time hearing that,” I shrug, smiling coldly at the guy. “So she *made* you hear it. Take your licks and walk away, pal.”

I start to turn to unlock the truck.

“Who said anything about talking? I just want to see if that slut’s mouth is still lippy when it’s full of my dick.”

His buddies chuckle. I slowly turn back to them.

“See, you’ve got me at a disadvantage here,” I smile. “I’m guessing you and your little friends came out tonight itching for a fight, because it’s something you enjoy.”

The guy smirks. “*Yup.*”

“Well then,” I shrug. “I guess I’m going to have try and enjoy this even more.”

None of them is a fighter, that’s easy enough to see from the way they’re all standing and the nervous, anxious energy radiating off them.

They’re seriously going to regret this. I’m not.

“*Get in the car,*” I murmur to Callie.

“Castle—!”

She gasps as I turn, cup her chin, and kiss her hard.

“Trust me,” I wink. “I’ll join you in a second.”

When I turn back, the guy chuckles.

“Buddy,” he grins, the five of them advancing. “There’s one of you and five of us.”

“Yeah, I know.” I roll my neck as I crack my knuckles and move toward them. “A shame. You *really* should’ve brought more friends.”

IT TAKES all of two minutes for the five of them to realize they're not getting back up off the ground. They get a few hits in, sure. But when it's over, I'm the one walking away and climbing into the truck next to the woman I love.

And kissing her, and telling her the cut on my eyebrow is no big deal, even though she's fretting about it.

And I'm the one taking her home, wrapping her in my arms, knowing damn well I'm *never* letting her go.

CASTLE

A COUPLE of nights later Callie's having a bath and I'm sitting on the couch in the library sipping a drink when my phone buzzes. I smile when I see Loraine's name on the screen and hit the answer button right away.

I ditched my and Callie's phones on the way out here, in case anyone was tracking them. But I've set it up so that my old number forwards any calls to my burner phone, so I don't miss anything.

"Hey, stranger."

"Hey..." Her voice sounds sad and strained. Instantly, I can feel my hackles rising.

"What's going on?"

"Oh, nothing, I just..." She sighs. "Do you follow Megan on social media?"

I frown. "Loraine, I'm not even *on* social media. You know that."

"And you haven't spoken to her recently, or seen her?"

"No," I shake my head. "I don't think she *wants* to be seen or talked to. Not by any of us, at least."

Loraine knows that by "any of us" I mean "the ones left".

We were all hurt and scared after Kabul. But Megan got the worst of it by a long shot, being Bryce and Matt's sister. She lost her husband Jason *and* her two brothers that day.

"I'm a little worried about her."

My brow furrows. "Why? What happened?"

"She posted for the first time in *years*."

I frown. "I mean, is that such a big deal?"

"No, Castle..." I can hear her swallowing uneasily. "This was incredibly dark shit. It was like..." Her voice catches, like she's struggling to keep it together. "It was really graphic pictures of dead American soldiers, from over there. I can't believe the algorithm didn't automatically yank the post down, to be honest."

I wince. "Fuck, Loraine," I growl. "I'm sorry you had to see that."

"No, it's fine, I'm..." She sighs. "I'm fine. I'm just worried about her. It was that, which was weird enough considering she hasn't posted anything on any social media in years. But then she also made these really cryptic posts about avenging angels and a pound of flesh and all this super dark biblical stuff."

I frown even deeper and rake my nails down my jaw. I don't remember Megan ever being a very religious person. But then, I haven't seen her in ten years.

"I can ask Jeremy if he knows anything."

"Do you guys talk much?"

I smile. "Not as much as I'd like. But we actually caught up over drinks a little while ago, when he was in town for work. It was great to see him. Do you?"

“No,” Loraine sighs. “I mean Jer and I weren’t ever that close anyway. But I think he had even worse survivor’s guilt than you did after...what happened.”

She’s not wrong. Yes, I hated myself for a *long* time for letting the three of them walk into that house before me, even though it was my order from Bryce to go in last. But Jeremy wasn’t even on the mission at all, since he was laid up back at base with bad food poisoning puking his guts out. I can’t even imagine the hell he went through when they told him what happened.

I sigh. “I miss them, Loraine.”

“Yeah.” She draws in a heavy breath. “You and me both, Castle. You and me both.”

“I’ll let you know if I hear anything from Jeremy about Megan, yeah?”

“Yeah, that’d be great. Thanks.”

“Say hi to that teenager of yours for me.”

She chuckles. “I will. And say hi to that wife of yours for me.”

I’m smiling when I hang up and call Jeremy using my burner phone to route through my real phone number. He doesn’t pick up, so I leave him a quick message to check in whenever he can.

I look up at the sound of bare footsteps padding across the hardwood floor to see Callie moving toward me, dropping her bath towel.

Instantly, she has my *completely* undivided attention.

I groan as she climbs into my lap, wraps her arms around my neck, and kisses me slow and deep. She’s warm and smooth

and silky from the bath, and my cock swells as my hands run up and down her back.

“What’s this for?” I growl, dropping my mouth to nuzzle her neck.

Callie whimpers, sighing in pleasure as my teeth graze over her skin. Then she’s sliding out of my arms and onto the floor in front of me, reaching for my belt. Lust rises up inside me as she opens my pants, pulling them and my boxers down together as I lift my hips to help her. I kick them away as she moves between my legs and wraps her small fingers around my swollen dick.

“*Shit*, Callie...” I hiss in pleasure as her mouth descends over the head. Her tongue teases around the crown, her eyes locked with mine as she moans. I groan, watching her mouth lower onto me, taking more of me deep into the back of her throat.

She drags her tongue up and down my shaft, moving to my cum-filled balls with her eyes still fixed on mine. I groan deeper as she slurps on them, tonguing them before licking her way back to the head.

I yank off my shirt as she crawls back into my lap and kisses me hard.

“*Well*,” she purrs softly, running her fingers through my hair. “It’s just that someone promised me something a little while ago and he hasn’t delivered on it yet.”

I arch a brow, my jaw tightening as I feel her hot little pussy grinding against my cock.

“And what might that be?”

She dips her mouth to my ear, her lips teasing against the lobe.

“*To take everything.*”

She reaches back, wrapping her fingers around my cock as she lifts up. And when she settles back down, I groan again when I feel her ass rubbing against my head.

“You haven’t yet,” she purrs into my ear.

I pull back just enough for our eyes to lock fiercely. My pulse hums in my veins as she slowly rocks her hips on me.

“Careful what you wish for, baby girl,” I growl.

She bites her lip, her cheeks deeply flushed as she shakes her head. “This isn’t me teasing, Castle,” she murmurs quietly. “I mean it. I want you *everywhere*.”

She gasps, whimpering as I pull her into my arms and stand, still holding her. Her legs wrap around my waist, her lips peppering my face and my neck with kisses as I carry her upstairs to the bedroom loft. It’s dark up here expect for the moon shining in, and when I lay her down on the bed, I feel like I’m standing over a goddamn goddess.

She was wrong when she told me once laughingly about her dad missing the mark when he named her after the muse Calliope. She might not be a singer or a poet.

...but she’s every inch my muse.

She moans when I move between her thighs, pushing her knees up high and wide apart, exposing her lewdly to my hungry eyes. My chin dips, and she cries out when my tongue drags wetly over her eager little pussy.

I swirl the tip around her clit before sucking it between my lips. Then I plunge my tongue deep in her greedy cunt, tasting how fucking wet she is as she mewls and writhes beneath me. My fingertip slides lower, teasing at her puckered little hole as she whines in pleasure. I let my eyes slide up to hers as I

slowly drag my tongue lower and lower, until I'm swirling it over her asshole.

"Castle..."

I've come to know that Callie goes *wild* when I tease her ass. I've run my tongue around her tight little ring before and watched her come apart at the seams when I do. I even made her come like a fucking hurricane a week ago with my tongue buried in her ass and my thumb rolling her clit.

Tonight, I'm taking all of her.

Every virginity.

Every first.

I want it fucking *all* when it comes to her.

Callie cries out, her fingers tangling in my hair as I drag my tongue over her asshole. My eyes meet hers as I tease a finger over her dripping wet pussy, up her stomach, between her breasts, until it slips over her lips. She moans as she opens her mouth and sucks the finger in.

"Good girl," I growl. "Get it nice and wet, baby girl, so that I can open you up and get your tight little asshole ready for my cock."

She whimpers, swirling and her tongue around and around my finger and wrapping her lips tight around it. I slip it from her mouth and bring it down to circle it around her tight hole. Gently, slowly, I press it into her, relishing the way her moan whines through the bedroom.

"Oh fuck, Castle..."

My mouth hums against her pussy and my tongue plays with her clit as I slowly ease my finger in and out of her ass.

Under the bed, my hand finds the bottle of lube I bought two weeks ago for just this moment—just in case. I drizzle it all over my throbbing hard, swollen cock and then bring the bottle up to her. She gasps when she feels me drizzling the warm liquid on her ass as my tongue dances over her clit. And when my finger easily slides back in, her hips rise to take me deeper.

“Fuck, Castle, that feels so fucking good...”

She’s writhing as I tongue her clit, and when I stand, her eyes drop right to my where I’m stroking my slick cock.

“Hold your legs back and open for me, baby girl.”

She nods, panting as she grabs her legs behind her knees and pulls them back. Her glistening pink pussy and her tight little asshole are right there waiting for me, and I swear my cock grows even harder at the sight.

I ease the swollen head against her most private place, feeling her tight ring puckered against my cock. My eyes lock with hers as I lean down over her and kiss her slowly and deeply.

“Please fuck me,” she whimpers. *“Please fuck my—oh FUCK...”*

Her eyes bulge and her mouth gapes wide as I slowly ease just the head into her for now. I have no intention of hurting her, *ever*, at all. So I go slow, gently adding more pressure until I can feel her body slowly opening for me.

Callie’s breath catches, and she whimpers out a high-pitched moan as my head slips past her ring.

“Oh my fucking God,” she gasps, staring at where we’re joined with wide eyes. *“Holy fuck, you’re so fucking big.”*

“We can stop any time you—”

“No. Don’t stop. Keep going.”

It's not the words themselves, it's the raw need behind them that has me growling and fighting to keep myself from ramming into her in one stroke. But I hold that back, going slower than slow as I start to sink inch after inch of my fat cock deep into her impossibly tight ass.

Callie moans as I start to rub her clit with my thumb. I dip my mouth to her neck, biting and sucking as I keep pushing forward, until every fucking inch of my dick is buried deep inside her.

She chokes, her eyes wide and rolled back with her mouth open. Her chest rises and falls, and I groan as I feel her ass clenching around and milking my cock.

I rest my forehead on hers, our eyes locking as her breath mingles with mine.

“And now, baby girl,” I groan against her lips. “I’m going to fuck your ass like the bad girl that you are.”

I slide out and then thrust right back in. She cries out, clinging to me and throwing her head back as she moans wildly. A brutal savagery comes over me as I start to fuck her, looking down to where my thick cock is plunging in and out of her tight little hole.

“Look at it, baby girl,” I groan, cupping her face with one hand as I rub her clit with the thumb of the other. “Look down at where that big dick is fucking your pretty little asshole. Look at your greedy ass swallowing every last inch of my cock.”

Callie's staring down between her spread legs, a look of pure lust on her face as I fuck into her.

“*Harder,*” she chokes.

I groan, my cock swelling even thicker. But I keep going at the same pace, not wanting to hurt her despite her enthusiasm.

“I said fucking *harder*,” she hisses.

I smirk deviously at her, grinding myself deep. “Eager little —”

Suddenly I jolt as she slaps my face.

“*Fuck my ass harder, Daddy.*”

My face goes dark, and my hand suddenly wraps around her throat. She moans deeply.

“You want me to fuck you hard, baby girl?” I snarl.

Callie whimpers eagerly, nodding her head up and down as an almost demented lust fills her eyes.

“You want me to fuck this tight, pretty little virgin ass until you can’t sit down for a fucking *week*?”

“*Please, Daddy...please fuck—oh GOD!!!*”

The lady gets what the lady asked for.

I ram into her hard—not hard enough to seriously injure her, but definitely hard enough to make her fucking feel it. Her eyes snap wide open, a mask of pure ecstasy on her face as I start to fuck in and out of her. My muscles bulge and ripple, and my hand tightens just enough around her throat to drive her wild.

My heavy balls slap against her ass as I shove into her, her impossibly tight little hole squeezing the very life out of my dick as I choke her and rake my teeth over her neck.

“Is this what you wanted, baby girl?” I rasp into her ear. “For me to use you like a dirty little fuck toy?”

“*Yes!*”

“For me to fuck this ass like it belongs to me?”

“*It does!*” she sobs in pleasure. “*Everything...every part of me...*”

“Squeeze my fucking dick, baby girl,” I growl, pounding into her as we both go crashing headlong toward release. “Squeeze that thick dick with your greedy asshole.”

“*Oh my fucking God,*” she chokes. “*Oh my FUCKING God...*”

With a snarl, I push her back onto the bed and then roll us over, never once slipping out of her. She whimpers, quivering around me as she finds herself perched on my lap with her knees on either side of my thighs and my eyes locked with hers.

“*Ride it,*” I growl. “Bounce on my big fucking dick, because I want to feel you fucking come for me. Let me feel you come, baby girl. Let me feel you fucking explode for me with my fat cock buried deep in your ass.”

Her eyes roll back in her head as the orgasm approaches.

“*Castle...*”

“Callie—”

“*I love you.*”

She blurts it out, and instantly, her eyes go wide.

