



Surrender

Angel's Halo NEXT GEN

USA TODAY & WALL STREET JOURNAL BETSELLING AUTHOR

TERRIANNE
BROWNING

surrender

TERRI ANNE BROWNING

Copyright © Terri Anne Browning/Anna Henson 2023

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of Terri Anne Browning, except as permitted under the US Copyright Act of 1976.

Surrender

Angel's Halo MC Next Gen

Written by Terri Anne Browning

All Rights Reserved ©Terri Anne Browning 2023

Edited by Lisa Hollett of Silently Correcting Your Grammar

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Surrender is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

No part of this book can be reproduced in any form by electronic or mechanical means, including storage or retrieval systems, without the express permission in writing from the author. The only exception is by a reviewer who may quote short excerpts in a review.

contents

Prologue

1. Samara
2. Elias
3. Samara
4. Elias
5. Samara
6. Elias
7. Samara
8. Elias
9. Samara
10. Elias
11. Samara
12. Elias
13. Samara
14. Elias
15. Samara
16. Samara
17. Elias
18. Samara
19. Samara
20. Elias
21. Samara
22. Elias
23. Samara
24. Samara
25. Elias
26. Samara
27. Elias
28. Samara
29. Samara

30. [Samara](#)
 31. [Samara](#)
 32. [Samara](#)
 33. [Samara](#)
 34. [Elias](#)
 35. [Samara](#)
 36. [Elias](#)
 37. [Samara](#)
 38. [Elias](#)
 39. [Samara](#)
 40. [Elias](#)
 41. [Samara](#)
 42. [Samara](#)
 43. [Elias](#)
 44. [Elias](#)
 45. [Elias](#)
 46. [Samara](#)
 47. [Samara](#)
 48. [Samara](#)
 49. [Samara](#)
 50. [Samara](#)
 51. [Elias](#)
 52. [Elias](#)
- [Epilogue](#)

prologue

SAMARA

THE BASS OF THE BEAT THUMPED THROUGH MY CHAIR AS I made an adjustment to the blueprint I was working on. After being in class all day, I'd planned on having a quiet night in while I worked on the new project my professor had assigned, but sometimes the silence was too loud.

Music always helped me concentrate better. Maybe working in a crowded, noisy club wasn't ideal for some people, but there were times I thrived in multitasking. It kept me from overthinking. Not only about the project, but other things.

Stuff that I had no control over.

Yet.

I needed to stay focused on what I had to accomplish so I *could* control it.

Which meant getting this blueprint perfect.

Tuning out the random flirty giggles, the baritone chuckles, and the snippets of conversations of the VIPs around me, I focused on the finer details of the building I was supposed to be creating as a final project.

Once it was done and got my professor's stamp of approval, I could finally start my internship.

"You're going to strain your eyes working in this dim lighting."

I kept my eyes on what I was drawing, making sure my lines were perfect. "The rest of Iron Hand is dim. But the lighting right here is perfect."

Mom sat across from me, barely sparing the papers spread across the table a glance. "Couldn't focus at home?"

"Too quiet."

“When is this one due?”

Sighing, I finished the extra details and dropped my pencil on the table. My mother didn't make small talk. Not about my projects. My decision to become an architect had thrown her off from the first time I'd brought it up when I was fifteen.

She thought it was a phase. It wasn't that she didn't support my career goals; I knew she would accept whatever made me happy. But she wasn't exactly ecstatic about them either.

Probably because she suspected *why* I'd chosen architecture.

“What do you need?” I asked, picking up my beer bottle and taking a drink.

Beer reminded me of him.

Her red-painted lips tilted up in a brief smile. “I can't have a conversation with my daughter about her college coursework?”

In answer, I lifted a brow, waiting.

Anya Vitucci shifted in her chair, her eyes briefly flickering around us before returning to me. It was a quick, reflexive action. One I made myself. Something she had taught me from an early age. Now it was second nature to both of us. You didn't live long in our world by not staying vigilant.

“I have a friend who has a situation. They called in a favor.”

“And you're unable to handle it personally?” I asked skeptically. She might have been close to sixty, but the woman before me had skills that would never fail her.

“It requires a trip abroad,” she said with a shrug.

A ping of pain filled me. I knew all too well why she didn't want to travel.

Papa.

“I'm busy at the moment. Ask Nova.”

“Nova is good, but you are better,” she argued. “And this requires the best.”

Wow, a compliment.

Not that it sounded like one. When it came to me, everything was a critique.

I wanted to say no. Pass. To hell with whatever favor she owed. It was her responsibility, not mine. Even though I knew her reasons for not wanting to travel, I still had my own life to live. Selfish, but I couldn't keep putting it on hold because of everyone else.

I would have held strong if my phone hadn't buzzed with a notification. My fingers itched to pick it up, see what was going on inside the apartment now that he was home.

His workday was over. He would go straight for the shower. I ached to see him. But I couldn't with my mom sitting across from me.

My fingers clenched around the beer bottle when Mom's lips twitched. “Go ahead, *myshka*. Look.”

“When?” I groused to distract her and myself from whatever was taking place on the live security feed.

Another notification buzzed, causing her to smirk. She knew she had me. “No later than Sunday. It needs to be seamless. Not a single trace left behind.”

“This is the last time,” I warned. “I have plans, and they don't include that life.”

For a long moment, we had a stare-off. Her intense blue eyes were trying to break me, but I refused to be the first to look away. I was so close to having what I'd been working for. There was no way in hell I was going to let anything get in my way now.

Not even my parents.

Mom finally dipped her chin. “Okay. Do this for me, and I won't interfere.”

ELIAS

Spreading out the plans on the dining room table, I inspected them slowly. The design was beautifully crafted, each line a work of art. For the next ten minutes, I just stood there, drinking in the beauty.

I didn't even want to look at the other internship candidates' submissions.

When my mom had handed me the satchel full of mock-ups from architecture students for our one and only internship spot, she hadn't listed names or any other details. She knew all of their personal information, but I didn't choose who would be working with me based on names or school or even gender.

Whoever had the best work was the one who got my unbiased stamp of approval.

Mom had warned me—look at the others before I opened the one on top. But one glance at the exquisite details, and I knew I would have been pissed if I'd wasted time on any of the others when this one was, hands down, the best work I'd ever seen in my life.

At the bottom of the plans was a sticky note with a phone number, along with a brief message written in my mom's pretty handwriting.

Figured you would want to call and offer the internship after seeing this.

Dropping onto the dining room chair, I pulled my phone from my pocket and typed in the number. It rang four times before a breathy voice answered. "H-hello?"

I slapped my hand down on the tabletop, my cock going rock hard with just that husky greeting. Gritting my teeth, I fought back a groan. That was a first. I was a visual guy. I needed to feast with my eyes to get hard the majority of the

time. Watching was more of a turn-on to me than foreplay itself.

That wasn't to say I didn't like playing too, but I fucking loved being a voyeur. Watching a woman strip for me, touch herself, get off right in front of me was a delicious kind of tease.

Most times, I didn't allow myself to get off for days at a time. Sometimes weeks. I let it build until I couldn't take it any longer.

The anticipation was just as powerful as the actual release.

Whenever I went on a run down to Oakland, I always tried to stop by a club that was invitation-only. None of my MC brothers knew about it, and I worked hard to keep it that way. One visit kept me revved up for weeks. I'd created some of my best work after visiting that secret sexual haven.

But this voice was unexpectedly potent.

I wanted to hear it breathe my name. Hear her whimper as she finger-fucked herself while spread open for me to see all of her secrets.

And then I wanted to make that pussy mine.

Over and over and over again.

“Hello?” that seductive-as-fuck voice called a second time, and it took a moment for my brain to function again.

“Sammy,” I choked out.

There was a brief pause on her end. “Elias?” She laughed, that sweet sound doing nothing but making my cock harder.

Fuck.

My gaze dropped back to the blueprint mock-up.

Fucking beautiful.

“What's up?” Samara said with another soft laugh. “I didn't even realize you had my number.”

I scrubbed a hand over my jaw, the stubble reminding me I hadn't shaved that morning before work. *Focus.* “Sammy, did

you apply for an internship with Barker & Reid?”

“Yes. I’ve applied to a few places, actually. My professor wouldn’t accept me interning at my family’s firm. But with Barker & Reid only having one spot open, I didn’t have much hope I would get a call from you regarding it.” I heard some rustling on her end. “Ugh. I’m sorry. Can you hold on a moment, Elias? I was in the shower. I’m dripping all over the place.”

I choked back a groan, trying and failing to avoid picturing her naked in her bathroom with water dripping from her hair, down her back, chest. Tits. Ass.

Ah fuck, I was in trouble.

“Yeah, sure,” I grumbled. “Take your time.”

“Thanks,” she murmured.

The sound of her moving around had my free hand fisting as the imagery kept popping through my head of her wet body moving around a steamy bathroom, droplets of water trailing down over each curve.

Shit.

The tip of my cock leaked at the idea of pleasuring Samara. I grabbed it, squeezing until it hurt. But then I heard her gasp and nearly came in my own hand through the sweats I’d tossed on after my shower when I’d gotten home.