“Castle, I—”

“*I love you, too.*”

It’s like getting kissed by an avalanche, or a cannon ball. She slams her mouth to mine so hard we both taste blood, moaning into my lips as she kisses me hard. And damned if I don’t kiss her right back just as hard, wrapping her in my arms with my

hands gripping her ass, feeling her ride me, up and down, harder and faster.

The world around us recedes to nothing, until it's just her and I, our lips locked and our bodies writhing together as we go crashing over the edge.

She screams into my mouth as she comes, and when I feel her pebbled nipples drag against my chest and feel her tight little as clamp down around my cock, it's too much for me to take.

I drive up into her with one last thrust, holding her fiercely in my arms as I explode into her. I can feel her body spasming and squirming as she comes, and I'm right there with her, my hot cum spilling deep into her ass until we're both tumbling into the sheets, spent.

CASTLE

“FUCK, man. You scared the *shit* out of me, you know that?”

I sigh into the phone. “Sorry. I really did mean to call you earlier, it’s just been an odd couple of weeks.”

“I mean, *shit*, Castle,” Jeremy whistles. “I hear all this chatter at work about a gangland war going down in New York—about this apartment belonging to one of the guys running the Reznikov Bratva getting shot to shit by a fifty-cal, a fire, gunshots in the streets of Manhattan. And then you go fucking AWOL on me?” He blows out an exasperated breath. “Like, what the *fuck*, man?”

I shake my head. “Trust me, it’s a very long story.”

“You’re good, though?”

“Yeah, man, we’re good.”

“Thank God,” he grunts. “And you’re keeping that new wife of yours safe?”

I nod. “Yeah, we’re set up somewhere secure.”

“Good, Castle. That’s good.”

“Listen, Jer, I wanted to ask...” I frown. “You don’t keep up with Megan at all, do you?”

He sighs heavily and goes silent for a minute. I know he doesn't like to talk much about all of that. But I did promise Loraine I'd ask him.

"Nah, man," he says quietly. "Can't say I do. Why, what's up?"

"I'm not sure. I was talking with Loraine the other day, and she mentioned...nah, forget it."

"No, what is it?"

"She said Megan was suddenly posting weird shit on social media after not posting at all for a few years."

"Huh," he grunts. "What sort of weird stuff?"

My teeth grind. "Pics of dead soldiers, Old Testament Bible verses. That kind of stuff. I think Loraine is worried about her." I exhale. "I am, too, to be honest."

"Woah...yeah, shit," he mutters. "That's not good. I don't think I've got her number or anything..."

"Yeah, I didn't think so. I just figured I'd ask."

"Well," he sighs. "I can try and dig into it. Oh, listen, while I have you, and speaking of digging into things, I came across some intel that might seriously interest you."

My brows arch. "Yeah? Like what?"

"Like intel concerning the fifty-cal bullets coming through the windows at that Russian's apartment."

I sit up straighter. "Shit, what'd you find?"

"Eh...I can't over the phone, man. Sorry. Even if you're calling me from a proxy."

I smirk. "You can see that, huh?"

He chuckles. “Fuck, man. The cool toys I’ve got over here would blow your mind. That’s the beauty of a Defense Department budget. You should see the shit I expense.”

“My tax dollars hard at work, huh?”

He laughs. “Something like that.”

I clear my throat. “Well, okay, could we meet?”

“You okay with that? I know you’re lying low.”

“Yeah, it’s all good.”

“For sure, then. Text me the address to this number. How far from the city are you? I’m actually working out of the New York office again this week.”

I grin. “Perfect. ’Bout four hours from you, then. We’re in Montauk.”

He clears his throat, and it sounds like he’s on the move. “I’m on it, man. Shoot me that address and I’ll get copies of this intel printed and be on my way. You’re buying me dinner for this.”

I chuckle. “How about I go one better and make it myself?”

“Shit, your cooking better have improved in the last ten years. All right brother, I’ll see you both soon.”

I walk onto the screen porch, where Callie’s bundled up in a big blanket reading a book. She grins when I lean down to tilt up her chin and kiss her softly.

“We’re having company for dinner.”

She looks surprised. “Oh?”

“Yeah. Jeremy. He has some intel about the shooter at Konstantin’s place, but it’s classified stuff and phones aren’t always so secure.”

“So he’s coming all the way out here?”

“In exchange for me cooking dinner, yeah.”

She grins. “Oh my God, someone from the outside world? *Here?*”

I roll my eyes as she laughs. It’s become an inside joke of ours out here: since we’re keeping a low profile and our one excursion resulted in me sending five assholes to the hospital, we keep laughing that we’re the last two humans after some sort of apocalypse, living in isolation.

Yes, it’s weird.

And no, I don’t give a shit.

“Is he staying over?”

I shrug. “Dunno. But it’s a three or four-hour drive back to the city from here, so...maybe?”

“Well, in that case...”

I let out a groan as she pounces on me and shoves me down onto the couch. She slips into my lap and starts to kiss my neck.

This woman is fucking *insatiable*.

“If he’s staying over,” she purrs into my ear. “I might need you *now*, because I think it’s considered rude to wake your house guest by fucking too loudly.”

“Definitely. Very rude,” I growl.

“And we can’t have that,” she murmurs, slipping her hands under my sweatshirt.

That’s when my phone rings.

“*Goddammit*,” I mutter, glancing at it. I’m about to let it go to voicemail, but when I see George’s name on the screen, I pause.

George is my accountant, and this is the fourth time he’s called in the last twelve hours.

“You need to get that, don’t you.”

I groan and sink my forehead to hers. “I need to get that.”

“Well, in that case, I’m going to jump in a bath.”

I eye her as she climbs off my lap and sashays away.

“You start without me, baby girl, and you’re going to be in trouble.”

“Yeah?”

She glances back at me over her shoulder as she peels off her dress and tosses it at me. “Good.”

I groan, and my cock throbs as I call George back.

This better be fucking important.

“Castle! Where the hell have you been?! I’ve been trying to reach you! I emailed, I called—”

“Sorry, George,” I grunt. “Been a busy few weeks. I haven’t really been in the office. What’s up?”

“Well,” he snaps in that snippy way of his, “I was just curious when you were planning to tell me?”

I frown. “Tell you what?”

“About winding up the trust?”

I sit bolt upright, my ears starting to ring. “Excuse me?”

I only have one trust, and it’s that one I set up to make sure Loraine, Teagan, Shawna, and Megan are taken care of. And I

sure as fuck haven't done anything to it.

"What the hell are you talking about?" I snap.

"The trust, Castle. The account's been closed."

"*No*, it fucking hasn't," I growl.

"Well, I don't know what to tell you then, because I'm looking at it right here on my screen. The funds were transferred out —"

"*All* of it?!"

There's thirty fucking million dollars in that fund, meant to keep Loraine, Teagan, Megan, and Shawna financially comfortable for life.

"I'm afraid so. To an undisclosed account, and then the delivering account itself was closed."

My heart thuds like a drum. "How in the fuck was this authorized?! I didn't sign or order a goddamn thing!"

I can hear George furiously banging away on his keyboard. "Okay, I'm bringing up the trust agreement now...right. Well, it looks like the only way to close the account or transfer funds out would be if you authorized it."

"Exactly. So get the fucking FBI on the phone," I growl. "Because I just got robbed."

"Hang on." He types again and then swears quietly under his breath.

"*George...?*"

"You've got a majority clause built into the trust declaration."

I scowl. "A fucking what?"

“A majority clause. *I* wouldn’t have included it, for the record. I already thought it was perhaps unwise to have the three beneficiaries also be listed as trustees, though perfectly legal, of course. But whoever you had working for you before—”

“What the hell *is* it, George?”

He exhales. “Basically, it allows for a majority number of trustees to make decisions. It’s usually there in the event of the grantor—that would be you—passing, or otherwise becoming incapable of making financial decisions regarding the trust itself. A majority in this case would have to be all three trustees aside from you—Shawna, Megan, and Loraine. We talked about adding Teagan when she turned eighteen, but we haven’t gotten to that—”

“You’re saying the three of them together signed off on emptying the fucking account?!”

“I...yeah, actually,” George says with bewilderment. “It’s literally the only way this could have—”

“I’ll call you back.”

Loraine doesn’t pick up when I call. Alarm bells are ringing in my head when I call Shawna next, and it also goes to voicemail.

What the fuck is happening.

I’m about to call Jack Dorsey, the FBI director of operations for New York, [BP1] when Loraine calls me back.

“Hey!” she says cheerily. “Wow, two calls in a week? To what do I owe this rare—”

“I need to know what the fuck is going on, Loraine.”

There’s a pause, and then she clears her throat. “I’m sorry, Castle, is everything okay?”

“No it’s not,” I snarl. “Not by a *mile*.”

“Oh my God,” she breathes, sounding scared. “What’s happening?”

This doesn’t sound like a woman who’s just been part of a plot to steal thirty million dollars from me, unless she’s been taking acting lessons from Meryl Streep.

“Lorraine, I need to ask you something.”

“Of course,” she whispers, her voice shaking.

“Has anyone forced you to sign anything recently? If someone is with you right now, just say ‘black bear’.”

“Castle, what are you talking about?!”

I exhale in relief.

“Force me to sign something? Something like what?!”

“Just—”

“I mean, the only things I’ve signed recently are Teagan’s college applications and that trust renewal thingy you sent over.”

I go still.

“I’m sorry—what?”

“Oh, yeah, we haven’t told you! She’s settled on NYU as her first choice—”

“Not the applications,” I rasp. “Renewal form?”

“Yeah. For the trust?”

Something cold sinks deep into my chest.

Oh fuck.

“Castle, I’m sorry, now I’m confused about what’s going on. I tried calling you when it came in the mail. But then I got a hold of Shawna, and she’d gotten the same thing. So we just signed them at the arrows and sent them back like your sticky notes asked...”

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. *FUCK.*

I think I just got fucked.

“Everything’s fine, Loraine,” I manage to fake out. “It’s all good. Sorry, I’m just overworked and overtired. Didn’t mean to freak you out.”

She exhales in a whoosh. “Well, you sure did!” She laughs nervously. “Hey, Tea just got home. Wanna talk to her about New York—”

“Sorry, I gotta run. Talk to you guys soon.”

As soon as I hang up, I get a call from Shawna, basically in the same confusion. When I get off the phone with *her*, I’m instantly calling Jack Dorsey.

“I mean...*fuck*, Castle,” he growls. “Yeah, of course. I can get a team on this fucking asap. It’s wire fraud, and obviously the amount makes it a felony.”

“How fast can you trace the account it went to?”

“I’m shoving through a request for a warrant right now. It’s Sunday, so don’t hold your breath, but I can get one in probably three hours. It’ll take one of our teams another one or two to get a trace going.”

“Do it,” I hiss.

“You bet. And...I’m really sorry, Castle.”

I hang up and groan as I sink back into the couch. Then I'm up and storming through the house—pissed off, tense as fuck...

...and, oddly, incredibly hard.

Callie grins up at me from a tub full of bubbles that don't quite cover her nipples as I barge into the bathroom.

"I was wondering what was taking you so—*Castle*..."

She gasps as I all but shred my clothes off, grab her, and flip her over onto her knees in the tub. She moans, shaking and grabbing the edges as I splash in behind her.

"*Take it out on me,*" she whimpers, arching her back and looking back at me with heat in her eyes as I grab her by the hips and line my cock up with her sweet little cunt.

"Whatever it is, take it all out on me."

MUCH LATER, I finally manage to pull myself from the sheets I've been tangled in with Callie for the last couple of hours.

"*Meeeh,*" she grumps, grinning sleepily at me as she grabs my hand. "Why?"

We've already talked about what happened with the trust. It's not even really about the money. I mean, yeah, it's a fuckload of cash. But compared to what I'll be making now that I'm running the Kildare empire, it's actually *not*. Which is...a weird reality to be living, I'll say that.

So it's not about the money. It's that someone out there isn't content with just shooting at me or Callie. They're trying to fuck with me, too. And what's worse is that they're *actually* fucking with the families of the men I watched die.

I smile as I lean down to kiss her. “Grocery store. I’m cooking tonight.”

“Shit, right,” she groans. “Houseguest.”

“He’ll behave, don’t worry,” I chuckle, pulling on jeans or a t-shirt. “Or I’ll kick him out.”

She sighs as she slips out of bed. My pulse spikes as the sheets slide off her nude body and I see her turn to grin at me.

“Or I might just kick his ass out anyway,” I growl, grabbing her wrist and pulling her close.

She giggles as she slaps my hand away. “Oh my God. Go get food. I’m going to put on some clothes and clean the place up a little.”

I grab some veggies from a local market and fresh fish right from the docks. I’m amused when I see one of the dipshits I tuned up the other night working on one of the boats. But he’s got the good sense to make himself scarce as soon as he sees me.

I’m already back at the old pickup truck when my phone goes off.

“Deimos,” I grunt as I yank open the door. “What can I do for ___”

“It’s not you.”

I frown. “What?”

He lets out a long sigh. “I’ve been talking with Cillian. I know what Callie dug up in your old apartment, Castle, and I know exactly what it looks like, and what you’re probably thinking. But *it’s not you.*”

I go still, my throat tightening as my ears begin to ring.

“You’re not Declan’s son.”

It feels like a knife stabbing into me. Not because I’ve just been told I’m not that prick’s bastard blood. But because it also means I’m *not* actually Neve and Eilish’s half-brother, which has been at the forefront of my mind ever since Callie showed me what she found. It’s an idea that I’ve been getting more and more used to.

So yeah, that kind of stings. A lot.

“I’m sorry, Castle.”

“What...” I close my eyes and shake my head as I sink against the side of the truck. “How do you know that,” I growl quietly. “What did you find?”

“I’ve been doing a deep dive into the Carvelis and some of the other Italian families in The Commission, and I started finding lots of skeletons in lots of closets.”

“What kind of skeletons?”

“Ones like the fact that as well as Svetlana—and about a dozen other women—Declan was fucking Luca’s niece, Silvia.”

My mouth twists. “And?”

“And *that’s* who he had a bastard son with.”

My heart wrenches a little.

“Look,” he sighs. “I know there was some information on that hard drive Gavan got from Drazen talking about ‘the child’, and yeah, all the circumstantial stuff pointed to Svetlana being the mother. But the Silvia thing is one hundred percent ironclad.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. “Yeah, but how do you know—”

“I got my hands on Luca’s private notes, Castle,” he growls quietly. “Again, I’m sorry. I can only imagine what’s been going through your head since you found out, or rather thought you found out. Especially with what it means for your relationships with Neve and—”

“Just tell me, Deimos,” I grunt in a monotone.

He sighs. “Luca became aware of the affair, and he almost went to war with the Kildares over it. Except Leo Scaliame, who ran the family before Michael Genovisi took over, made him back down. He had a business deal in the works with Declan.”

I drag my fingers through my hair, turning to stare out at the ocean waves.

“Seems like Silvia never meant to get pregnant and didn’t want this kid at all. So when he was born, Luca offloaded him to the family of one of his lieutenants, and that was that. The recording we heard, with Owen and Declan talking about his illegitimate son finding out who he was and coming after what was his, was about *that kid*, not you.”

Deimos clears his throat. “Look, Castle, I don’t know why Declan was paying your folks’ rent and sending them checks —”

“The fucking letter,” I growl. “There was a fucking letter—”

“Unaddressed, and signed S.T., yeah, I know,” he says quietly.

“Castle...Silvia’s last name was Taglieri.”

I close my eyes tightly.

“I’d ask *anyone* why the fuck that letter was in your parents’ apartment. But literally everyone involved is dead, including Silvia herself as of a few years back.”

“And the kid?” I murmur. “What about him?”

“He is or was military, that’s all I could find out. A lot of his record is redacted, and not even my contacts could get past that.”

“What about the family he was raised by?”

“The DiMarcos? Yeah,” Deimos grunts. “I checked. They’re dead too—”

My brain glitches out. Everything goes still, and it feels like something cold is sliding under my skin.

“What the fuck did you just say?”

There’s a pause on the other end of the line.

“What?”

“The family *name*, Deimos,” I hiss, my heart racing. “Say it again.”

“DiMarco. Why?”

Because I fucking *know* a DiMarco. An Italian kid who grew up knowing he was adopted, and whose father was mob connected. A DiMarco who ended up joining the army, and who made Ranger.

Who I fought next for five fucking years.

Who’s an ace shot with a fifty-cal.

Who was *in Konstantin’s fucking apartment*, using the bathroom, not long before a random-ass incendiary device somehow got placed in what was supposedly an impenetrable fortress.

...A DiMarco who’s currently on his way to my fucking safe house, where Callie is.

Alone.

Jeremy.

Jeremy *DiMarco*.

“Castle—”

“I need you to get here, *now!*” I bellow, dropping the fish and jumping into the truck. The engine roars to life, and I peel out of the parking lot and race toward the house.

“What?!”

“Call Ares!!” I scream. “Tell him Callie is in danger, and to get everyone he can to the fucking Montauk address I texted him *NOW!!*”

There’re no more questions after that.

“On it.”

I toss my phone to the side as I floor the gas pedal. I scream down the winding coastal roads until I slam on the brakes and tear down the driveway that leads to the house.

There’s a black SUV parked out front.

I grab my gun out of the glove box and jump out of the truck. I duck into the shrubbery, backtracking around the side of the house to the rear door. Thankfully the hinges are well oiled and it opens noiselessly, and I slip inside, my gun raised.

The house is quiet, but my heart is thumping fit to wake the dead as I quietly step through the kitchen and into the living room.

Oh fuck.

Callie is bound on the floor, writhing and trying to scream through a gag in her mouth. Her eyes bulge when she sees me,

and she starts to kick and raise hell even more as I bolt across the room to her, drop to my knees, and yank at her gag.

“Callie—”

“*B-BEHIND YOU!*”

The hit comes fast. I blink back stars, lurching sideways before my face slams into the floor. I blink again, my vision blurring as something hot and sticky starts to drip into my eyes. With a groan, I twist my head, and suddenly freeze.

“I’m sorry, brother,” Jeremy grunts, his jaw grim and set. “I really am.”

His arm is still in the sling. But he’s walking *just fine*, with no cast.

“You...*fuck*...”

“It’s nothing personal, Castle,” he growls as he steps toward me and raises the butt of his gun. “It’s just business.”

The gun slams down, and then everything goes black.

CALLIE

HIS EYES ARE BLURRY, wild, and unfocused when they first open. But even seeing him regain consciousness brings my heart lurching up into my throat. Even if I can't touch him.

...Because we're both tied to vertical wooden support beams running up from the floor of the boathouse to the corrugated metal roof. But at least we're facing each other.

"Callie—"

"Hey! I'm right here!"

He blinks, wincing before me manages to focus on me. His eyes flash as they lock onto me, and he grins a little before his face tenses again.

"Where's—"

"I'm right here, brother."

I flinch when I hear Jeremy's voice behind me. I turn my head, shooting daggers at the man with his arm still in a cast, whom I invited inside and offered coffee to, only to be jumped from behind, knocked to the ground, and tied up. The man suddenly didn't have a limp anymore, who has since slipped the walking cast off his feet and ditched the cane.

We're not far from the house, though I lost track of the time. We might still be in Montauk, or maybe slightly west, closer to New York. But where exactly, I have no idea.

Not that it matters. Because nobody *else* knows where we are, either.

I glare at Jeremy again as he strolls past me and a jumble of old gasoline drums, a gun in his good hand. Castle looks up at him, and his face turns livid. He snarls, surging to his feet—or at least, trying to. He gets his feet under him. But we're both tied too firmly to the support beams, our hands bound behind us around the posts.

“You *son of a bitch*,” Castle hisses venomously at his friend. “You fucking *coward!*”

Jeremy looks genuinely sorry as he shakes his head and shoves his fingers through his dark hair.

“I hate that it came to this, brother—”

“You don't get to call me that anymore,” Castle spits back.

Jeremy sighs, looking down. “It's really not personal, for what that's worth. Like I said, this is just business.”

“Is that what you do for work, now?” Castle snarls. “Tie up old friends and their fucking wives?!”

Jeremy's jaw tightens. “I'm *sorry*, man,” he murmurs. “I really am. And if there had been any other way—”

“It was you, wasn't it?” Castle hisses, his eyes lasered on Jeremy's wounded arm. “The gunman who ran when I winged him. That's not a car crash injury, is it?” He snarls as his eyes go savage. “That's a bullet wound to the shoulder. And nice miraculous fucking recovery. I notice you've lost the cane.”

Jeremy looks away.

“Was that to throw me off?” Castle snaps. “Get me off the scent of you being on the rooftop, trying to fucking murder—”

“I wasn’t trying to hit you, Castle.” Jeremy’s mouth thins. “Either of you. If I was, I wouldn’t have missed.”

“*I didn’t miss.*”

Jeremy frowns and glances at his wounded arm. “No, you didn’t.” He smirks. “And here I thought kingpins had guys paid to do the shooting back *for them.*”

Castle’s mouth purses. “That’s what this is really about, isn’t it?”

Jeremy frowns.

“You know who you are, don’t you Jer,” Castle mutters. “You know who your father was. You thought *this* was the only way to get what you think is rightfully yours.”

Confusion clouds the other man’s face.

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about, Castle,” Jeremy grunts. “Beyond being a bum who knocked up my bio mom and probably peaced out right after, I have no fucking idea who my father was.”

Castle stares right at Jeremy. “Jer, you’re...” He shakes his head tiredly. “You’re Declan Kildare’s son with Luca Carveli’s niece Silvia.”

Holy. Fucking. *What?*

I stare at Castle, my face paling. When his eyes meet mine, he just nods quietly.

“It’s not me,” he whispers to me, his face ashen as he shakes his head. “*He’s* Declan’s heir.”

The boathouse is silent for a second. Then Jeremy barks a cold laugh.

“Jesus Christ, man,” he chuckles darkly. “Did you rehearse that? ‘Cause that was a solid sell, Castle—”

“I’m not selling you *shit*, you fucker,” Castle spits back. “It’s the God’s honest truth.”

Jeremy rolls his eyes. “Yeah, I wish, brother. Trust me, I wish. Good one.”

Castle looks confused as he stares at the other man.

“Then what is this?” he hisses. “What the fuck are you into, DiMarco?”

Jeremy just shakes his head and looks away.

“I’m in deep, Castle. With the kind of people you don’t even want to be in *shallow* with. I’ve got walls closing in on me that you can’t even imagine—”

“So...wait...*you* fucked up, and now this is your way out?”

“Yeah,” Jeremy mutters quietly. “Yeah, brother. It is. And don’t think I don’t hate that this is going to destroy you and me.”

Castle barks out a cold laugh. “You’re worried about our fucking *friendship*, asshole?” His arm muscles strain against the rope tying him to the beam. “When I get free, and I will, I’d be more worried about your ability to keep *breathing* if I were you. Our friendship was over the second you decided to betray me. But *this*?” His gaze swivels to me, and his throat bobs. “When you put your hands on her, and tied her up?” He looks back at Jeremy with a vicious glint in his eyes. “That’s when you signed your fucking death warrant.”

Jeremy exhales. “I’m sorry, Castle,” he whispers. “I really am. But you know as well as I do that sometimes, your back’s against the wall, and you’re just shit out of options except shooting your way out. That’s where I’m at right now.”

Castle shakes his head. “So what happens next, you fucking prick?” he snarls. “You gonna shoot us?”

Jeremy frowns. “*No*; no, man. Like I said, it’s just business. This is just about money, I swear to you, nothing more.”

Castle’s eyes dart to me, and then switch back to Jeremy. “The trust—that was you, wasn’t it.”

Jeremy nods miserably.

“That money was for the widows and child of the men we called brothers, you piece of fucking shit!” Castle roars.

“You think I don’t know that?!” Jeremy snaps. “I’m telling you, I had *no. Other. Choice*, Castle!”

“Bullshit,” Castle snarls back. “There’s *always* a choice.” He nods grimly at the gun in Jeremy’s hand. “You could’ve stuck that in your mouth and pulled the trigger instead of fucking over the families of your brothers in arms.”

“But you have the money now, right?” I blurt. “From the trust?”

Jeremy turns to me and nods.

“Well then?!” I yank my arms against the ropes around my wrists.

He smiles sadly. “I wish it was that simple. But I didn’t go through all this trouble and burn my life to the ground for fifteen million.”

“There was thirty mil in that account,” Castle spits.

“Yeah, well, I got a partner, brother.” Jeremy glances at his wrist-watch. “She’ll be here in a minute.” He sighs as he looks back at Castle and then over at me again. “I’m in *deep*. And I do mean deep. But you’re the darling princess of the biggest Greek mafia family this side of the Atlantic.” He jerks his head at Castle. “Meanwhile he’s the goddamn king of the Kildare organization. I’m pretty sure I could name any dollar amount I want, and your families would gladly pay double it to get you both back.”

Castle barks a mirthless laugh. “So that’s what you are now, huh? A fuckin’ mercenary? A kidnapper?!”

There’s the sound of a car pulling up outside. Jeremy’s mouth thins. “She’s here now.”

The side door to the old boathouse wrenches open. My face pales, and my heart twists as a woman with a black hoodie pulled up over her head walks through.

It takes me a second. But then I realize I’ve seen her before, standing across the street from my family’s building the day Castle and I got married.

The woman pushes the hood back, revealing a haunted face, a grim mouth, and unkempt dark hair.

“*Megan?*”

My eyes flick to Castle, who’s staring at her with a cold look on his face and stunned, confused familiarity in his eyes.

“Megan, what the *fuck*...”

She turns to look at him, an eerie, cold expression on her face, her eyes stabbing into him maliciously. Then without a word, she turns to level the same look at me.

And *smiles*.

It's the creepiest thing I've ever seen in my life.

Jeremy eyes her warily as he pulls a cell phone out of his pocket. "Let's just get this done, okay? My accountant is ready to go, and I've got a plane to catch in six hours. I'm going to call Ares Drakos first for the fifty mil on *her*," he nods at me, "then we'll get Cillian Kildare on the phone regarding—"

"You let them die, Christopher."

Her voice is a creaky and dry whisper, like she hasn't used it for a while. But her face is alive with pure rage and vengeance as she narrows her gaze at Castle. His jaw grinds nervously, and I see a darkness flicker briefly in his eyes.

"Megan..."

"They were your *brothers*, Chris," she hisses quietly. "My *actual* brothers, and my love. You were supposed to have their backs!"

Anguish explodes across Castle's face, breaking my heart when I see it.

"Megan..."

"It was an ambush!" I scream at her, my pulse racing. "They didn't know the house was—"

"They didn't know because *he* was fucking reckless!" Megan screeches, jabbing a finger at Castle. "Because *he* didn't have all the intel he should have had before *he* made the call to go in there!"

Castle's face goes white and haggard. His throat bobs.

"I..." He shakes his head. "*I'm sorry, Meg*," he growls quietly, his voice like sandpaper. "I'm *so fucking sorry*—"

"Sorry won't bring my brothers back," she snaps. "Or Jason."

Her cold eyes slide to me.