Christ.

My gaze fell back on the paper spread across the table. *Exquisite.*

“I’m back,” she said after a few minutes had passed. “Sorry it took so long.”

“No problem,” I rasped and cleared my throat. “How many other companies did you say you applied to?”

“Ten?”

My jaw clenched. Unsure why that pissed me off, I pushed back from the table and crossed to the fridge to grab a bottle of beer. “Have you heard back from any of them?”

“A few,” she admitted after a pause. “I told them I would take a little time to consider their offers.”

“I want you,” I gritted out.

Her breath rushed out, sounding loud in my ear, and I realized how that must have come out to her. “*You* want me?”

“I mean, Barker & Reid wants you,” I amended, mentally cursing myself. “To be our intern. Twelve weeks. Paid.”

“Oh, cool. Well, thanks for extending the offer. Can I take a few days to consider?”

Despite understanding that taking time to consider was a smart move, I didn’t like that she didn’t immediately accept. Not one damn bit. “What did the others offer you, Sammy?”

She laughed. “Why? Do you want me so bad, you’re willing to negotiate?”

“Yes,” I snapped, but I shook my head at my own stupidity. “I can match anyone’s salary and even offer you housing. There’s an apartment that just became vacant in my complex. We don’t have a tenant lined up yet, but you can stay there rent-free for the duration of your internship.”

Reid and Chance were both going to bitch about that. We’d bought the property, built the apartments, and took one each for ourselves. The other twelve, we rented. The one next door to mine had only been vacant a few days. We had a wait list, but none of us had had the time to go through it yet.

“Well, that does sound like a great offer,” she hedged. “But I still need a few days to consider all of my options.”

“I can give you twenty-four hours. I need to know by tomorrow night. Otherwise, I’ll have to extend the internship to someone else.”

“That’s fair,” she agreed. “I’ll call you back tomorrow to let you know what I decide.”

Squeezing the back of my neck in frustration, I gritted out, “I look forward to your call, Samara.”

Hanging up, I dropped my phone facedown on the table, my chest practically heaving. She had to pick Barker & Reid.

I needed her to pick me.

CHAPTER ONE

samara

VOLUME CRANKED UP, I BLASTED MY PLAYLIST AS I STARTED on my run. My leg was throbbing like a sonofabitch, but I wasn't about to let that stop me from getting in my daily five. One of the first things anyone should learn was that running could and would save your life.

It was the first rule I had been taught—and one that still stayed with me, no matter where in the world I was.

Running was what had saved my life when I was in Budapest two weeks ago, taking care of a little favor my mom had asked me to fulfill for her. She was still on my shit list because of it. Luckily for her, my instincts were keen, or I would have been nothing but a splatter on the side of the Hungarian Parliament Building. Which would have been a shame. I loved that beautiful, Gothic, Renaissance-style architecture. It was too gorgeous to ruin with brain matter.

I didn't need the thump of the bass to make my heart pump as I discreetly surveyed my surroundings before taking the curve in the road. Under the tutelage of my mother, I'd been put through training while blind, deaf, and even half frozen. I didn't need all of my senses to identify danger, but speed and endurance were everything when it was life-or-death. Sweat soaked through my sports bra, a mixture of exertion and a little remembered fear.

Dying wasn't what scared me. That was the one thing not a single person on the planet could outrun. My biggest fear was not getting to experience the things I craved with a hunger that

had been gnawing at me for years. I just wanted a little taste, and then the angel of death could drag me to hell.

Until then, I would fight to stay in this world until the last drop of strength and blood drained from my body.

Lungs burning, pain slicing through the wound in my thigh, I reached the halfway point and turned, flying back toward the apartment.

With the sun coming up, my entire body was begging for mercy, and I breathed through the burn squeezing every muscle. It wasn't my first bullet, but it was the one that had done the most damage. The scar was going to be gnarled and ugly. Whoever had put a hole in me better hope I never found them, because if I did, I would make them taste their own liver.

Needing to cool down, I slowed to a walk. As I did, a redhead in yoga pants and a Trinity University hoodie passed me. Her long ponytail swung as she gave a chin lift but otherwise kept running.

I watched her for a minute, trying to place her. She was familiar to me, but not a local. I was sure I had seen her before, though. Red looked younger than me by a few years, and the university hoodie suggested she was a student. It niggled at my mind, yet I couldn't readily place her.

An urge to follow her, make sure she was safe, nearly overwhelmed me. It stole my breath, made my muscles ache in a way that had nothing to do with the five miles I'd just run, my crazy itching to be set free so I could protect Red. I almost gave in, but at the last second, I was able to rein in the urge.

Elias.

He was so close. What I wanted—needed—was within reach. But if I followed Red, all my plans could be ruined.

Hands on my hips, I let my head drop back onto my shoulders, closing my eyes as the music continued to pump in my ears, and I mentally shrugged off the redhead. My song of choice matched my mood. Corpse always spoke to me. My

sister-in-law called me a freak, and she wasn't wrong. She just didn't know to what extent.

Baring my teeth at the sky, I sucked in gulps of oxygen and climbed the stairs to the third floor. I hadn't bothered locking the front door of my new apartment that was supposed to be home for the next twelve weeks. Creswell Springs wasn't like NYC. No one was stupid enough to break in to a building owned by a member of the Angel's Halo MC. Mine just happened to be the property of three of them.

As soon as I walked in, my phone synced with the speaker I'd placed in the kitchen. It blasted through the entire apartment, and I groaned. "Shit. The neighbors aren't going to be happy."

I doubted any of them would appreciate being startled awake to "E-Girls Are Ruining My Life!" at any hour, let alone first thing on a Monday morning.

Turning it down, I started a pot of coffee and was about to pull my sports bra over my head when someone pounded on my door. Adjusting the top back into place, I called out a "Hold on a sec!" as I jogged over to answer.

Pulling the door open, I stared up into a pair of blue eyes that never failed to make me feel like I was drowning. Brow cocked, he tilted his head to the side, amusement teasing his lips upward. "I'm a little afraid to ask, but do you start every morning like this? 'Cause, baby girl, if so, I need to warn my tenants."

Leaning against the door, I laughed. "Sorry. My phone clicked over from my earbuds to my Bluetooth speaker when I walked through the door. The beat has killer motivation for a good, hard workout."

Pupils dilating, he dropped his gaze, trailing over the tops of my tits and down my bare middle before shooting back to the sports bra flashing a good bit of cleavage. Elias was a breast man. I knew that and planned on thoroughly exploiting it.

“I promise not to startle anyone in the future.” I pulled my hair from the sweaty ponytail and finger-combed the strands over my shoulder, pretending to be unaffected by the caress of his eyes. “Please don’t kick me out, Mr. Landlord, sir.”

I would have had to be deaf not to have heard his change in breathing. Knowing he was affected pushed at the limits of my control. Anything else, and I was unbreakable.

But where this man was concerned?

There was a very short leash, and I was already fighting with myself not to take what I wanted.

“I guess I can let it slide this time, young lady. But if it happens again, we’re going to have problems.”

Noting his damp hair and his half-buttoned shirt, I stepped back, putting distance between me and what I would kill for a taste of. Without hesitation. “I would invite you in for coffee, but I was just about to jump in the shower. I’m starting my new job today. I hear my boss is kind of a hard-ass, so it’s best if I’m not late.”

Smirking, he lowered his head—as if he knew how close to breaking I was. But there was no way. I might have been clawing at the walls of my own sanity, but I’d be damned if he suspected. If he ever guessed, Elias would run before I had the chance to make him love me.

I was above average in height, but he was a freaking giant. It made me feel small, delicate, which was laughable. Thankfully, it was a joke only I knew the punch line to. Mostly. His scent hit me like a flash-bang, and I struggled to control my breathing, but somehow, I didn’t give away how affected I was by his nearness. He was so close, I could have licked him—and fuck knew I wanted to. “I don’t want to get you in trouble with your boss, pretty girl.”

My urge to lick him only intensified.

Young lady.

Pretty girl.

Baby girl.

Every time he called me those names, the leash became shorter. What would happen when it choked me? Would I finally break and take everything I wanted before it was time?

Or would I beg for him to twist it a little tighter?

“Try to keep the noise down between ten at night and eight in the morning.” I could feel the heat from his breath on my cheek. If I pressed my legs together, he would know exactly how turned on I was.

Denying the throb of my clit, I dared to return his grin. “I’ll try to restrain myself.”

Winking, he stepped back. “Good luck on your first day, Sammy.”

CHAPTER TWO

elias

AS SOON AS I WALKED BACK INTO MY APARTMENT, I WAS stripping again. Groaning, I stepped into the shower, the icy spray doing nothing to ease the hard-on I was sporting after seeing Samara in so few pieces of fabric. My cock was ready to blow, and I needed to rein it back in, my control already slipping.

With her tangled dark hair, her sports bra soaked with sweat and pushing those perfect tits up invitingly, her toned belly with the little jewel drawing my attention to her navel, Samara was the hottest thing I'd ever set eyes on. I didn't think girls got their belly buttons pierced anymore, and I couldn't remember being turned on by the few I'd seen over the years. But I'd be damned if the glitter of that tiny gem hadn't caused my balls to draw up. That was as far as I'd allowed my eyes to roam before I was pulled back to the sweat rolling down her chest, disappearing into her cleavage.

She was dangerous—the kind of woman that made a man thirst for a shot of tequila to go with a lick of her skin.

Fuck, she already had me itching to touch her.

Every inch of that delectable body.

Two seconds after seeing her, I was ready to break.

Shit. Leep it together, motherfucker.

Combing my fingers through my half-frozen hair, I turned off the water and towel-dried for the second time that morning. Once I was dressed again, I grabbed a travel mug of coffee and my keys before stomping down to my truck. As I opened the

door, I saw my brother exit his own apartment on the third floor just as the door to Samara's opened.

The two of them nearly collided. "Whoa there, beautiful," Reid said, catching her around the waist to keep her from falling on her ass. Every nerve in my body suddenly felt engulfed in flames as I looked at my brother with his hands on Samara. "Sorry, Sammy. I didn't see you."

"It's my fault." Her breathless voice set my teeth on edge. "I was totally spacing. But I can't say I'm sorry. I enjoy bumping into sexy men."

He whispered something that made her giggle. It didn't escape my notice that he was still holding on to her. For the first time in my life, I considered burying my brother beneath the foundation of one of his projects. "Reid!" I barked, trying to bank my growing...

Rage.

Jealousy.

It was a dangerous cocktail. "Shouldn't you already be at work?"

His head snapped around. Even with his sunglasses on, I could tell he'd narrowed his eyes on me. "You already busting my balls, little brother?"

"If they need busting, sure." I stepped around the front of my truck, glaring up at the third floor. "Stop manhandling my new intern."

Mine.

Pull it together, you dumb fuck.

He dropped his hands like he'd been electrocuted. "Shit. Sorry, Sammy. Did I hurt you?"

"I'm good," she said with another laugh. Was she flirting with him? *Deep breaths. Don't kill your brother.* "I guess I should go. My boss seems to be in a mood. Maybe we can run into each other like this again tomorrow. I kind of like being manhandled."

Noted.

“You’re dangerous,” he said with a half-amused, half-pained groan.

I could picture the hole I wanted to throw him into before turning on the cement mixer and watching it cover him. I’d keep him alive and conscious so he could feel the terror while it slowly hardened, making it impossible for his lungs to expand, cutting off his ability to breathe completely.

“Get your asses to work,” I called up to them, opening the driver’s side door with such force, it was a wonder I didn’t rip it off.

They were still standing there when I pulled into traffic. My brother had his head thrown back, laughing his ass off, while Samara had her hand on his arm.

Yeah, she was fucking flirting.

Did she *like* him?

Reid was too old for her.

So are you, dumbass.

Telling myself I didn’t care, I stopped at Aggie’s for a breakfast sandwich and a few pastries for the office staff. My mom would appreciate a treat, and the receptionist—whatever her name was, I couldn’t remember it for shit—always seemed to work better with a little sugar incentive on Mondays.

As I ordered from the waitress at the counter, looking at the options beneath the miniature glass displays, I wondered what Samara would like the most. They didn’t have a lot to choose from, unlike at the little bakery across town that had a selection of every pastry, muffin, donut, and dessert. Aunt Quinn bought the diner’s pastries from a single mom who needed extra cash. She baked them every night and then dropped them off on her way to her job every morning.

I thought these were more delicious than the ones the coffee shop/bakery sold, but maybe Samara would want a chocolate-filled croissant. Or one of those coffees that required a foreign language degree to order...

Irritated, I picked a few extra assorted muffins and paid for the food. Ten minutes later, I pulled into the parking lot at work just as Samara was getting out of her car.

“Do you prefer apple-cinnamon or blueberry muffins?” I called, reaching back in for the box and coffee.

Curious, she met me at the rear of my truck. “Are those my only options?”

“There was one double-chocolate—”

“Dibs!” she cried before I could finish, making me laugh. “Gimme, gimme, gimme.”

“Glad I got it, then.” Opening the box, I let her snatch the muffin. Falling into step together, we walked toward the front door. “You have a good chat with Reid?”

She shrugged. “I didn’t realize how easy he is to talk to. He always seemed so standoffish in the past. But really, he’s just...intense.”

I paused to open the door, jaw flexing, fingers clenched so hard on the door handle they ached. “And you like intense?”

“It can be fun,” she said with a smirk.

Ah, baby girl.

We stood there in the open doorway, the annoying peal of the phones not even enough to distract me as I suddenly felt like I’d just been dropped headfirst into the deep end. With a head injury.

Had her eyes always been that blue? How had I never noticed those little freckles in her irises? And that mouth... Goddamn, those lips were plump enough to get a man off in no time once they wrapped around his cock.

My slacks became too tight to stand straight. I had to shift my legs to make more room before I burst through the zipper. But I still couldn’t look away from all that beauty.

“That’s your type?” I asked, trying to tease, but my tone was anything but amused. I needed to know. Now. “Intense older guys?”

“Kind of.” She glanced inside and then stepped closer to me. I’d never taken much notice of how a girl’s hair smelled before, but damn, hers was floral and sensual as fuck. “I want a man who... Well, I guess what I want is someone who will take care of me,” she whispered, nervously licking her bottom lip. “In every way.”

As if she was worried someone would overhear. Or that I might judge.

Which would have been funny as hell if she didn’t look so vulnerable. She should never feel that way, not with me. Not fucking ever.

I gripped the box of muffins so hard I nearly destroyed the thin cardboard. Sammy wanted a...

Daddy.

Jesus Christ.

She was going to break me.

For as long as I could remember, Samara hadn’t been one to wait for things to drop into her lap. Even as a kid, she went after everything she wanted. Some would have called her an entitled, spoiled brat if they knew who her parents were. But it was because of her parentage that she had to fight harder than anyone else to get what she needed.

She didn’t require someone to take care of her or her needs.

And if she wanted a daddy, I’d fucking give her one.

But first, I needed to know why she seemed so hesitant to voice her desires.

“Why does that embarrass you, baby girl?”

Her lashes flickered. She liked my calling her that. Storing it away for later, I had to strain to hear when she spoke again. *Why wasn’t the receptionist answering that damned phone?* It was starting to piss me off because I could barely hear Samara.

“I’m not embarrassed. It’s just... You are my boss now, Elias. I don’t want you to think... I want to make you proud,

okay?"

CHAPTER THREE

samara

NOTHING I'D TOLD ELIAS WAS UNTRUE.

I wanted a man who would take care of me. Who would allow me to just let go and not have to worry about everything, everywhere, every minute of the day.

His opinion mattered. More than anyone else in the world. It was the only one I'd ever cared about. Not even my parents' opinions mattered to me. Especially not my mom's.

I loved her, so much at times that it physically hurt. But my head didn't always understand that she loved me too. What she thought of me had stopped mattering a long time ago. Nothing I did felt like it was good enough. I knew it wasn't true. Deep down, I knew that. Which was why I'd had to train myself to stop caring what other people thought of me and my choices.

But I never could figure out how to turn off wanting Elias's approval.

Which was okay because I had plans, and they all revolved around him. Caring what he thought was kind of important. If I didn't care, then there would definitely be problems.

My confession to him was only supposed to test the waters. See if there was even an ounce of interest close to the surface. Hearing his ragged inhale and witnessing the way his eyes dilated told me he was a lot further along than I could have ever hoped for.

Elias Reid wanted me.

My fingers contracted around the muffin in my hand, almost squishing it, wanting to devour him more than the delicious-smelling breakfast pastry. *Not yet*, I tried to caution myself. I had to be smart. No matter how close he was, he might freak out if I moved too fast, too soon.

“I am proud of you, Sammy,” he murmured, his blue eyes softening.

I sank my teeth into the underside of my bottom lip to hold back my moan of pleasure at hearing him say that. Words could so easily be foreplay. An erotic caress to the mind and soul.

Words were dangerous as fuck. They were weapons that could cause mass destruction within someone. Or untold pleasure.

“You don’t ever have to worry about what I think, baby girl. In my eyes, you are amazing. There is nothing you could do that would change my mind about that.” He shifted his legs, another ragged exhale leaving his mouth, brushing over my cheek. I could almost taste the coffee he’d been drinking. “But Reid won’t take care of you, Samara. Not the way you need and deserve.”

I lowered my lashes before I could give myself away. “He won’t?”

“He’s too selfish. He doesn’t have the time or patience for that. You need—”

“Good morning, Elias!”

He muttered a curse and took a huge step back at the intrusive sound of a voice I didn’t recognize. Struggling to keep my breathing even, banking the rage that was already starting to simmer, I slowly turned to find a woman several years older than me walking toward us.

“Did you stop and get me a muffin again?” she gushed. The sound of her voice hit my ears wrong. I wanted to stuff the muffin I held into her mouth to shut her up. “You spoil me.”