“Whatever you want, Megan,” Castle snarls. “It’s yours, okay?! Give me a phone and a fucking amount, and it’s *yours!* But you leave her the *fuck* out of this!”

Megan laughs mirthlessly. “Money?” She chokes. “You think this is about *money*?!”

Jeremy frowns, stepping forward and glaring into her face. “It *is* about the money,” he growls under his breath. “C’mon, Meg. We’re right here. We finish this and take off. We talked about this. That was always the plan. So let’s get this done—”

“It’s always about money for you, isn’t it, Jeremy?” she says quietly, looking at him with that eerie look in her eyes again.

“It damn well is today,” he mutters. “So let’s get this—”

“Maybe that’s why you got into this much trouble to begin with. Because it’s *always* about money for you.” Her eyes narrow. “It’s why you let them all die, right?”

Jeremy pales, his eyes darting quickly to Castle before he turns back to glare at Megan.

“You listen to me,” he growls, jabbing a finger at her. “The only reason I’ve put up with you and your crazy shit the last few months is because Jason, Matty, and Bryce were as much my family as they were yours.”

“And because you needed me.”

His eyes narrow. “No. *You* needed *me*, Meg,” he growls. “Let’s not get confused.” He sticks his gun into his belt and yanks his phone out again. “Get your account number ready. I’ll let you do the Drakos exchange first, so you can fuck off out of my life that much faster.”

As he starts to dial a number, Megan's face goes absolutely livid.

"It's *always* about the fucking money with you!" she snaps at his back. "This is ALL because of your colossal fucking greed!"

"Yeah, well, reap what you sow and all that, sweetheart," Jeremy mutters. "If you don't want to be fifty fucking million richer, you just pipe right up, and I'll happily take it off your —"

"They all may have walked them into that trap!" she screams. "But *you* fucking set it!!"

Jeremy turns to stone, his face going cold. I stare in horror, watching almost in slow motion as he slips his phone into his jacket pocket and slowly slides his hand to the gun in his belt.

Then it all happens so fast, I don't even have time to blink. In half a second, Megan's yanked something glinting and metallic out of her back pocket, raised her arm up high, and jammed it down hard into the side of Jeremy's neck.

I scream as blood geysers out from where she's just stabbed him. Jeremy roars, choking and gurgling as his hand flies to the gushing wound. He drops to one knee, then both, his eyes wild and staring as he tries to turn around.

Megan screams, stabbing him in the back, then again as he falls to the ground. His face turns the color of ash as he wrenches his eyes toward Castle.

"I'm sorry brother."

His face contorts in pain as he suddenly yanks his gun out of his belt and swings it wildly toward Megan.

"WAIT!"

Castle roars as Megan kicks Jeremy hard in the arm just as he manages to squeeze the trigger. I scream as the shot fires wild off to the side, right into the pile of rusted old gasoline drums.

...Which immediately *explode* into flame.

I scream, flinching and looking away as a wall of heat slams into the side of my face.

“CALLIE!” Castle roars.

I turn, my eyes wide with fear as the flames roar up the plywood wall of the old boathouse, licking at the corrugated metal roof. I rip my terrified gaze back to Castle, who’s managed to wriggle himself to standing now, his arms still bound behind him, his shoulders and his biceps rippling as he strains his bonds to the limit as he leans toward me.

“Megan!” he yells. She’s not even hearing him. She’s just standing there, transfixed, staring at the wall of fire with a look almost of idolatrous adoration in her eyes.

“MEGAN!” Castle bellows. “Whatever you want, I can make it happen *right fucking now!* But I can’t help you if I’m dead! And you can be damn sure I won’t if *she* is!”

Megan doesn’t blink.

“*MEGAN!*” he roars. “Whatever the hell you want!! Anything —!”

“What I *want*, Castle!!” she suddenly screams, whipping around with tragic fury etched across her face. “Is my *fucking family back!?*”

In the blink of an eye, she’s storming over to me. I scream, kicking at the floor and vainly trying to somehow get away from her. The knife glints in her hand as Castle roars and roars

and slams forward against his binds over and over again, screaming my name.

Wood starts to snap and crumble as the fire begins to devour the wall near us. Metal whines as the ceiling sags, and I scream as Megan suddenly surges right into me. Her eyes are wild with mania, and my throat seizes up when she suddenly has the point of her knife right against it.

“*DON'T DO IT!!*” Castle roars, his face strained, his eyes wild, his arms bulging as he strains against the rope. “MEGAN!” he screams. “Look at me! Look at *ME*, Megan!”

She tenses, her nostrils flaring as her eyes go in and out of focus. She’s shaking, and I gasp as I feel the knife point zigzag across the skin of my neck. I cry out when I feel the prick of the blade and the first few droplets of sticky hot blood trickle down to my collarbone.

“MEGAN!!” Castle screams. “You want someone to pay for what happened to Jason?! To Matt, and to Bryce?!”

She nods silently, staring with unseeing eyes as tears fall down her face. The flames grow louder around us, engulfing the wall behind me as the metal roof sags and whines even more.

“Well, guess what?!” Castle roars. “It was *ME*, Megan! *I* got them killed!” His voice breaks, his eyes brimming with pain and regret as they lock onto mine. “It was all me, okay?! You’re right about all of it! I was reckless, and stupid, and careless, and *I got them killed!* So, you wanna kill someone?!” he snarls. “Then *kill me!*”

My eyes bulge, and my throat presses to the blade as I scream.

“NO!” I sob. “No, STOP IT!”

“Kill me instead, Megan!” Castle roars over the thundering flames and wrenching metal. “C’mon! She’s nobody to you!”

She's not who you want to hurt!! *I AM!*" His face is haggard and lined, and he coughs as smoke fills the boathouse.

"C'mon, Megan!" he rasps. "C'mon!"

He slams forward, his arms wrenching over and over as he tries to break free from the ropes.

"MEGAN!"

"*I'm sorry,*" she whispers to me, her eyes hollow and sunken, her infinite pain etched across her face. "I'm sorry."

She starts to press the knife harder against my jugular.

"You wanna hurt someone!!" Castle screams, slamming forward over and over again, the ropes refusing to give. "Then hurt me! Don't hurt her!! Hurt *ME!*"

Megan smiles sadly as our eyes lock, tears running down both of our faces before she turns to look at him.

"But this *will* hurt you, Christopher."

The tip of the knife drags over my skin as I cry out in pain, shock and fear. The fire explodes around us as smoke chokes the air. Something cracks and splinters from the flames and the heat, and I hear a bellowing sound somewhere in the distance as the knife begins to prick into my neck.

Suddenly, Megan wrenches to the side. She chokes, slamming sideways as she and the knife go sprawling across the concrete floor.

Then I'm looking right into two piercing blue eyes.

Castle winces as he grabs one of his shoulders, which is horribly askew. He twists and grimaces, grunting in pain as he slips the dislocated joint back into place.

“Hang on,” he chokes, crashing behind me and yanking on the ropes. I feel them come free, and then suddenly he’s yanking off his shirt and wrapping it tight around my mouth as black smoke billows over us.

Flames erupt from the wall next to us, a booming sound thundering through the air as one of the gas drums explodes. I scream, turning my face to his chest as Castle scoops me into his arms, turns, and starts to run.

Fire is falling like acid rain around us. A burning chunk of ceiling joist explodes like a bomb to our left as he sprints for the burning doorway of the boathouse.

“Close your eyes, baby girl.”

We hit the engulfed wooden door with a bang, Castle grunting as his shoulder splinters through it and we go tumbling outside into the dark. I cry out when I hit the blacktop, tumbling out of his arms. Then he’s grabbing my wrist and yanking me after him, pulling me away from the roaring inferno that the boathouse has become.

I cling to him, sobbing into his chest as he holds me tight and strokes my hair.

“You’re safe, love,” he growls into my ear as I shake against him.

“And now I need you to stay right here.”

What?!

Before I can react, he’s pulling away, whirling, and running right back into the fire as I scream after him. I scramble to my feet, vaguely aware of a whirring sound behind me as I rush toward the flames.

“CALLIE!!”

I spin back in shock to see Ares, Hades, Deimos, and Kratos all running headlong toward me from a helicopter that's just touched down across the parking lot.

“CALLIE! STAY BACK!”

I turn, not even hearing them as I rush toward the fire and the man I love who's just disappeared back into it. Before I can take four steps, strong hands grab me and yank me away.

“LET ME GO!!” I scream as Ares hugs me tightly to his chest. “LET ME—!”

“I'm not letting you fucking die!!” he roars into my ear, yanking me back from the hellfire of the flames as I sob and strain to break free.

“He's still in there!!” I scream. “*Castle!!* He's still in there!”

“*Fuck it,*” Hades spits, shoving his hair back before he starts to rush toward the building.

The horrible screeching sound of metal rending fills the air. Something explodes deep inside the boathouse. And as I stand there with a river of tears coursing down my face, I feel my heart break in two as the entire roof of the building caves in with a thunderous explosion of sparks and ash.

It feels like I've been stabbed. I manage to wrench out of Ares' grip and immediately fall to my knees, sobbing and screaming into the fire for the man I love.

I'm still screaming as Ares lays a comforting hand on my shoulder, and as Kratos lifts me from my knees and hugs me close, letting me scream my grief into his arms and shake against him.

“That *crazy fucking bastard...*”

I whip my head around when I hear Hades' choked words. My eyes stare in disbelief, and my heart leaps into my throat as I watch a dark shape lurch out of the flaming wreckage.

There's no holding me back at that point. There's no holding *any* of us back as we race toward him. Castle's face is a twisted mask of pain, his body blackened by soot and fire and his jaw clenched as he struggles to carry the two bodies on his back. He collapses just as I get to him, slamming into his chest and wrapping my arms around him.

My brothers take the two people he's just come out with—Jeremy's lifeless body, and the shallowly-breathing, unconscious Megan. Whining sirens and bright lights fill the night as both the local police and the FBI swarm into the parking lot, alongside EMTs and firetrucks.

All I do is cling to him. All I *can* do is hold him, worried that if I let go, he might disappear again.

So I'm not going to.

I'm just never going to let him go.

Ever.

CALLIE

HADES IS WAITING for us the second the elevator doors to the Drakos estate foyer glide open noiselessly. His eyes snap right to Castle and narrow dangerously.

Instantly, my pulse spikes, and I yank my hand out of Castle's to lurch between him and my brother.

"*Back off, Hades!*" I hiss. "*No. Don't even fucking think it!*"

My brother frowns deeply, staring at me like I'm nuts. "Think what?"

I shake my head. "You are *not* attacking him!"

A small smile lifts the corners of Hades' mouth. "*Attack him?*" he snorts, raising his eyes to my husband.

Hades is tall, and seriously built. But Castle's taller and bigger.

My brother glances back at me, frowning. "Do I look fucking suicidal?"

"*I love him, Hades,*" I mutter fiercely. "So you can get on board with that, or you can fuck right—"

"I know you do, Cals," he says softly, reaching out and messing up my hair before I whack his hand away. "You're... not exactly subtle, you know."

My face heats as Hades grins at me and then raises his eyes to Castle. His grin fades.

“I love her right back, Hades,” Castle growls quietly. “And I’m not ever going to *stop* loving her. So we can make something of this right here and now, or we can shake hands and—”

“Will you two fucking *relax*? Jesus Christ,” Hades sighs, smirking as he reaches out a hand and claps Castle on the shoulder. “I was going to thank you for saving my sister’s life, Captain America. That okay with you, or did you want to throw down in my grandmother’s fucking foyer?”

Slowly, Castle’s lips curl into a grin as he reaches out and shakes Hades’ offered hand.

“I mean, we *are* technically brothers-in-law.”

Hades groans. “*Easy*. I’m just tiptoeing in the door of accepting this whole thing. Let’s not go crazy and start buying each other Christmas presents.”

“Shit. Does this mean I should return what I already got you?”

Hades’ brows lift. “Is it good?”

“Definitely.”

“Then fuck no. I want it.”

I laugh as I throw my arms around my brother and hug him close.

“*Thank you*,” I whisper as he hugs me back.

“Yeah, well, keep the fucking PDA to a bare minimum, yeah?”

“No promises,” Castle chuckles, pulling me back into his arms and leaning down to kiss my cheek.

Hades makes a barf face and rolls his eyes.

“I’m giving that a pass, Cals, because he keeps saving your goddamn life. But, I mean, honestly...” He frowns. “Could you make a bit of an *effort* to not need saving so fucking much?”

I flip him off, and he chuckles as he fucks with my hair again.

“C’mon. Everyone’s waiting in the library.”

Neve and Eilish barrel into my arms when we step into the library where all my family and all of the Kildares are, together with Jack Dorsey. They both hug me fiercely, none of us saying a word before they pull back with tears in their eyes.

Instantly, Castle’s the next target of their hug attack. I grin as I watch him hug them back with all the love of an older brother.

Even if, in the end, he’s not.

It’s funny. Even though they’ve been my best friends since I first met them, I’ve also always been envious of Neve and Eilish’s relationship with this man I secretly loved—noticing the bond they had with him, the way he grinned whenever they were around, and the time and history they had with him.

I was sad that they had his love, however platonic, and I didn’t.

I flush when he pulls back from them and wraps an arm tight around my waist.

Yeah, I don’t feel that way anymore.

Elsa and Una come over next to hug me tightly and tell me how glad they are that we’re both okay. But then it’s *all* Ya-ya, who comes rushing into the room and instantly shoves everyone aside to pull me into her frail arms. She cries into my shoulder, stroking my hair and murmuring in a mix of Greek and English how happy she is that I’m okay, and unharmed.