If I made her choke on the muffin, it would be a waste of good food. Taking a bite out of the top to remind myself of that, I watched her approach, the flavors of the muffin a beautiful blend of chocolate perfection. She wore a pair of black pants that molded over her hips and a top that gave a good show of her breasts. Her business casual outfit pushed the boundaries and could have tipped over into club wear.

Begrudgingly, I had to admit I liked the shade of brown of her shoulder-length hair that was in soft, beachy waves around her face. She didn't look like she'd spent an hour on her makeup. But that didn't mean she hadn't. I knew firsthand how long it could take to make it appear as if a person wasn't wearing makeup but was actually hiding the natural shape of their face.

Before she could reach us, Elias shifted, putting me half in front of him. Discreetly, I glanced at him while taking another bite of muffin and saw he was trying to hide his erection. Knowing I was the one who'd caused that reaction, I shoved my hand out in front of me. "Hi, I'm Samara, the new intern. You must be..."

Her eyes narrowed on me for only a split second before she pasted on a fake smile and shook my hand. "Crystal, the receptionist. Nice to meet you."

"Oh right, Crystal. The receptionist. Jos told me about you." She beamed at that and glanced up at Elias.

My territorial instinct told me to slit her throat, while a voice whisper-shouted a chorus of *mine, mine, mine* in my mind.

I tilted my head so I could glance around her. I hadn't sensed another vehicle pull into the parking lot, but I noticed someone driving away from the curb. "I guess I was confused since she said you would be here before everyone else. But you're only now arriving, and the phones are ringing nonstop. Sorry. Crystal. The receptionist."

Her smile faltered. "I'm running a little behind. Mondays are insane." She glanced up at Elias through her lashes, making me wonder if she spent most of her paycheck on those

amazing extensions. They looked good on her. Made her brown eyes look all doe-like. I wanted to sink my thumbs into them and gouge them out of her skull. “I’m so sorry that I’m late, Elias. It won’t happen again.”

“My mom is already inside. You should explain to her why you are late. Again.” I liked how his voice remained neutral when he spoke to her. Bored. Cool. No interest present in the deep, delicious timbre. Goose bumps popped up along my arms and legs when he stepped forward, so close I could feel the heat from his body. “I need to get Samara settled in her office.”

I almost smirked, and my hand twitched to give her a little finger wave as she shot me a glare before pouting at the man behind me. “Elias—”

“Why is the damn phone still ringing?” I heard Jos yell before she walked out into the lobby.

With his free hand on my back, Elias nudged me forward. Every nerve in my body contracted at the contact, but I didn’t have time to savor it. Walking inside ahead of Crystal, I went straight to Jos for a hug.

Her eyes lit up when she saw me. “Sammy! Did you get settled into the apartment?” She wrapped her arms around me, and I almost cuddled closer. Mom used to give the best hugs. And then she had to harden herself to train me. Hugs from her were rare and precious to me now. “Did my boys make you comfortable?”

Stepping back, I didn’t have to force a smile. “Everything has been perfect. Reid is even taking me to dinner tonight.”

“You didn’t mention that,” Elias grumbled as he practically shoved the box of muffins at his mom.

Jos took it and lifted the lid. “Is that the banana chocolate chip?”

“Yes. They only had one left. You’re welcome.” Grasping my elbow, he tugged me back a step. “Samara and I will be busy all morning. I want her opinion on the Kepler project.”

It was only when the phone stopped ringing that I noticed Crystal had finally started working. She'd stood back, watching us before taking her place behind the desk. I felt her eyes on me the entire time, even when she finally bothered to pick up the phone.

Her customer-service voice made me twitchy. She probably thought it sounded sultry, but to me, she sounded like a chipmunk.

"That's a great idea. Maybe the two of you working together can finally make that asshole happy and we can move forward with breaking ground." Jos glanced down at her phone when it vibrated. Rolling her eyes, she focused on me once again. "Elias will get you set up in your office. I need to speak to Crystal and then return a few calls. I'm so glad you're here, Sammy."

After giving me another hug that I welcomed and returned, she walked over to the reception desk, still holding the box of muffins. "Unanswered calls cost this company money. If you aren't going to be on time, I can find someone who will appreciate having a job."

"I'm sorry, Jos," Crystal murmured. "It won't happen again."

"That's what you said last week. Twice."

Elias placed his hand on my hip. "Your office is just past the conference room on the right," he said as we walked down the corridor. "Accounting department is at the end on the left. Legal is the one before them. And I am right beside you. We're not as big as your family's firm, but we're growing more every year. Barker & Reid Construction has come a long way since Mom took over after my great-grandfather died."

"You guys are doing amazing work. That's why I took this internship."

"Was it a hard decision to make?" he asked as he paused to unlock my office door before handing me over an extra key. "You mentioned you had several offers on the table."

I took my time answering as I glanced around the room. A simple desk with a computer and a rolling chair. A few pictures of some of the company's most memorable designs and builds decorated the walls. But my gaze went straight to the drafting table behind. That was where the magic would be created. My love of architecture might have started as a way to connect with Elias, but it had bloomed into an obsession that nearly rivaled what I felt for him.

Turning to face him, I shrugged. "There was one firm in Chicago I was considering. But I hate Chicago. And another in Fort Worth had my attention, but when I got your call, I knew it was an opportunity I couldn't pass up. Nova told me you go off talent alone. No names. No school information. That you considered me at all is a huge compliment."

"As soon as I saw your mock-up, I knew I wanted to work with you."

I nibbled the inside of my lip, soaking up his words to overanalyze later. "Confession?"

Blue eyes sparked down at me. "Tell me."

"I've kind of dreamed of this. Ever since you interned with our firm back in New York." I laughed a little self-consciously. "You have so much talent. Seeing how passionate you were back then, it got me interested in architecture. I've been hooked ever since."

CHAPTER FOUR

elias

ONCE I HAD SAMARA SETTLED, AND MY BODY CALM ENOUGH that I could sit down without splitting my zipper open, we got some much-needed work done.

She took one look at the Kepler project and immediately started making suggestions. By lunchtime, I had the man on a video call, asking his opinion. He was bored at first, barely paying attention. He'd been a pain in my ass from our first meeting. I didn't think he knew or even understood what he wanted from this build.

After about twenty minutes of listening to the man argue with me from the other side of my desk, Samara rolled her chair around so she was sitting beside me. I'd been fighting my frustration, so aggravated with the asshole that I was seconds away from telling him to fuck off and stop wasting my time. When her hand touched my arm, my muscles unlocked.

Inhaling slowly, I covered her hand and linked our fingers together.

"Who is this?" Kepler asked, having seen a glimpse of Samara on the screen.

My first instinct was to push her chair away, just enough so he couldn't have the pleasure of looking at her, but close enough I could still touch. Before I could nudge her chair a few inches away, Samara rolled closer and introduced herself.

"Good morning, Mr. Kepler. My name is Samara. How are you doing today, sir?"

His beady eyes lit up with interest, causing my blood to heat with an emotion that was all too new to me, yet I'd been struggling with since seeing my brother make Samara laugh that morning.

"I'm new to the firm, but Elias and I have been brainstorming your project all morning. It's already beautiful, and I've seen the aerial view of the land it will be built on. Gorgeous. I can't wait to see it in person." She gave him a smile that had him leaning closer to the camera.

I had a sudden urge to pull her out of her chair and into my lap—stake my claim. Fuck professionalism.

Mine.

Samara glanced at me, her beautiful eyes flashing with something that was gone before I could read it, and she returned her gaze to the screen. My fingers flexed around hers, and she made a soft humming noise in pleasure.

"Come out anytime. I'll show you around personally."

She moved her chair closer to me, her free hand going to my thigh, her nails biting into me with just enough of a sting to tell me to keep my growl in check. Shit, I hadn't even realized I'd made a sound at first.

"We have a few ideas that we need to run by you," she said, keeping her tone professional while her nails continued to dig into my leg. "I promise not to take up more of your valuable time than absolutely necessary, but we do need to discuss these changes and have your approval so we can break ground for you, sir."

If she called him "sir" one more fucking time...

"I apologize for being distracted earlier," Kepler told her. "Could you explain everything again, honey?"

"My name is Samara," she corrected without malice, even though I'd felt her tense ever so slightly when he called her "honey." "And I am more than happy to review everything to date if you need me to, Mr. Kepler."

She had more patience than I did with the bastard. For the next hour, I listened to her go over everything, from our initial meeting and my original design, to the weeks of adjustments and add-ons, up to that morning and the ideas we'd come up with together.

A few hours working on one project that was more than half complete, and I could already tell we were going to make a great team. I'd never clicked so effortlessly with another intern—hell, another person—so quickly. I couldn't wait to see how we handled a client together from start to finish.

Which made me realize I only had twelve weeks with her as an intern. Then she would return to NYC to graduate. Move on with her life.

Time had never mattered before, but now it felt like it was rushing past. Like trying to hold back a broken dam with nothing but my fingers.

Shaking that image out of my head, I focused on the present.

If all I got were three short months with her, then I'd make do. We could have a little fun, I'd burn off whatever chaotic need seemed to be gnawing at me, and then she could get back to her life as the Vitucci princess.

Right. I'll just let her go. Definitely won't chain her to my bed until she agrees to stay.

A firm knock on my office door had us lifting our heads from the latest prints I was working on for Kepler. Mom opened the door with a frown. "I thought you two would have left by now. When I was on my way out, I noticed both your vehicles still in the lot."

Popping my neck to relieve some of the strain, I glanced at the clock. Samara groaned. "I had no idea it was that late. I'm supposed to meet Reid for dinner in fifteen minutes."

I snapped the pencil I was holding in half with my thumb, past the point of irritation, crossing into unfamiliar and unwelcome territory. "Reid probably isn't done at the site yet. If he even remembered."

She picked up her phone that she'd switched to silent earlier in the day, a smile teasing at her full lips. "He texted me. Said he's on his way to Aggie's now." She laughed at whatever she was reading and spared me a quick glance. "Do you need me to stay? I can."

"No, no," Mom rushed to assure her when I opened my mouth to tell her yes, I needed her to stay.

Stay the fuck away from my damn brother.

"You go on, sweetheart. Have a good time. I can't remember the last time Reid took a girl out to dinner."

"That's because the only place Reid takes a girl is to bed," I groused. "He doesn't date. He fucks around."

"And you're any better?" Mom shot back with a huff. "Between the two of you, I'm never going to get a daughter-in-law. Rory and I are going to be the only ones without grandbabies to spoil if you boys don't find someone to settle down with. I swear, I thought you would settle down before Max, but he's been married for well over a decade now. He gave his mother a sweet daughter-in-law and a grandchild. Who will take over this place when you boys are gone?"

Samara lifted her hands, her eyes wide. "Whoa. This is just dinner," she laughed but couldn't completely hide the panic in her eyes.

"Fucking better be," I muttered under my breath, tossing the broken pencil aside. Pushing my chair back from the table, I stood. "This can wait until tomorrow. I'm starving. Aggie's sounds like a perfect idea to me. I need some country-fried steak and mashed potatoes."

"You had red meat yesterday when we grilled at the clubhouse," Mom called after us. "Chill with the cow. Maybe eat some chicken. And would it kill you to eat a vegetable that isn't mashed or fried every now and then?"

Samara giggled at my side, the sound heating something in my chest, the sensation rapidly spreading outward. "I've missed her so much."

"We've all missed you too, baby girl."

So fucking much.

CHAPTER FIVE

samara

I STEPPED INTO AGGIE'S JUST AS I SAW ELIAS PULL INTO THE parking lot. Fighting a giggle, I glanced around in search of Reid. If I had more of a conscience, I might have felt bad about using him to make his brother jealous, but when it came to getting the man I wanted, I'd learned quickly that I didn't give many fucks about anyone else.

It wasn't hard to spot Reid, even during the dinner rush. As I did, a flash of red caught my attention. My fellow runner from that morning. She was sitting with a group and was, hands down, the most beautiful of the other girls. Relief that she'd made it through the day hit me like a fist to the sternum.

She laughed when someone said something, but then blue eyes caught mine when she noticed my gaze and gave me another chin lift that I returned. It was easier to ignore the urge to make sure she was safe this time, and I was able to focus on my prey.

Reid's hair was slightly shaggier than Elias's, but the same shade of raven's-wing black. He kept his facial hair short, whereas his younger brother tended to keep his neatly trimmed. Reid was bulkier, proof that he spent most of his time doing hard labor. He was an architect, electrician, and a certified contractor. With the MC cut on over his simple white T-shirt, he gave off an alpha aura that had people glancing his way.

But in my eyes, there was no comparison. Elias was the better catch, the better brother. The better everything.

Seeing he'd picked a booth by the window, I tried not to freeze up. Since Budapest, it was hard for me to relax out in public, and sitting by a window? I could already feel the panic trying to choke me, but I forced my muscles to relax as I approached him.

Seeing me, he stood, unfolding his giant body from the booth where he'd taken up most of the space on one side. "I was starting to think you were going to stand me up," he teased, bending to hug me.

"We lost track of time," Elias excused behind me, causing his brother's head to snap up.

I heard Reid's gruff laugh, his arms contracting around me for a moment before stepping back. "Didn't know you were joining us, little brother."

"We're starving," Elias said, grasping the back of my shirt to tug me away from Reid. "There aren't any free tables, so I guess we'll join you."

"Sure, you can join Sammy and me," Reid said with a smirk. "We don't mind, do we, beautiful?"

My eyes ping-ponged back and forth between the two of them, more thrilled than annoyed that they were having a pissing match over me. I tried not to, but my body melted into Elias's touch. "All I care about is eating," I said with a shrug, noticing a waitress walking our way.

"Have a seat, baby girl," Elias urged.

I glanced around for any other empty tables, but there was nothing, not even an open place at the counter. Biting back a sigh, I sat, only to have Elias slide in beside me. Feeling the heat of his thigh press up against mine, I was able to relax a little.

Reid laughed as he retook his seat across from me. "How was your first day, honey?"

My skin felt like it was crawling, but I wasn't sure if it was because I was just uneasy from being exposed by the window or if someone was watching me. I was being ridiculous. Even

if someone did want to take a shot at me, the window was bulletproof.

When Nova was fifteen, Ryan had heard a vehicle backfire while they were on the phone. He'd freaked out, thinking someone had shot at her, which wasn't unreasonable for him to imagine, given that our enemies had targeted her before. Two days later, all the windows in Aggie's had been replaced.

Even though I knew that, it didn't stop my heart from racing. Uneasily, I pressed into Elias, needing his warmth, his...protection. "It was productive," I answered Reid. "My boss is a bit of a hard-ass, but I think I'm going to enjoy the work."

Elias placed his hand on my thigh. "Hard-ass?"

I looked up at him through my lashes. "Absolutely."

"Hey, Reid," the waitress greeted when she stopped at the table. She offered us menus and asked what we wanted to drink.

"Stef." He tipped his head in acknowledgment. "Kingston working tonight?"

"He's in the kitchen. You want your usual?" She flicked her gaze to Elias and then me. "Country-fried steak and mashed potatoes?"

"Since Kingston is working, I'll take a cheeseburger, no onions, extra tomatoes and pickles. Fries for the side," I told her before either man could respond. "Diet Coke to drink."

She scribbled down my order. "You want this on three separate tickets?"

"Two," Elias informed her, cutting off his brother when he started to answer. "Reid's on one, Samara's and mine on the other."

"Put Samara's on mine," Reid argued. "She's my date."

"I'm paying for her meal," Elias half growled, his eyes narrowing dangerously on his brother.

I thrust the menu back at Stef, shutting them both up. “Three separate tickets. Thanks.”

Elias leaned back, trying to stretch his legs under the table. “Doesn’t matter. I’m still paying for your food.”

Rolling my eyes at him, I tried to get comfortable.

Bulletproof glass. Relax. Relax. Relax.

“You want to stop by the bar and get a drink after, Sammy?” Reid asked, thankfully distracting me.

“I have an early morning conference call,” Elias announced, pretending not to hear his brother’s invitation. “Would you like to sit in on it? I bet you will have some notes to incorporate into the design. If it goes well, you could start taking point soon.”

Excitement pushed down some of my discomfort. Beaming up at him, I nodded. “I would like that.”

“Guess that’s a no on drinks,” Reid laughed.

“She’s not interested,” Elias grumbled.

His aggression toward his brother made it difficult not to squirm. “Rain check?” I murmured, wishing I had my drink so I could cool off.

“Anytime, beautiful,” he said with a wink.

From the reflection in the mirror, I saw a familiar blond head as Kingston came out of the kitchen. He said something to Stef, who answered, and he lifted his head in our direction. I waved my hand.

“Sammy!” he shouted, causing several heads to turn.

“He got over Avery leaving town easily enough,” Reid commented.

“If he was interested in more than fucking around with her, he would have wifed her years ago,” Elias reasoned. “Wasn’t like he was in love with her. He didn’t care who she screwed around with. Chick was wild.”

I curled my fingers into my palms, briefly wondering if Elias had firsthand knowledge of Avery's wildness. But I already knew the answer. He didn't do sloppy seconds when it came to his MC brothers' hookups. He didn't do sloppy, period.

But that didn't stop him from watching other people share someone at that secret sex club in Oakland.

I'd learned more from watching Elias in that club for an hour than I had in the first few weeks of stalking the cameras that had given me my daily fix.

Just thinking of watching him while he watched others receive pleasure was enough to make me burn. The first time I'd followed him inside, I was nervous. What if I saw him join in and couldn't stop the jealous rage that would demand I spill someone's blood?

Thankfully, he hadn't.

All he did was watch. Even when others had come up to him, he'd avoided being touched or kissed.

"Sammy, you didn't tell me you were coming for a visit," Kingston complained when he reached our table, distracting me from the sweltering memories of watching Elias get turned on from being a voyeur. "Get over here and hug me, girl."

I nudged Elias's arm. Muttering something under his breath, he stepped out of the booth so I could jump up and hug Kingston. He swung me around, his laughter bouncing around the diner when I squealed in delight.