Then, even before I can respond, she's turning and hugging Castle even tighter, crying against his chest and thanking "her Adonis" over and over for saving me.

When everyone's done telling Castle and I how glad they are that we're alive—and I mean, heck, that's always nice to hear—Jack Dorsey stands and nods to where Castle is sitting in one of the tall-backed armchairs, with me perched on his thigh.

He clears his throat. "I'm sorry you both had to go through that." His brows knit. "Since I'll be overseeing the case and liaising with the FBI office out on Long Island, I just want to be clear..." He looks right at Castle. "You *won't* be pressing charges against Mrs. Lin? Is that right?"

I smile as my hand slips into Castle's and squeezes. We've already talked about this, at length. And as much as I am usually filled with vengeful touch-my-family-and-I'll-cut-you energy, I'm with Castle when it comes to Megan Lin.

I'm choosing to forgive her. To see past my anger and recognize the pain and the terrible demons tearing her apart from the inside.

"No, we won't be," Castle says quietly. "Provided you follow through with what we discussed."

Jack nods. "It's already been approved. She'll skip an official trial since she's agreed to be interned at a psychiatric facility. She...uh..." Dorsey smiles wryly. "I interviewed her last night at Bellevue Hospital. She mostly wanted to make sure you both knew how sorry she was."

"I know she is," Castle says with a deep sigh. "And I can't even imagine the pain she's been living with for the last ten years."

Last night, when he and I were talking about it, he framed it this way: that while he came home with his scars but immediately found a family and a purpose, when Jason *didn't* come home, Megan lost both her family and her purpose. And she never figured out how to get them back.

“Which brings us to Special Agent DiMarco.”

I squeeze Castle's hand tighter when I feel him tense up.

Jack holds up a file folder. “This is obviously classified, but...” he rolls his eyes as he glances around at the small crowd of us all gathered around. “Fuck, I don't know why I even bother to give a shit anymore.”

He drops the file on the coffee table in front of him, where Deimos plucks it up.

“Jeremy DiMarco had been under investigation by CIA Internal Affairs for the last ten years,” Dorsey begins. “The only reason he wasn't already in prison is that the Agency was hoping he'd lead them to bigger targets. It is *highly* suspected that he...” He grimaces as he looks at Castle. “That he was directly involved with the deaths of your men on that mission in Kabul. I'm sorry, Castle.”

When I turn to look at the man I love, my heart breaks when I see the pain exploding behind his eyes. He looks away from me, stabbing his gaze out the window at Manhattan as I take both his hands in mine and squeeze, lifting them to my lips to kiss them softly. He turns back to me, his eyes meeting mine as he smiles quietly.

“Through his offshore accounts,” Dorsey continues, “the CIA has traced money exchanges back to the Saudis, the Russian government, Mossad, even ISIS. The guy had his fingers in a lot of pies, and owed money to *everyone*. Seems he kept doing

jobs for and borrowing money from one piece of shit organization to pay back some other piece of shit organization he owed. The speculation is that he knew he was running out of time to pay some of these people back, and had been tipped off that the Agency was onto him. He'd recently bought property in Vietnam through a shell company, and had an appointment booked with a prominent plastic surgeon in Brazil who is known to have worked with a number of high-profile cartel bosses."

"So he was planning to disappear," Deimos mutters.

Jack nods. "Looks like it, yeah. And he needed the money he lifted from your trust, Castle, and the money he was *hoping* to get from ransoming you both back to your families, to pay off his lenders before fading into the sunset, rather than risk they would still somehow hunt him down." Dorsey sighs as he looks at the both of us. "We were able to find some better CCTV camera angles from the nights of both attacks. The shooter *was* DiMarco, and that first time it looks like he was deliberately trying to make it look like the work of El Cirujano, the hitman. There's also evidence that places DiMarco in Mexico on the same day that El Cirujano was shot and killed while staking out that cartel boss."

"And the incendiary device in the apartment bathroom?" Castle mutters.

Dorsey nods. "DiMarco. He could have easily put it on a timer or set up a remote activation device when you had him over for drinks."

Castle swears quietly under his breath and sighs heavily. His grip on me tightens, which only makes me blush. And of course, when I catch Neve and Eilish looking right at me and grinning like a couple of Cheshire cats, I blush even deeper.

Yeah, that's going to be a bigger conversation later. But for now, especially when I see Eilish waggle her brows and dart her eyes meaningfully between Castle and me as she holds a thumb way, way up, I just smile.

It's going to be okay.

We're going to be okay.

Jack sticks around for a little bit answering what questions he can from everyone. When he's gone, Ya-ya announces that she's got lunch ready in the dining room.

But that's when Cillian, who's been oddly quiet the entire meeting with Dorsey, gets to his feet and clears his throat.

"If I could...I'd like a minute with just my family."

Dimitra smiles, nodding her head as Kratos and Deimos escort her out. Ares gives Neve's hand a squeeze and follows along with Hades and Elsa. Gavan gives Eilish a kiss on the cheek and does the same. I start to stand, but then gasp, a happy little flutter rippling in my stomach as Castle grabs my wrist firmly.

"In case you've forgotten," he murmurs right into my ear, making me flush. "You *are* family, Mrs. Kildare."

I turn to smirk at him. "You know, we never actually discussed changing my last name."

"Well, we're discussing it now," he growls, grinning as he leans close to brush his lips against my ear again. "Can't really be the king of the Irish Mafia with a Greek queen sitting at my side."

"Well, sucks to be you, because I'm not going anywhere."

He chuckles, rolling his eyes. "I meant the name, baby girl."

I blush, dragging my teeth over my lower lip. “Calliope Kildare *does* have a nice ring to it, I’ll give you that...”

“See?” He makes me giggle when he swats my ass. “We’ll get a few pounds of corned beef and cabbage in you and make a proper Irish lass of you yet.”

I laugh as his lips find mine.

...Which is *exactly* when Cillian loudly clears his throat again.

I blush, pulling away and groaning when Neve, Eilish, and Una all grin impishly at me.

“Are you done?” Cillian says icily.

“Yeah, sorry, boss.” Castle chuckles before he suddenly frowns as he catches himself on the whole “boss” thing.

“Shit, sorry,” he frowns. “Old habits.”

Cillian grins and then sighs deeply. “There’s something you need to know.”

Castle smiles wryly, nodding. “Yeah, I talked to Deimos. I’m not it.”

Neve frowns. “Not what?”

Cillian starts to open his mouth, but Castle’s faster. “You remember how your dad and Svetlana Tsarenko were having an affair?”

Her face shadows, but she nods. “Yeah,” she mutters bitterly. “I remember.”

“And there was something hinting that there was a child of that affair?”

Her lips twist. “I remember that too. But no one knows who ___”

It clicks for both her and Eilish at the same time, and both of them go white as they stare at him.

“*Castle*—” Eilish chokes with a stunned look on her face. “Are you—”

“Nah,” he smiles and shakes his head, reaching over and ruffling her hair. “Jeremy was the kid, from an affair your father was having with Luca Carveli’s niece.”

My heart twists a little at the way both of the girls’ faces fall a little.

“I’m still just your former bodyguard,” Castle chuckles quietly. “But hey, you wouldn’t really want to be related to me, would—”

“The devil, as they say,” Cillian growls quietly, interrupting from where he’s leaning against a side table. He arches a brow when he has all of our attention. “Is in the details. And by details, I mean *money*.”

He turns to me.

“Your brother Deimos, Callie, is good at digging. *Very* good, actually.”

“Yeah, well, he practiced by stealing and reading my diary when we were kids.”

Cillian smiles. “Well, as good as he is, I couldn’t ignore a few details.”

Castle frowns. “Like?”

“Like why Declan was paying your parents’ rent and sending them checks every month.”

Castle shrugs. “My dad did a lot of dirty jobs for Declan. For Dominic Farrell, too. It could have just been kickbacks for the

work.”

“*Could’ve* been, yeah,” Cillian nods slowly. Then he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a little plastic bag. “These,” he says thoughtfully, “are facial hair trimmings from your razor.”

Next to me, Castle’s brow knits. “Okay?”

“And these...” he lifts two more bags out of his other pocket. “Are samples from Svetlana Tsarenko and Declan.”

My pulse skips.

“From?” Castle growls.

Cillian’s brilliant green eyes blink calmly. “I dug up their graves the other night.”

I blanch, and even Neve and Eilish look a little sick as we all stare at their uncle.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Cil,” Castle mutters.

Cillian grins. “That was a *joke*. Jesus. These are hair samples from old clothes of theirs—a coat of Declan’s I found in a box in the basement of the brownstone, and one of Svetlana’s hats that was in storage with a bunch of Gavan’s father’s things.”

I let the breath that’s been trapped in my lungs out in a slow stream as Castle shakes his head.

“Oh, so we tell jokes now?”

Cillian smirks as he glances at Una, reaching over to squeeze her hand.

“What can I say. I’m evolving.” His smile fades as he turns back to level a look at Castle. “Jeremy DiMarco was indeed Declan’s son.”

Something painful flickers over Castle’s face, but he nods as he sweeps it aside. “Well, then there we go. DNA test and

everything.” He smiles wryly at Neve and Eilish. “Guess you’re off the hook for presents on national sibling day—”

“And so are you.”

The entire room goes pin-drop silent. My heart thuds as Castle’s hand tightens in mine. And when I turn, he’s staring right at Cillian with a stunned expression on his face.

“Hang on,” Neve breathes. “*What?*”

Cillian’s face stretches into a grin. “Neve, Eilish, allow me to introduce you to your half-brother Christopher.”

There’s a single second of utter silence. And then the room *explodes* with emotion and screams of joy. I’m screaming, Neve and Eilish are screaming as they hurl themselves at Castle and wrap their arms around him. He still looks completely gobsmacked, but there’s a smile on his face that lights up my whole heart as he’s hugging them back in complete bewilderment.

My two friends whirl to hug me so tight it hurts, all of us squealing and screaming and crying at once. They tell me how excited they are that Castle and I are together, and how much they love that we’re a real couple now. So, I guess we’re having that conversation sooner rather than later.

Cillian shakes Castle’s hand and then gives a hearty laugh as he grabs him into a bear hug.

“Guess I always was that unhinged uncle you saw me as.”

Castle still isn’t saying anything. It’s like he’s too stunned, and smiling too hard to actually be able to form words.

Cillian chuckles as he claps him on the shoulder. “So, enjoy the throne you were *literally* born to sit on, Mr. Kildare.”

Somehow, through the chaos and the screaming and the tears of joy and hugs, I find myself back in his arms, looking up into those piercing blue eyes.

“You haven’t even said a word,” I giggle quietly as I lean up close to his face.

“I know,” he murmurs, cupping my chin, looking deeply into my eyes.

“Don’t know what to say?”

“Nah.” He shakes his head. “I know exactly what to say.”

I grin. “Yeah? And what’s that?”

“That I love you so fucking much.”

My lips slam to his as Neve, Eilish, Una, and Cillian burst into applause.

A crush might still be a disease. It might still be a cancer that poisons your heart and taints your blood until you think you’re going to lose yourself in the agony of it all.

But where I used to think it was incurable, I know now that I was wrong.

There *is* a cure.

Love.

A crush will crush you.

But love will lift you higher than you could’ve ever known.

EPILOGUE

CASTLE

“SO, THESE ARE FOR YOU.”

Unceremoniously, I drop the small bouquet of daisies on Cynthia’s gravestone. My brow furrows as I stare down at the simple marker, my back molars grinding.

“This isn’t me” I continue. “But I’m trying this new thing where I let go of the past that’s keeping me stuck there.” I shake my head and look away. “You were a shitty mom, Cynthia. But...” I shrug and glance back at the marker. “But at least you were there, a little, when no one else was. When nobody wanted me at all...even if you were taking a paycheck for it.”

I hold up the letter that Callie found in our old apartment in Alphabet City. I’ve had it checked by an expert against other samples of Svetlana’s handwriting. It’s definitely hers. She’s the one who was threatening Cynthia, telling her not to come by the house anymore or even mention me to her ever again.

The lighter flicks in my other hand, and the flame touches the corner of the letter. I watch the old, dry paper flare up and turn to ash before I drop it onto the grass.

“No, I don’t forgive you. Not for what you let him get away with. Not for me. Not *ever* for Kelly,” I growl bitterly. “But

I'm letting go of my anger toward you, and if that brings you a little bit of extra peace wherever you are, then you're welcome." I take a slow breath and then exhale. "Goodbye, Cynthia. I won't be coming back here."

And that's that. I turn and walk away, pausing only for a second to smirk at the pile of churned earth and rubble that was my adoptive father's grave until last night, when I had the whole thing destroyed.

I spit on it before I walk away. Because fuck him.

Kelly's final resting place isn't anywhere near these two assholes. I had her moved when I was still in basic training to a nature preserve further out on Long Island. The place allows for the interment of human remains provided a tree is planted on top of the final resting place, along with a marker. Kelly's at rest under a flowering dogwood tree.

Her favorite.

Callie's already finished when I get back to the car, leaning against it next to the rock-dust-covered sledgehammer.

"All done?"

She nods. "*Yuuup.*"

"And how'd it go?"

My wife grins. "Fun as *fuck*. Should've done that years ago."

We've both exorcised some demons on this little trip to the cemetery today. I got to spit on Robert James' destroyed grave and exhale Cynthia from my lungs. And Callie got to smash the shit out of her father's marker, which is in the same cemetery further up the hill.

"Wow. You didn't even get a single mark on your dress."

Callie pantomimes “fancy dusting” her shoulders off with a cute little haughty look on her face. “You know me.”

“You mean an agent of chaos, and the hell-raising queen of breaking the rules herself?”

“Like you don’t love the shit out of me for that.”

“Oh, the thing is,” I grin, yanking her into me, “I *do*.”

“Smart answer,” she murmurs, stretching up on her tiptoes to kiss me. “And have I mentioned lately how good you look in a tux?”

“Nah, but you probably wrote about it in your diary or something.”

She snorts, rolling her eyes and slapping my chest playfully. “Jerk.”

I laugh and kiss her again. “C’mon, we’ll be late if we don’t hurry.”

We climb into my new Range Rover—one *without* bullet holes in the back—and start to head back to the city. We’ve got a wedding to attend: the joining in holy matrimony of one Ms. Eilish Kildare, aka my half-sister, to one Mr. Gavan Tsarenko, at a certain Greek family’s jaw-dropping home atop a certain building on Central Park South.

“How much time *do* we have?”

I glance at the GPS. “If traffic doesn’t screw with us, we’ll be there pretty much right on time. Why?”

She shrugs, turning to look out the passenger window. “No reason. It’s just that flushing out the past like that sort of makes me want to fuck your brains out.”

I groan, my jaw grinding as my cock instantly thickens in my pants.

“*Callie...*”

She turns to grin devilishly at me, batting her eyes. “What?”

“Don’t fucking tease me like that, baby girl,” I growl as I merge onto the freeway.

Suddenly, I feel fingers on my thigh.

“Who said anything about teasing?”

I groan again as she slides her hand to the bulge in my tux pants, cupping my swollen cock and breathing heavily.

“Fuckkk,” she purrs, stroking me as I grow harder and harder. “How the fuck are you so big?”

I grin. “That is *all* you, baby girl.”

“*Good answer.*”

Then she’s pulling my zipper down and sliding her hand into my pants and boxers.

“Shit, Callie...”

“Just keep your eyes on the road.”

She strokes the length of me, her small, soft hand sliding up and down my thick cock until I’m so hard it hurts as it throbs inside my pants.

“Hmm. I think we need to take care of that.”

My hands grip the wheel tighter when she pulls me out through my unzipped fly, and I gasp quietly as her hand slips up and down.

I glance over to her when I hear the click of her seatbelt undoing.

“Callie—”

“Just watch the road,” she giggles, twisting onto her knees in the seat and leaning over the center console. Her breath teases against my shaft, and then suddenly, I hiss as I feel her hot little mouth slide down over the head.

“Fuck, baby...” I groan, my hips rising involuntarily as she swallows my head into the back of her throat. One hand leaves the steering wheel, and Callie whimpers around my cock when I grab a fistful of her hair.

I know she loves it when I take control like this, so that’s exactly what I do, grabbing her hair and pumping her mouth up and down my swollen dick. I can feel her drool dripping down to my balls, and when I grind my cock even deeper down her throat, she whimpers eagerly.

Her tongue swirls around my head and she moans when I let go of her hair to slide my hand down her back. I grab her dress, hiking it up to her waist before my palm slides over her ass.

Thank God for tinted windows. It’s broad daylight, and there’s not a fucking chance I’d let a single other person see her like this.

Not without running them off the fucking road, that is.

My hand slips under her thong, sliding lower between her thighs until my fingers drag through her messy little pussy from behind. Callie moans louder, gagging on my cock as she slurps and sucks on me. I sink two fingers into her pussy, stroking against her g-spot as my thumb rolls over her clit.

She pulls away, panting, her lips swollen and her eyes hooded with lust as she strokes me against her cheek.

“I want to taste you,” she whimpers. “I want you to come in my mouth.”

It’s a seriously tempting offer.

But I have a better proposition.

“That’s not where I want my cum, baby girl,” I growl, fingering her harder as she starts to squirm and whine in pleasure.

“Where—”

“Come here.”

I slide my fingers from her sweet little cunt, suck them clean, and beckon her over. Her eyes widen when I glance down at my cock.

“Wait, are you serious?”

She whimpers when I grab her chin and pull her close to me, keeping my eyes on the road the whole time as I nip at her earlobe.

“You have exactly three seconds to sink that tight little pussy all the way down on my cock, or I’m pulling over to the side of the road and fucking you over the hood so that everyone can see what a greedy little cumslut you are.”

The look on her face, suffused red, is pure need. The car actually might jerk a little bit as she crushes her mouth to mine, climbs onto my lap, and pulls her dress up. I growl as I feel her slide her panties to the side and rub her pussy over my head. And then she starts to lower herself onto me, and moans when her cunt swallows me whole.

“Such a good fucking girl,” I groan, one hand on the wheel, the other on her ass. Callie moans deeply, grinding herself on my dick as she nips at my neck. I keep watching traffic over

her shoulder as I start to guide her ass, feeling her slick pussy snugly gripping me all the way up, only to swallow me back down again.

“Oh *fuck*, Castle...”

“Bounce on that fucking cock, baby girl,” I growl into her ear as I drive. “Feel how fucking tight your greedy little cunt is, so fucking filled by my big fat dick.”

She cries out, bouncing faster and faster, taking every thick inch of me with every stroke. My fingers dig into her ass, rocking her up and down as I lift my hips and fuck up into her. The silky tightness of her pussy drags up and down as she bites my ear again and whimpers those little moans of hers that always make me go fucking crazy.

“*Do you feel how wet you make me?*” she coos into my ear, riding me harder and faster as my balls swell. “*Do you feel how messy you make my pussy, Daddy?*”

“You’re going to make come with talk like that, baby girl,” I rasp into her ear, bucking my hips faster and harder and ramming my cock into her as she moans feverishly. “And when I do, I’m going to fill this little cunt with my cum. Then I’m going to slide your panties back into place. And when we get to that wedding, you’re not going anywhere to clean up. You’re going to sit there by my side the whole night, with my cum spilling into your panties and rubbing against your pussy, so that you remember *whose you are*.”

“*Castle!*”

The moan rips from her throat, and when she suddenly jolts and spasms around me, I can feel her pussy rippling as the orgasm crashes over her. Her walls clamp down around me,

milking the cum from my balls as she bites down harder on my neck.

The feel of her shattering around me, mixed with the adrenaline hit of fucking her while driving at eighty miles an hour is too much. With a guttural groan I let go, grabbing her ass tight as my hot cum explodes into her. Again and again, my cock twitches and throbs, spurting rope after rope of cum deep into her pussy as we both grind slowly together.

I stick to my promise. After we fix our clothes in the car, we ride up to the top of her family's building in silence, hand in hand, with big shit-eating grins on our faces.

It's not very subtle.

Hades shoots me a dark glare when he spots the way we're walking—like, well, like we just fucked each other's brains out. But then Elsa rolls her eyes and slaps his chest, shooting Callie and I a grin and a knowing look, and he settles down.

We all clap and cheer when the new Mr. and Mrs. Gavan Tsarenko run back down the aisle, hands clasped and beaming. We drink champagne and dance with our families and friends, rubbing shoulders with Gavan's Bratva pals long into the night.

It's somewhere past two in the morning when Neve and Ares finally throw in the towel and head home. Cillian and Una follow them out shortly thereafter. Hades and Elsa are long gone, and Kratos is already passed out in one of the chairs in the tent Dimitra had set up on the lawn. Deimos gives me a long hug before kissing his sister on the cheek and helping his sleeping brother inside.

Then, it's just Callie and I.

I take her hand wordlessly, leading her through the gardens until we get to a familiar, quiet corner.

Where it all began.

And there beside the rose bushes, on the edge of the world, with just her and I, I tell her I love her. I tell her I'll *always* love her. And then I kiss her, long and slow and deep.

That's what living is for: living. The past can stay there, dead and buried.

But the future is ours.

Together.

The Dark Hearts series continues with Deimos' story in

Reckless Hearts.

Haven't gotten enough of Castle and Callie?

Get their extra scene here, or type this link into your browser:

<http://Bookhip.com/WMGVXDZ>

This isn't an epilogue or continuation to *Stolen Hearts*. But this extra hot "follow-up" story is guaranteed to keep the steam going.

DEVIANT HEARTS

Thank you so much for reading *Stolen Hearts*! If you enjoyed the book, I'd be incredibly grateful if you could leave a review!

As mentioned, the Dark Hearts series continues with Deimos' story in *Reckless Hearts*, a dark enemies-to-lovers mafia romance. But if *Stolen Hearts* was your first foray into the Dark Hearts series, you can also start from the very beginning with *Deviant Hearts*, Ares and Neve's story. You can even read a sneak peek of that book on the following pages.

There are also other characters mentioned in *Stolen Hearts* who already have their own books. Konstantin and Mara's story, for instance, can be read in the Savage Heirs series. You can read a sneak peek of *Savage Heir*, book 1 in that series after the one for *Deviant Hearts*.

You can find complete book lists and suggested reading orders on my website.

www.jaggercolewrites.com

Scroll on for a sneak peek of *Deviant Hearts*.

Neve

Fuck. Me.

He's doing it.

Again.

I tell myself not to look. I tell myself to keep my eyes on the book and the study notes in front of me, because NYU seriously *does not care* what my last name is, and they'll have no issue failing my sorry ass from my government and public policy master's program if I don't focus.

I tell myself it's high time I bought some fucking curtains, so I can avoid this...*distraction*...since it's clearly shaping up to be a frequent thing.

But the problem with telling yourself not to do something that deep down you *really* want to?

The "deep down" part always wins. *Always.*

Or, at least it does with me. Which might say more about me and my own self-control...or lack thereof.

No. It's definitely easier to go ahead and blame my new neighbor across the street. Let's go with that.

I mean, *he's* the one that keeps walking around naked in a penthouse made out of fucking *glass*.

Mark Twain once said, "There is a charm about the forbidden that makes it unspeakably desirable." But, smart as he was, it's clear Mr. Twain never had the neighbor I do. If he had, I'm pretty sure he'd have taken a whole lot of the whimsical "charm" out of that statement.

And sure enough, despite my best—or, okay, let's be real, *mediocre*—efforts, soon enough, my gaze shifts from the notes

in front of me to the man across the steel canyon from me.

Sweet Jesus.

He's a freaking *god*. Tall and lean, and as muscled as a superhero. Shoulders and arms built to take away your ability to speak. Chiseled abs and those grooved hip-muscle things that I don't even know what they're called but they seem to be evolution's way of making even smart women go fucking stupid.

Tattoos for days. Deeply tanned, Mediterranean skin, with a shadow on his razor-sharp jaw, and dark, *perfectly* tousled hair.

It's like living next to a goddamn Avenger who models for Armani while he's not busy saving the world from Thanos. No wonder he seems to have a problem with wearing clothes.

Heat floods my cheeks as I glance across the chasm between us. The morning light streams right through his penthouse, which is another annoyance.

Two months ago, my place was a dream apartment. A modern, light-filled loft at the top of a thirty-eight-story building. So high up that I didn't even have neighbors who could see into this place.

Is it more than a little ostentatious? Well...*yeah*. It's a thousand square feet of modern glass and steel on the West Side overlooking the Hudson. Was it absurdly expensive? Also, yeah. But there's gotta be *some* perks that come with being a Kildare to offset the downsides.

Issues making friends my entire life because my family is the Irish Mafia? Check. Problems having any sort of romantic relationships, for the same reason? Check and double check.

Aimless, drifting, utterly unsure of what I want to do with my life, because what exactly *do* mafia princesses do all day?

Check and fucking mate.

For the last year, I've been throwing myself into this government and policy master's program at NYU. But after that? Who knows. For now, I'm at least finally living on my own.

But life still sort of feels just like something I'm drifting through.

Truth be told, I was pretty sure my uncle Cillian was going to shut down my plans of finally moving out of the main family house and into this place. Especially with all the violence and upheaval in the last few months as the fighting between the Irish Kildare and Greek Drakos families escalated to world-war-three levels.

But my dream apartment and the building itself are incredibly secure and easy to defend. Especially when there's a rotating crew of four Kildare guys constantly guarding the lobby—much, I'm sure, to the chagrin of the other tenants.

Yet that whole “dream apartment” thing quickly lost some of its luster when they completed construction on the building across the street, next to mine. The building with the double-height glass penthouse that rises two floors *above* my thirty-eighth-floor apartment, that now blocks part of my view of the river.

His glass penthouse.

The man with the god-like body and the aversion to clothing.
The man with the sensual tattoos and the swarthy, lean look of a Trojan warrior.

The man I have absolutely *no* business gawking at and thinking these sort of sinful thoughts about. Not just because it

makes me a spying creep. But because he's a man I should have every reason in the world to hate.

He's not just my neighbor.

He's the *enemy*.

But try telling that to my under-satisfied libido and clenched thighs.

At last he moves from where he's been standing at the windows staring out at the Hudson with a cup of coffee in his hand and, mercifully, disappears from view.

Finally.

Distraction gone, I manage to pull my attention back to the study notes in front of me. Nina Simone croons over the sound system as I lose myself in the books. But a handful of minutes later, movement at my peripheral vision drags my eyes back up again. He's back. And wonder of wonders, he's dressed—in an impeccably-tailored dark suit. I yank my eyes back to my notes, then back to him.

This time, he's finally gone.

I exhale slowly, swallowing as I drag my attention back to my government policy books. I don't have time for these distractions. Not when I've got two weeks of notes to memorize and *also* a Kildare family meeting in...

I glance at my phone and groan.

Shit. In, basically, now. As if on cue, the buzzer goes off for my front door. Sighing, I close the books and pad across the living room. I glance through the peephole out of habit. Then I grin and open the door wide.

Eilish's brows furrow as she looks me up and down.