"I'm mad at you for not giving me a heads-up." He set me back on my feet. "I would have made you a cake."

"I told you I was accepting an internship," I reminded him.

"Wait." He glanced from me to the brothers then back again. "With Barker & Reid?" I nodded, and he slung an arm around my shoulders. "You're going to be around for a while? Hell yeah!"

"I'm hungry. Are you hungry, Reid?"

"Starving, little brother."

Kingston ignored them. "I'll bring you an entire Death by Chocolate cake tomorrow at work," he promised.

I side-hugged him. "You don't have to do that. Besides, if you bring it to the office, I'll have to share."

"Then I'll make two. You have to have your favorite cake to celebrate, Sammy baby." He smacked a kiss on my cheek. "I'm so damn proud of you."

An ironlike arm wrapped around my waist and jerked me back down onto the booth cushion. A flame settled low in my belly, and I couldn't tame it in time to mask my gasp of pleasure.

"Worry about her burger, not the damned cake. She's hungry now," Elias snapped.

Eyes the same shade of green as my sister-in-law's narrowed for a count of three, but Elias only shifted me closer. All I wanted to do was crawl onto his lap and fall asleep with my head tucked against his thick chest.

"No extra gravy on your mashed potatoes," Kingston warned with an amused snort. "Sammy, your burger will be out soon."

"Thanks, Kingston." I gulped when Elias's hand brushed back and forth over my belly a few times before he flipped off the blond man.

When I twisted back around, I noticed Reid's eyes bouncing from Elias to me to the arm still wrapped around my back. With a shake of his head, he grinned. "Looks like our Sammy is popular tonight."

"Mine," Elias growled.

Yes, please. Oh God, it was what I wanted. What I'd dreamed of. I was his, and he sure as fuck was mine. Even if he didn't know it yet.

But then Reid sighed, and I could see the game he wanted to play flash across his face before he even opened his mouth, dragging me out of the happy haze a single word from Elias had created. "You never were much of a sharer."

CHAPTER SIX

elias

A RED HAZE DESCENDED OVER MY EYES. JUST THE INSINUATION that I would share Samara made me want to see my brother's blood on my hands. My fist slammed down on the tabletop so hard, I was going to get a bill from Aunt Quinn to replace it.

“Elias—”

“Shh,” I soothed without taking my gaze off my brother. “Everything is okay, baby girl. Reid just decided to take his food to go.”

“No,” she choked out. “I’m going to go. You two shouldn’t fight because of me. I...I’m sorry, Reid.”

“There is nothing for you to apologize for,” I bit out. “Not to this jackass or anyone else.”

Reid broke eye contact first, regret flickering across his face when he looked at her. “I’m the one who is sorry, Sammy. I was just trying to get a rise out of my brother. Which I did, but I’m not proud of myself for how I accomplished it. You stay.”

Standing, he adjusted his cut and shot me a glare. “Make sure she gets home safely.”

“Planned on it.”

Samara moved to get up, but I locked my arm around her, keeping her in the booth with me. “Reid.”

He gave her a sheepish grin. “Honestly, I’m surprised I’m still breathing, Sammy. I thought for sure you would put a bullet in me for what I said.”

Her lips twitched upward. “It crossed my mind, but there are way too many witnesses.”

Laughing, he ruffled her hair. “See you later, beautiful.”

She watched him walk to the counter and grab Stef’s attention, before elbowing me in the ribs. “What was that?” she hissed.

I smoothed her hair back into place. “What?” When she just cocked a brow, I shrugged. “I’m not going to let anyone talk to you like that, baby girl.”

“He was upset over the way you were acting on my date with him,” she defended.

I angled my body so I could face her a little easier, but the booths were tight and I wasn’t exactly small. “One, you weren’t on a date with him. Two, doesn’t matter if he was upset or not, he should never have said what he did. And three, don’t fucking make excuses for anyone’s shitty behavior. Ever.”

“Okay. I won’t excuse you for being an asshole, then,” she sassed.

“How was I an asshole?” I asked with a laugh.

“You crashed my date and then antagonized him.”

Clenching my jaw, I lowered my head until my nose skimmed hers. “You were not on a motherfucking date. Say it again, and I’m going to turn that ass red when we get home.”

Her excited little inhale made me hard enough to pound nails. “Elias...”

I touched my lips to the shell of her ear. Fuck, she smelled good. “That’s exactly how you are going to say my name when I’m inside you, Samara. Half sexy little vixen. Half whiny little brat.” I felt her shiver and had to restrain myself from pushing my hand under her skirt to feel how wet she was for me. “Now be a good girl for Daddy.”

“I... But...” I heard her swallow, felt the little puff of air from her pants on my neck. “O-okay.”

“Okay, what?” I coaxed.

Her fingers tangled in my shirt, twisting the fabric and tugging, but there was no need for her to pull me closer. I wasn't going anywhere.

“Okay, Daddy,” she moaned just loud enough for my ears only. No hesitation. No questioning it. Simply complying, giving me what I wanted.

What we both wanted.

God, I need her.

A spurt of come leaked from the tip of my cock. Swallowing my groan, I touched my lips to her forehead. The dim roar of voices around us was the only thing that kept me from wrapping her hair around my wrist so I could jerk her head back and taste her throat.

Stef placing our drinks on the table had me forcing a smile and thanking the waitress when she said our food would be right out. Samara picked up her glass of Diet Coke and sucked down a fourth of the contents through the straw.

I stretched out my legs in an attempt to ease the constraints of my pants choking my dick.

Her phone ringing made her flinch. Slowly, she picked it up, and I saw her shoulders droop for a moment.

Catching sight of the screen, I frowned. *Papa* was at the top with a picture of the king of New York wearing reindeer antlers attached to a headband that mushed up his gray hair and a grin so big, the skin around his eyes crinkled. “You don't want to talk to your dad?”

“It's not that,” she said with a grimace. “I...” The ringing stopped, and she seemed relieved, only for a text to pop up.

Papa: Did you sneak out again? Your mother is going to kill us both, young lady!!!

Releasing a heavy breath, she quickly replied, but I didn't see what she wrote. I rested my arm along the back of the booth as she turned the phone off and placed the screen facedown.

“Want to talk about it?” I offered.

“I can say with absolute certainty that discussing my dad is the last thing I want to do right now,” she said with a forced laugh. “Or ever.”

“Does he not support your decision to take this internship?” Would he force her to return home before the twelve weeks were up? “Was that why he said you snuck out?”

Samara played with the straw in her drink, twirling the ice around in the glass. “Would you like me to move to the other side of the booth?” she offered, deflecting. “You’re all scrunched up.”

Catching her hand before she could stand, I entwined our fingers. “I like you here, baby girl.”

* * *

Pulling into my usual spot, I hopped out of my truck and jogged over to open Samara’s door. As she stepped out, we both glanced up at the pole that had a lightbulb blown. It had been fine the night before when I got home. Making a mental note to fix it later in the week, I steered her away from her car and shut the door.

“You look exhausted,” I observed as we walked toward the stairs.

“Today was a little overstimulating,” she admitted. “But I really enjoyed it.”

I let my hand wander from the small of her back to her amazing ass before we got to the second floor, and I was rewarded with the sound of her soft little mewl of pleasure. She liked my hands on her, but not nearly as much as I enjoyed touching her. “You’ve already blown away my expectations. Good job, baby girl.”

“Thank you,” she husked, licking her bottom lip.

We stopped outside her apartment, and she turned to face me. Those blue eyes searched mine, making me want to back

her against the door and devour her. Instead, I brushed my lips over her forehead and stepped back. “Sleep well, Sammy.”

“Elias...”

“I’ll see you first thing tomorrow for the conference call.” I tucked a few locks of hair behind her ear, caressing my thumb over the constellation piercings in her cartilage.

“Don’t you want to come in?” she tempted.

“So fucking bad,” I admitted. “But not tonight. Get a good night’s rest.”

Disappointment flickered over her face for a moment before she nodded. “Good night, Elias.”

“Good night, baby.” I waited until she stepped inside and I heard the door lock before taking another step.

Popping the knuckles on my right hand, I walked to Reid’s door and slapped my palm against it three times. Moments later, I heard his heavy steps. As soon as I saw his smug grin, I put my fist through his face.

Cursing, he stumbled back. “Jesus Christ, Elias!”

“You ever talk about her like that again, and I’ll bury your ass.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

samara

AFTER A DAY THAT HAD BEEN BETTER THAN I COULD HAVE ever hoped for, I tried not to be let down after Elias left me at my door with nothing more than a forehead kiss.

Although I should have been grateful. Especially when my phone blew up not long after I kicked off my shoes. Tears burned my eyes as soon as I saw it was Papa calling again.

There were days I ached to talk to him, tell him every one of my problems so he could solve them for me. Then there were days I dreaded seeing his name pop up on my screen because it hurt too much.

Knowing I couldn't ignore him for long without sending all of New York into a tailspin, I pasted on a grin and answered. "Hi, Papa!"

"Samara," he hissed, his voice strained. "You better get your ass home in the next twenty minutes, or we will both suffer your mother's wrath."