“Neve, what the fuck. We’re going to be late, and you’re not even dressed?”

My brow scrunches as I glance down at myself.

“You need to get *dressed*, Neve,” my younger sister sighs.

“I’m dressed!”

“Those look like pajamas.”

“So? They’re comfy.” I raise my gaze past her to the tall guy standing behind her. “Cas, back me up here.”

But Castle just shakes his sandy blonde head and lifts a muscled shoulder apologetically.

“Cillian wants you dressed properly, kid.”

I roll my eyes at the word kid, but I let it go. Castle’s been Eilish’s and my—I suppose the word is “bodyguard”—for the last ten years. Growing up, all of our friends drooled over the six-and-a-half-foot tall, built-like-a-quarterback shadow that was always with us. That, or they were *sure* one of us was going to get scandalously tangled up in some steamy, x-rated tryst with him.

But, *no way*. No way to an “eww” degree. Yes, Castle is ridiculously handsome. But to Eilish and me he’s always been the older brother we never had. And we’re the perpetually annoying-but-loveable kid sisters *he* never had.

Which is why he can still get away with calling me “kid” or doing annoying big brother-type shit like messing up my hair even though I’m twenty-four.

I stick my bottom lip out, giving Castle my best puppy-dog eyes.

“But *Caaaastle*—”

“Enough with the waif eyes. Go get changed, Neve,” he grunts. “Your uncle isn’t exactly one to mince words, and he wants you dressed up.”

“But *why*? What’s this meeting even about?”

Eilish shrugs. “Beats me. Bet it has something to do with your new neighbor, though.”

Annoyed as I am to be forced to give up my sweatpants and hoodie, I know Castle well enough to know there’s no way he’s budging on this. And I know my Uncle Cillian well enough to know that one, there’s no wiggle room here, but more importantly two, there’s a reason he wants us looking sharp. Even if I have no idea what that reason is.

I root around in my disaster zone of a bedroom, stripping out of my hoodie and sweats and pulling on clean underwear and clothes. Five minutes later, I emerge in a green puff-sleeve top, black jeans, and heeled black boots, shoving my long red hair up in a loose ponytail.

Eilish, predictably, rolls her eyes.

“*That’s* dressed up?”

“I could go back to my extensive sweatpants collection, if you prefer.”

Eilish sighs, reaching up to smooth the single errant lock of blonde back behind her ear. She’s right. I’m still fairly casually dressed. Especially next to my princess of a little sister, who looks like a modern-day blonde Jackie-O in a pink Chanel jersey dress and heels, her hair and makeup immaculate. At *nine-thirty in the freaking morning*, no less. So sue me, this is the best I can do.

Finally, she grins as she rolls her eyes again.

“Okay, *okay*, fine. C’mon. We shouldn’t be late.”

“Hey, I’m not the one getting bent out of shape about the dress code.”

I glance to Castle for at least a chuckle. But he’s looking even more grim and stoic than usual.

“What’s up with you?”

He shrugs, turning away.

“Just don’t want to be late. C’mon.”

I frown. “Cas, seriously, what’s up?”

There’s a glint in his eye when he glances back at me for half a second. But still, he gives nothing away.

“Let’s get where we need to go, kid,” he murmurs quietly.

I shoot Eilish a puzzled look as we follow him out the door. But she just shakes her head and gives me an “I have no idea” face. Given that my sister is incapable of being anything but cheerful, talking shit about *anyone* no matter how terrible they are, or lying in any capacity, it’s clear she’s also in the dark.

Twenty minutes later, Castle is pulling the white armored Range Rover up to the curb outside O’Bannon’s. The midtown Irish pub has been our uncle’s temporary center of business and war room since he moved to New York from London a few months ago, after the petty scuffles between the Kildare family and the Drakos family turned into all-out war.

After things went nuclear, when the Drakos family lost Vasilis, their head of operations in New York, and we lost Declan, the head of ours.

Declan, as in, *my father*.

The side door to O'Bannon's, which leads up to the second floor where Cillian's been holding court the last few months, is guarded by four Kildare men with not-so-hidden bulges of sidearms under their dark jackets. One nods stiffly at Castle and goes to open the door to the bar for us, when suddenly there's the sound of a car screeching to a stop at the curb behind us.

The hairs on the back of my neck start to prickle as I slowly turn to frown at the black Escalade. And when the back door opens, and a man in a dark suit with pure malice on his face steps out, my heart leaps into my throat.

"*RUN!*" I scream as I grab Eilish's arm, whirling to bolt into O'Bannon's before the bullets start flying.

Because I know damn well who the man who just stepped out of the SUV is. Hades Drakos: a dangerous, certifiable psychopath and second-in-command of the Drakos family. Basically, public enemy number two if your last name is Kildare.

As I yank my sister towards the door, I realize something odd: the guards aren't launching into action. Castle himself is just standing there, glowering at the second-oldest Drakos brother as he grins savagely at me.

"Cas?" I hiss hoarsely, my pulse thudding. Clearly, Eilish is just as out of the loop as I am, because she's still cowering behind me, shaking.

"It's okay, kid," Castle mutters quietly. He glances behind me, his look softening as it frequently does when it comes to Eilish. Which is totally understandable. I'm the sister with a chip on her shoulder and an axe to grind. Eilish is the sweet one. The one who's arguably *way* too soft for this dangerous world that we live in.

“But that’s—!”

“*Boo*,” Hades chuckles thinly, winking at me in a way that sends a shiver up my spine. He rolls his muscled shoulders, the tattoo ink that curls up from inside the collar of his dress shirt rippling as he buttons his jacket.

“Well, Pillow Fort. Can we go inside now?”

The creases in Castle’s brow deepen as he squares off with Hades.

“It’s Castle.”

“I really don’t give a shit. Are we doing this or not?”

I frown as I turn to Castle again.

“Doing *what*, Cas? What are we—”

“Open the doors.”

I stiffen at the deep, powerful voice that rumbles behind me. A voice that causes a tingling sensation to creep over my skin, electrifying me as deeply as it scares me. The feeling grows and throbs deeper and warmer, until I can feel my cheeks reddening as something wicked pools between my thighs.

I turn, and my core clenches tight.

It’s *him*.

My neighbor. The forbidden distraction. The man with the god-like body built for sin who I have no business fantasizing about, but God help me I do.

Because my neighbor isn’t just eye candy.

He’s *Ares fucking Drakos*, the brand-new king of the entire Drakos family.

I'm vaguely aware of more people getting out of a second and a third SUV that pull up behind the first—the other siblings in the Drakos family, and various other guards. As the seconds tick by, and as Ares' piercing, dark-eyed gaze continues to stab right into me, the question of why he's here fades into the background.

And the question of why he's looking at me like he's trying to figure out how to swallow me in one bite comes to the fore.

"Inside, all of you," he growls quietly, his voice filled with unquestioned power. Two of his three brothers—Hades and Kratos—and his sister Calliope glance at me with slightly raised eyebrows as they file past me into O'Bannon's. Their guards and the Kildare men follow.

Castle clears his throat, taking Eilish by the shoulders as if to escort her inside. I know I should go too. But somehow, I'm stuck. It's as if my gaze is bound to Ares. Or as if *his* gaze has me pinned to the very pavement beneath my feet.

We're on a busy New York sidewalk. And yet, it's as if we're suddenly in a bubble of silence. As if the entire rest of the world fades away to a low hum, until I can actually hear my throat tightening when he starts to walk towards me.

I shiver when he stops right in front of me, looming over me. I want to sneer at him. Or spit on his fancy shoes. Or worse. But all I can do is purse my lips and glare at him.

Ares smirks down into my eyes.

"They haven't told you yet, have they?"

I swallow.

"Told me *what*?"

One of his dark brows raises in amusement.

“Never mind. You’ll find out soon enough. You know who I am?”

“Of course I know who you are.”

“I mean, apart from being your neighbor.”

I stiffen, desperately trying to swallow back the heat from my face.

“Neighbor?” My voice cracks. Not badly, but enough. “I hadn’t realized.”

The dangerous and lethally-attractive man looming over me smiles ruthlessly, coldly.

“You don’t recognize me?”

“I—I guess not.”

“Would it help if I took my clothes off?”

Dear. GOD.

My face turns as hot as the sun as I pray for a sinkhole to open at my feet.

“I—I—”

“The meeting is about to start.”

He lets his lips curl slightly, giving me the faintest flash of white teeth. Then, without blinking, he starts to move past where I’m still glued to the sidewalk.

He pauses right next to me, and my breath sucks in as he leans down, so close I can smell the woody, elegant scent of his cologne and feel the heat of his breath in my ear.

“Oh, and Neve...” he growls quietly. “Peach isn’t your color.”

My brows knit as I start to turn towards him in confusion.

“I’m not wearing—”

Oh God.

Yes, I am.

My mind flashes back to rooting around in my light-filled bedroom as I yanked off my hoodie and sweatpants. Where I pulled out the green top and black jeans...

After putting on the laundry-day pair of peach-colored panties.

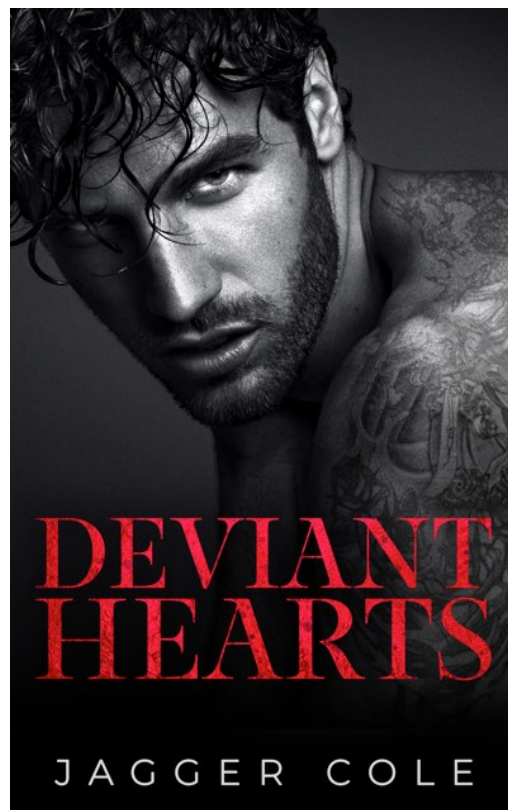
I'm not the only person spying on their neighbor.

Son of a bitch.

Ares clears his throat, straightening up and buttoning his jacket as I melt into a puddle of mortification.

“See you in there, princess.”

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SAVAGE HEIR

Chapter 1

Tenley

“You can’t actually be serious.”

My eyes slide from my hands, busy buttoning up the front of my raincoat, into the mirror where they meet Charlotte’s. I smile curiously.

“Of course I’m serious. All the sports programs here are *way* too competitive for me to have a prayer at getting into, and the math team doesn’t have its first meeting until halfway through the term.”

My roommate pales, shaking her head. “No, you need to find something else. Seriously. Look, I know this is all new to you, but I’m telling you—”

“Char, it’s just tutoring. I’ve done it a million times before.”

Okay, I’ve done it a million times before in public school, in North Carolina and then DC after we moved there. I’ve never done it at the single most exclusive, prestigious private preparatory school in the world.

But just the same... tutoring is tutoring, isn’t it? And apparently, even at *the* Oxford Hills Academy, which guides the world’s most elite, connected, and—let’s be real—*rich*

students get into whatever higher education best suits their perfect pedigrees, there are still ones who need a leg up.

And tutoring looks *amazing* on pre-college resumes.

“Tenley...” Charlotte’s lips are thin, and the color has fully left her face as it shakes back and forth. “You can’t tutor *him*. You can’t go *near* him.”

My brow furrows as I turn with a smirk. “Charlotte, I helped with SAT prep in some of the most dangerous schools in DC.” I glance around at the stunningly gorgeous living area—complete with Tudor-style paned glass windows, curved, intricate ceiling beams, wood inlay shelves of books, and a fireplace that would fit right in at Hogwarts. “I mean, look where we are. I’m sure I’ll be—”

“They call him ‘The Wolf’ for a reason, Tenley,” she hisses quietly.

I swallow. It’s not the first time I’ve heard the nickname.

In the three days since I moved into the student housing with Charlotte, I’ve heard the moniker whispered like a curse, or maybe a prayer, throughout the common areas of campus.

Ilya Volkov: The Wolf of Oxford Hills.

I’ve looked him up online. I mean how do you *not* after a nickname like that. I’ve never even met him or seen him face-to-face. But one Google image search later and I fully understood why he’s the Wolf.

Because when that man looks into a camera lens, it’s like a predator ready to pounce on his prey.

Well, that and the fact that his last name is literally Russian for “wolf”, I guess. His last name is also as synonymous with organized crime in Russia as “Capone” would be in the states.

In fact, his uncle is *the* Yuri Volkov, head of the notoriously brutal and cold-blooded Volkov Bratva family.

My face flushes as I think back to the face of Ilya spread across the search engine page. Dark hair, green eyes, and the chiseled good looks and bone structure of an aristocratic model. But the whole visage is washed in a brooding darkness that you can't help but shiver at.

Just like I do, right now, even thinking of it. But I steel myself and shake that shiver off. Ilya Volkov might be "The Wolf." He might—allegedly—be heir apparent to one of the most dangerous, powerful, and wealthy crime families in the world. He might, bewilderingly, be on academic probation after some issues last year.

But I won't let any of that affect me or throw me off. Because all of this is part of The Plan.

Okay, so The Plan has been slightly edited by the media and consulting team surrounding my father's anticipated political moves. But it's still mostly The Plan I've had in my head since I was twelve.