"Okay, Papa," I soothed, putting him on speaker so I could text Mom. She must have been at Iron Hand. Otherwise, he wouldn't have been so confused. "I'll be home soon."

"Do you need me to send my men?"

"No, Papa," I assured him as I walked through the apartment, texting as I went. "I'm safe. I was just out with a friend."

"A boy?" he asked suspiciously.

“No, Papa. I don’t like any boys.” Not a lie. I’d never liked boys, not even as a kid. They were too immature. “I’m with a friend from school.”

Me: Papa thinks I snuck out of the house.

Mom: I’m leaving the club now. If there hadn’t been an issue with a patron, I would have been home hours ago. Is he upset?

Me: Just worried about me. Should I call Ryan? Have him bring Wren up to the house to pretend to be me?

Mom: I tried that last week when he had a bad day. It worked until she forgot and took off the sunglasses. His confusion scared her, so we won’t be trying that again anytime soon.

I swiped my hand over my cheek when a few tears escaped. I hated this. Alzheimer’s was stealing my dad away from us little by little. It had started out almost two years before with him blanking, stumbling over basic words in both English and Italian, forgetting how to do simple tasks. But it got worse each passing month, with more frequent days of his confusion. His doctor had sent us to a specialist who’d diagnosed Alzheimer’s and placed him on medication that was recently approved.

When he’d started confusing me for Mom, that was when we knew the meds weren’t working. Several different trials and errors later, each with their own disastrous consequences, we all decided that it was better for Papa if we stopped trying to treat this with pharmaceuticals.

Now, because I looked so similar to Mom when she was younger, it not only confused him but made him irate. A few times, he’d gotten borderline violent. Lately, he was trapped in the past. He thought I was a little girl or in my teens.

What nearly broke me, though, was when he forgot me completely. Although, it was easier to handle than when he couldn’t find me, even when I was standing right in front of him.

For the moment, we were trying to keep his early-onset dementia a secret. Very few people knew. My brother and sister-in-law were aware of his condition, but Mom hadn't told my aunts and uncles yet. It was safer for everyone in case it was leaked to someone within our family's staff and they decided to sell that information. Considering how many times we'd had moles in what was supposed to be a closed-net organization, it was difficult not to be suspicious of every person who wasn't blood.

If our enemies found out Cristiano Vitucci was losing his mind, they would all attempt to take his seat.

Until Ryan was fully in control of every aspect of the family business, we had to hide what was going on with Papa.

Which was why I'd gone to Budapest to fulfill my mom's favor instead of her doing it personally.

"Samara?"

I flopped down on my bed, making sure the smile was back on my face so it would come across in my voice. "Papa?"

"I love you, *figlia*."

More tears spilled out of the corners of my eyes, but I kept on smiling. "I love you too, Papa."

After we said goodbye, I waited until Mom texted to let me know she was home and was helping him to bed. During that short time, I allowed myself a silent cry. It was all too much. Being so close to Elias, having him touch me, look at me with almost everything I'd ever hoped to see in his eyes, being the focus of his full attention... It was pure bliss. I was riding high on the endorphins until I crashed back to reality after a single conversation with the first man to own my heart.

Not bothering to wipe away my tears, I walked into the bathroom and turned on the shower. Head beneath the spray, I felt a prickle of awareness slither up my spine. Jerking back, I scanned the bathroom, my heart racing. Straining my ears, I tried to listen without turning off the water in case someone was stupid enough to break in.

I waited a full minute without sensing another person before shaking off the feeling. My damn PTSD was making me twitchy. But still, I felt unsettled and rushed through the rest of my routine before turning off the water.

Reaching for a towel, I wrapped it around me while wringing out my hair. The bathroom was steamy, the scents of my hair care products and body wash blending together to relax me.

Until I turned and saw the message written in the condensation on the mirror. Blood turning to ice in my veins, I stepped closer to the sink. Nothing on the counter looked disrupted, but a single red rose petal lay beside my toothbrush, and a message drawn out by someone's finger was already starting to fade as the steam evaporated.

Knock knock, Baby V. See you soon.

Gross. Some perv had been in there while I was naked, showering, vulnerable.

I almost laughed when I considered the vulnerability aspect. I kept a blade behind my hair products. Oddly enough, not something my mom had taught me, but a lesson Papa had instilled in me. He always did prefer a knife over a gun.

At least the shower was frosted and my stalker hadn't gotten a free show.

I shook my head at the vague threat fading on the mirror. Whoever it was had been close enough to touch me, attempt to kill me if that was what they truly wanted. Instead, they had tried to scare me.

Someone wanted to play games with me?

Too bad for them, I always played to win.

CHAPTER EIGHT

elias

REID WAS CHANGING THE BLOWN LIGHTBULB IN THE PARKING lot when I walked out to my truck the next morning. Ignoring him, I drove off, noticing Samara's car was already gone.

After a quick stop for something to eat at Aggie's, I pulled into work with ten minutes to spare before the conference call. Hearing the phones already ringing nonstop, I stomped past the unstaffed reception desk and barged into my mom's office.

"Morning, bud," she greeted with a smile that slipped when she noticed how stormy my face was. "Uh-oh. What happened?"

"We need a reliable receptionist. Those phones constantly ringing are driving me nuts. She's late. Again." My annoyance with the front office staff was minuscule compared to all the other bullshit swirling around in my brain, but it was the only thing I could complain about to my mother.

She didn't need to hear that I hadn't slept all night because I couldn't stop thinking about Samara. I thrived on anticipation, but only a few hours away from her, and I was turning into a fucking rage monster.

And Mom really didn't need to know that I'd nearly broken my brother's nose. Word about that would get back to her soon enough when someone saw his black eye. Whether she decided to whup him or me over it was a coin flip. Knowing her, she'd go after us both. She didn't play favorites. Joslyn Barker Reid wasn't of the mind-set that "boys will be

boys.” She would kick her sons’ asses in a heartbeat if we were disrespectful to anyone, including each other.

Calmly, she sat back in her chair, her eyes scanning over me in that all-knowing mom way that never failed to make me feel like I was ten years old again. “You’re right. I already have a few interviews lined up. Hopefully I’ll have her replacement by the end of the week. I’ll let her work until then, though. Because late or not, at least she does handle the phones well when she does get to work.”

“I’ll be in the conference room,” I informed her. “Everything ready to go for the call?”

“Should be. Sammy is setting it up.” She smiled. “I’m so glad she’s interning with us. What little I’ve seen of her talent so far, we could expand Barker & Reid into Oregon and farther south if she decides to work for us full time. With the two of you working together, we could—”

“Mom, stop,” I chided. “This is Samara we’re talking about. She’s not going to want to stick around any longer than she needs to. Why would she? There’s an entire company back in New York waiting for her to take the helm.”

But I want her to stay. Need. Fucking need her to stay. So goddamn bad.

Mom shrugged, her eyes twinkling with amusement. “You never know.”

“I’m going to tell Dad he needs to keep you better occupied. First, you want Reid to marry Sammy and have her spit out grandkids for you. Now, you’re fantasizing about her turning this place into a dynasty.”

“I can dream.” She huffed and tapped her pen on the desk. “And I’m not sure I like her with Reid. He needs someone... softer.”

“Good, we’re on the same page. Besides, if I see him near her again, you’ll never get to hold any grandchildren.”

“I knew it!” She laughed. Seeing how giddy she was nearly made me smile. “You two were sparking off each other left and right yesterday. I think you’re perfect for each other.”

“Ma,” I growled in warning. “Whatever happens between Samara and me, that’s our business.”

She tilted her head, studying me a little closer. I crossed my arms over my chest, glaring at her. Smiling, she gave another little lift of her shoulders. “Get to work, kiddo. You’re going to be late for the call.”

I found Samara in the conference room. Mugs of coffee sat in front of the two chairs facing the computer, which was logged in and waiting to connect to the meeting. The plans were already spread out, my notes placed neatly in front of my chair.

Tucking her hair behind one ear, she made a humming noise as she stood over the blueprints, her hip popped out, drawing my gaze. She was dressed in another skirt that molded to her ass. I could have happily stood there and looked at her all day in her pair of fuck-me-heels that made her legs look endless.

Fucking beautiful.

Leaning forward on her forearms to get a closer look caused her top to plunge, and I got a good view of her tits. She was wearing one of those half-cup bras that barely contained her gorgeous breasts.

What would she do if I pushed that skirt up over her lush ass and thrust balls deep into her? I could already imagine her wet heat sucking me deeper, locking around my shaft, contracting, squeezing until it was too painful to hold back.

No, if I took her like that, it would be over too soon. I wanted to sink to my knees behind her, taste all of her secrets, discover ones not even she knew about herself.

Unable to control my groan had her slowly lifting her thick lashes, those startling blue eyes climbing my body. A sultry smile teased her lips. Fuck, she was dangerous. “Good morning, boss man.”

I rubbed my hand over my mouth, surprised I wasn’t drooling. “It’s definitely better now.”