Graduate valedictorian, then Columbia for undergrad where I will, of course, graduate with honors. After that, it's right to Harvard Law, and interning at the renowned Welsley and Kane who will make me a Junior Associate. From there, I'll make moves to the even more prestigious Lancer, Stein, and Ramirez firm back in DC, where I'll make partner within two years. After a few years there, I'll climb the ladder into a judgeship for the District of Columbia. And by the time I'm forty, I'll make the push to the final goal: Supreme Court Justice Tenley Chambers—the youngest Justice in history.

Lofty? Perhaps. Impossible? Not with The Plan, which is why I have it.

In the last year, though, The Plan has changed. Sort of. It's been "recolored," as Jill, my father's new PR chief, put it. Because The Plan now involves a lot more than me.

The Plan now involves my father possibly becoming the next Vice President of the United States.

Currently, my dad is the US Secretary of State. Which, I'm under zero illusions, is almost entirely why and how I'm at Oxford Hills. It's the power and prestige he wields, not the money. We were never struggling when I was growing up. My dad did well as a Naval officer and lawyer with the military courts.

But there's "doing well" for normal people, and then there's "doing well" for the kind of people whose kids go to Oxford Hills.

And Oxford Hills is in a class entirely its own.

The students here are the upper echelon—the elite of the world's elite. The sons and daughters of billionaire tycoons, oligarchs, and royalty—literal, real royalty. I'm from an upper-middle-class suburb and public school. The other students here are from actual castles, or houses with their own zip codes, and have never washed a single teaspoon.

But six months ago, my dad was approached by Senator George North. The New York Senator is highly speculated, by the entire political media spectrum, to be the next President of the United States. He's already gotten a thumbs-up from the soon to be exiting current POTUS, and his team has picked my father to be his potential running mate when he announces.

Six months ago, life got *very* complicated. Suddenly, public school and the burbs wasn't enough. Being a model student

with the highest marks possible wasn't enough. No, I needed "elite status." I needed "pedigree."

I needed "a social life."

So, here I am: out of DC and across the ocean to the bucolic English countryside where Oxford Hills sits. Here, my image will be "perfected" by elite classes, elite friends, and an elite *boyfriend*.

My mouth tightens at the very thought of it.

Patrick North, Senator North's son, is also at Oxford Hills. Though, he's been here for the last three years, given that his father is a US Senator and billionaire investor. Granted, I'm not a political PR expert. But the idea of the soon-to-be-President's son dating the soon-to-be-Vice-President's daughter seems... gross to me. Jill and the PR team, however, thinks it's a slam-dunk for the polls. Senator North agrees, and my dad seems to just be along for the wild ride.

So now I have a new school, a new country, and a new fake boyfriend to pose for the cameras with.

But at least the new roommate is all sorts of awesome. Charlotte's like me. Which is to say, being here gives her imposter-syndrome to the max, too. Char's been at Oxford Hills for a year already. But like me, she doesn't *really* belong here.

A little over a year ago, Charlotte's mother, a very regular, normal schoolteacher from a London suburb, married the King—the actual, real King—of the small country of Luxlordia. That makes Charlotte an actual, real princess. Or, to a "normal" person like me, it does. To other royalty, it makes her an imposter.

That's basically how we became fast friends two months ago when we were notified we'd be roommates this term at Oxford Hills. A single phone call turned into almost nightly FaceTiming, and now we're best friends. And all because of the joke that the only reason we've been put together as roommates is because we're the "imposters."

The faux princess and the presidential race prop.

"Tenley."

Her voice snaps me out of my own head.

"You can't—"

"Charlotte, I'll be *fine*," I smile. Even though inside, my stomach knots. My heart clenches along with my fingers into the palm of my hand. I'm trying to be brave. But I can't help but feel like I'm about to walk right into the lion's den.

Or The Wolf's, as the case may be.

I glance outside through the elegant paned windows at the rain pouring down on the English countryside. I pull up the hood of my burgundy raincoat and turn back to the mirror. My blue eyes meet their reflection. I tuck an errant lock of red hair behind my ear, under the hood, and I take a breath.

Okay, I can do this. It's all for The Plan. And Supreme Court Justice and Time Magazine Person of the Year Tenley Chambers is *not* afraid of the Big Bad Wolf.

I glance back at Charlotte, curled on the couch, and smile. "I'll be back in an hour or so I guess."

"Yeah, unless he *eats you*," she mumbles with a worried frown. I roll my eyes, wave, and turn to head out the door into the rain.

Ilya Volkov is *not* going to eat me.

Student housing at Oxford Hills is quaint, but moneyed. There aren't big buildings full of dorms with communal bathrooms or anything like at other private schools. Students are paired two to a "cottage"—whimsically beautiful Tudor-style houses arranged in quads with three others just like it, with a shared, gorgeously manicured and landscaped backyard area.

Each cottage has a downstairs kitchen—though there's a Great Hall dining area that serves three meals and two teas a day—a study library and living room. Upstairs, there are two bedrooms with private bathrooms, and a common area between them.

Outside, I tighten my hood against the downpour and trudge across campus. The housing address for Ilya that the student services office gave me simply says "Lordship Manor." I haven't explored much of campus since I moved in three days ago. But an online map had it situated on the far side of the stables—yes, there are stables—and past the archery range. Yes, there's an archery range.

My rain boots splash through puddles along the slate and cobblestone walkways that crisscross the grounds of Oxford Hills. There are only a few other people out in this weather, but they seem to ignore me even when I give a wave.

I'm quickly learning that the children of the world's elite aren't the friendliest bunch.

I pass the stables, smiling at the smell of hay and horses. The archery range is empty and gray in the downpour. I've got my head down to ward off the rain, so I don't notice the wall and the gate until I'm almost smacking into it.

I startle and step back. I glance up, and my eyes widen.

Past the ivy-covered stone wall and ornate iron gate, is a *stunning* old home. It looks like it belongs on the grounds of Versailles or something—a huge, beautiful and yet imposing stone manor, half-covered in ivy. Black-iron windows dot the facade, and the front door looks like it would withstand a siege from a rival kingdom.

I'm about to dig my phone out and figure out how close I am to Ilya's cottage when my eyes suddenly snap to the words carved into the stone wall next to the gate. My mouth falls open in shock when I read "Lordship Manor."

What. The. Fuck.

This is where Ilya Volkov lives? It's no cottage. It's a fucking castle. I shake my head in disbelief. But, this is it, alright. And palace or not, the student I'm supposed to tutor in order to bulk up my resume is in there.

This will be fine.

Unless he eats you.

I tremble as I push the gate open and step through. I fast-walk up the stone walkway to the enormous, black iron and old-wood door. There's no doorbell.

I frown. What the hell am I supposed to do, use a battering ram? Have my squire call up to the Lord of the realm?

I take a breath, haul my fist back, and pound. Then I pound again, and again. Finally, I hear the sound of a lock being drawn back. The door cracks and then swings open. I blink in surprise.

The girl is not who I expected. She's... stunning. Tall, leggy, blonde, and absolutely gorgeous. And here I am standing in the pouring rain in a baggy red raincoat, hair stuck to my face, no makeup, looking like a shipwreck survivor.

The wrinkled-nose look of disdain she gives me seems to back that up.

“Who are you?” She sneers in a haughty, posh British accent. Her manicured brow arches with distaste.

“I—I’m the...”

I suddenly realize there’s a party going on behind her. The inside of the manor is even more gorgeous than the outside. And it’s full of students drinking, dancing, making out, smoking cigarettes—and something else by the smell of it—and roaring with laughter. Music thuds.

“Were you *invited*?” She sneers.

I frown. “No, I—I mean, I’m the—”

She suddenly smiles widely. “*Oh!* Oh, no, honey,” her smile thins. “We won’t need the maid service until tomorrow. And when you do come back, do make sure you come through the service entrance at the back, yeah?”

Her cold eyes pierce me as her lips thin. “Kay, *bye...*”

She starts to shut the door in my face. But my rain boot juts out to stop her. She looks at me like I’ve just peed on the royal jewels.

“Are you *fucking*—”

“I’m actually the tutor?” I smile weakly. Then I take a breath and compose myself. I stand a little taller. “I’m the tutor. I’m here for Ilya.”

She stares at me. But slowly, her lips curl in amusement.

“Ilya?” She says with a smirk.

“Uh, yes. Does he live here?”

She grins widely. “You’re sure you’re looking for Ilya. Ilya Volkov.”

Good grief.

“I’m sure,” I say tightly. “Can I—”

“Stay here, I’ll get him.” She starts to turn. But then she glances back at me and shakes her head. “You’re sure about this?”

“Pardon me?”

She chuckles as her eyes slide up and down over me, like she’s sizing me up. Her lips smirk.

“Oh, hon,” she shakes her head and gives me a faux-sympathetic look. “Just remember, you had the chance to run, and didn’t.”

She shuts the door. I stand there in the pouring rain, blinking and trying to figure out what the hell just happened.

The minutes tick by. After about five of them, I realize I’m being pranked, or hazed or something. Yeah, screw this. I can tutor anyone. But I don’t need to deal with this mean-girl shit.

As I start to turn to head back home, though, I hear the door creak. I roll my eyes, ready to give miss Ice Queen the finger. Slowly, I turn with the sneer on my lip as the door swings open.

And then my heart stops beating for a second.

Suddenly, I’m face-to-face with The Wolf himself.

The dark hair, the piercing green eyes. The dark, menacing look on his perfectly chiseled face. My eyes drop, and I blush.

He’s also shirtless. Shirtless, and... built. And tattooed to hell and back. My face burns as my eyes drink in the broad,

muscled shoulders, the lines of his photoshop-perfect chest and abs, and the grooves of his hips diving into the waist of his black jeans.

I slowly drag my eyes up to his stern but slightly amused face. And I tremble.

Ilya Volkov is stunning. And terrifying. And gorgeous. And dangerous looking. His hair is both tussled and perfect. Those almost supernatural green eyes pierce into my very soul. There's a smug smirk on his perfect lips, and what looks and smells like a spliff dangling from them.

He leans against the doorframe holding a crystal tumbler with what looks like whiskey or scotch in it. His cold, amused gaze sweeps over me.

I shiver under it.

“Well?” He growls—growls, literally. Like a... well, like a wolf.

I frown. “Well... what?”

His smirk deepens. “Well are we doing this outside in the rain or in my room?”

“I... uh, your room would be good?”

He chuckles darkly. I glance past him at the raging party going on.

“Look, if you're in the middle of something, I can always come back later—”

“I'm ready right now.” He shrugs, his eyes never blinking or leaving mine. “We could go right there on the floor in the middle of it, if an audience is your thing.”

I frown in confusion. “I'm sorry, do you know who I am?”

He shrugs. “I know what you want, and that works for me just fine.”

My frown deepens. “You know what I—” I shake my head. “I’m Tenley.”

“And I’ve got things to do, Tenley,” he grunts thinly. “So if it’s a shag you’re so desperate for, why don’t you turn around, lift that skirt, and say please.”

My mouth falls open, and I *stare* at him. “*Excuse me?!?*”

His lips grin; the spliff still dangling from them as smoke curls around his piercing green eyes.

“I said to be sure you said *please*—”

I don’t know what takes ahold of me. I just know that I am *not* putting up with frat-boy bullshit like this. I’ll take the being relocated to another fucking country. I’ll deal with the fake boyfriend crap. I’ll cater my perfect Plan to fit the new realities of my life. I’ll even deal with snobby rich brats talking down to me because I wasn’t born with a jeweled scepter up my ass.

But I will *not* put up with this shit.

Without really thinking it through, my hand darts out. I snatch the glass from his hands, haul back, and splash the contents of it right into his face.

I swear, the music behind him stops. The people behind him freeze and stare with horrified expressions. And it’s only then that I truly realize what I’ve just done.

I just threw a drink in the face of The Wolf—heir apparent to the most brutal mafia family in the world.

And yet, he says nothing. He doesn’t even blink. His gorgeous face drips with scotch. The spliff in his lips dangles limp and

soaked against his chin before he spits it out. His jaw grinds.

But suddenly, a fire sparks like molten green magic in his eyes. I gasp as he rapidly closes the short distance between us. His hand juts out, and I choke on my breath as he grabs the front of my raincoat at the neck in a fist. Fear spikes through me as he yanks me hard into him.

The glass drops from my fingers, landing in the wet grass next to the walkway. The hood falls back off my head. Rain pours down over the both of us in sheets as those eyes burn like green fire right into mine. His perfect lips pull back into an animal snarl, white teeth flashing in fury.

I'm petrified. I can't even scream, let alone try and break free and run for my very life. All I can do is shake as my wide eyes stare up into his.

The seconds tick by as I wait for death. Until finally, his mouth opens.

“Run away, little red,” he snarls thickly and quietly. His grip tightens, almost choking me with the neck of my coat. *“Run away, before I eat you up.”*

He shoves me back and lets go. I don't think. I don't ask what he means. The fight or flight internal war is over in a quarter second: flight wins.

I turn, and I *run* as fast as I can from the big, bad Wolf of Oxford Hills.

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Stalker of Mine

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jagger Cole

A reader first and foremost, Jagger Cole cut his romance writing teeth penning various steamy fan-fiction stories years ago. After deciding to hang up his writing boots, Jagger worked in advertising pretending to be Don Draper. It worked enough to convince a woman way out of his league to marry him, though, which is a total win.

Now, Dad to two little princesses and King to a Queen, Jagger is thrilled to be back at the keyboard.

When not writing or reading romance books, he can be found woodworking, enjoying good whiskey, and grilling outside - rain or shine.

You can find all of his books at

www.jaggercolewrites.com