* * *

My cock didn't go down once during the hour-long video call. Having Samara beside me, listening to her ingenious ideas, the respectful and intelligent way she handled the client, smelling her hair whenever she shifted—goddamn, it was enough to keep me hyped up for a year.

As soon as the call ended, I couldn't take another moment without touching her. She stood, but I caught her by the hips and lifted her onto the table. "Elias," she laughed. "What are you—*oh!*"

Pushing her skirt up to her hips, I spread her silky thighs and saw the wet spot already on her panties. "Fuck, you smell good, baby girl."

"I-I do?" she breathed.

"Mm, yeah. Delicious." Lowering my head, I licked up the inside of her right thigh. But when I felt something rough, I jerked back.

I saw a red and brown scar that was at least two inches in diameter. I'd seen too many healed wounds not to know what had caused the injury.

Gunshot.

How the fuck had I missed that?

Grasping her knee to hold her in place when she tried to shift away, I inspected the outside of her leg. Sure enough, she had a similar scar but smaller. As pink as they both were, at a guess, I would have said it was something that had happened recently.

Looking up at her, I couldn't miss the panic in her eyes. "Don't ask," she whispered. "Please, don't ask."

Stroking my thumb over the scar, I bent to kiss it. "Poor baby girl," I soothed. "Does it still hurt?"

"No," she choked out. I cocked a brow, detecting the lie. My breath brushed over her wet panties and she trembled, but

I wasn't going to kiss her sweet spot until I got the truth. "Okay, yes. It hurts. A little."

I caressed my fingertips over the area around the scar. "Whatever you did to get this, you won't do it again."

"I wasn't planning on it," she said, but I could sense it was just an evasive tactic.

My chest vibrated with my growl of displeasure. "You will not do it again, Samara. Promise me."

"Elias."

I cupped her pussy. "Promise." The only answer I received was a needy little whimper. "Tell me, baby girl. Say 'Yes, Daddy. I won't ever do it again.'"

"Oh God," she whined, her head falling back onto her shoulders. I pushed her panties aside so I could feel her, play with her needy little clit.

"Say it, Samara," I commanded.

"Y-yes, Daddy," she repeated. "I won't ever do it again."

In reward, I thrust two fingers into her greedy pussy.

Heels clicking warned me we were about to have company. Other than my mom, the receptionist, and Sammy, everyone else on staff was male. Unless Eugene in accounting had started dressing in drag, which was legit fine with me. But I doubted it since old Eugene was sixty, with five grandkids and a wife who ironed his shirts every night.

Although the probability wasn't zero, the more likely scenario was Mom coming to ask how the meeting went. Reluctantly, I pulled my fingers free and fixed Samara's skirt. Unable to stand without busting the seam of my pants from how hard my cock was, I lifted her back into the chair she'd occupied during the call.

As soon as she was settled, I couldn't resist and licked her cream off my digits. Ah shit, that was a huge mistake. A shot of dopamine exploded in my brain, altering everything around me.

Fucking addictive.

CHAPTER NINE

samara

I KNEW IT WASN'T JOS BY THE WAY THE PERSON WALKED. JOS was confident, comfortable with herself. That rolled over into her steps. Light, but sure. The tap-tap-tip-tap hit my ears wrong. Confident. Confident. Insecure. Confident.

Annoying as hell.

I smoothed my hand down over my skirt as the person stopped outside the conference room and hesitantly knocked. Definitely not Jos.

Despite the shy vibe of the knock, the door opened without invitation, and Crystal stuck her head around the corner. "You're done!" she cheered, her gaze focused solely on Elias.

Pretending I wasn't there. It would have been amusing if she didn't irritate the fuck out of me.

She stepped into the room, letting the door close behind her, never once taking her eyes off the beautiful man seated beside me. "Perfect. I'm about to place a lunch order for Aggie's. Would you like anything?"

"It's not even ten o'clock." I nearly laughed at how sullen Elias sounded.

With how painfully my clit was throbbing, I wasn't too happy about the interruption either.

Crystal's smile dimmed. "I just figured it was better to get the order in early so it would be ready on time."

"We don't need you to place an order for us," he said dismissively, a muscle ticking in his jaw. "Sammy and I have

to check on a site. We will grab lunch while we're out.”

She finally shifted her eyes my way, her lips pressing into a hard line. I could practically taste her jealousy. I gave a little finger wave, unable to contain the urge like I'd done the day before, my smile genuine.

Mostly because I was fantasizing about burning her house down while she was inside.

Tragic.

I wouldn't do it because Elias wasn't the least bit interested in her. But if she ever interrupted us again, I wasn't so sure I could restrain myself. This pretty little garter snake thought she could scare me off. She had no idea that I was a viper waiting to strike.

“Why is no one answering this phone?” Jos called out.

Crystal huffed and stomped away, muttering to herself about *having to do everything, while everyone else sits on their asses*.

Irritated, I considered setting her car on fire. I would drain the gas tank first, to make sure it didn't explode and cause extra damage. I only wanted to inconvenience her, not cause harm to those around her.

Elias grasped my chin. Tipping my head back, he smirked down at me. “She won't be here much longer, so don't go planning her death.”

My breath hitched. I liked that he could read me. No, that was a lie. I fucking loved it. “You don't know what I was thinking.”

“Yeah?” he teased, brushing his nose over mine. “Tell me I'm wrong, baby girl.”

“I wouldn't have killed her,” I admitted with a pout. “Just torched her car. And it was just a fantasy. I'll be good.”

Laughing, he kissed my brow and stood. Before he took a step, however, he had to adjust himself. Heat flared low in my belly all over again.

“Until later, my little homicidal psychopath.”

My gut tensed. Could he really tell what I was—what I’d been turned into? What he brought out in me? Or was he still teasing?

Because there was no way he’d still want me if he knew the truth.

Standing, I smoothed my hands over my skirt to make sure it was perfectly in place.

“I got you something,” he announced as I followed him into his office. Walking behind his desk, he opened a drawer and pulled out a pink hard hat. “What do you think?”

“I love it!” Heart melting, I hugged it to my chest and kissed his cheek. “Thank you, Daddy.”

Flames ignited in his blue eyes. “Fuck, you are beautiful.” His gaze dropped to my mouth, and I couldn’t help but lick my bottom lip. I wanted to taste him so damn bad.

Please, please, please.

His head started to lower, and I whimpered, so desperate for his kiss, I trembled.

He pulled back at the last moment with a wicked grin. “Later, baby girl.”

“You’re evil.” Clutching my pretty new hard hat in my hands, I stomped out of his office to my own to grab my things, unable to fight a smile.

Only two days in, and things were moving faster than I ever imagined possible. It was perfect...

My smile faded when I saw a rose petal on my desk. Shit. Almost perfect.

After glancing over my shoulder to make sure Elias hadn’t followed me, I tossed the petal in the trash and inspected my desk for any other signs of my new stalker friend.

Nothing.

Humming to myself, I picked up a pen and scribbled a quick note.

Red roses are clichéd and tacky. Try orchids. Or tulips. Neither are my favorite, but better than roses.

XO,

Baby V

Leaving it on my desk, I grabbed my things and left without a backward glance.

* * *

It was late by the time Elias pulled back into the parking lot outside of Barker & Reid Construction. One site visit had turned into two, in different counties. Stop number two became a whole thing because of some supposed bullshit design flaw. Or that was what the client said when he showed up unexpectedly and didn't know the first thing about the process of building a structure.

Stupid people were such a joy.

As soon as we got there, Elias had to take charge. First his dad, who, at a single glance, I could see was ready to choke the life out of the client. Once Tanner was calm, and the crew was told to take the afternoon off, Elias spent the next several hours patiently dealing with the client so construction could begin once more the next morning.

“We should just drive to work together from now on,” he suggested, frowning hard at my parked car.

I followed his gaze, fighting a smile. A truck would have been more practical for my needs, but I adored that little car. It was cute and deceptively fast—and easy to blend in when I was on the West Coast stalking Elias. I'd bought it for myself when I was twenty and kept it stored in the hangar at the private airport my family owned not far from Creswell Springs.

“What if you have to go out to a site alone and don’t get back until late?” I reasoned. I should have kept my mouth shut. I wanted to ride to work with him. Wanted to spend every minute of every day just looking at him for as long as he would allow me. But I also had to be smart. We both had work to do, and I didn’t want to be reliant on anyone for anything.

Except when it came to him.

Letting Elias fulfill all my needs in every way, day in and day out—yeah, I was okay with that.

“That car is a tin can. I could crush it in ten seconds flat with my truck. You can’t take that thing on-site. It’s not safe enough.”

“I promise not to take it to any construction areas,” I compromised.

“You drive too fast.”

Unfastening my seat belt, I turned so I could put my elbows on the center console and propped my chin in my hands. “I promise not to speed, Daddy.”

“Liar.” Groaning, he leaned in to kiss my brow. I’d been aching for him to kiss me. For years, damn it. But all he’d given me so far were those sweet forehead kisses. And I fucking loved them. If he ever stopped, I wasn’t sure what I would do. “You’re trouble.”

“Being good is boring.” Unable to stop myself, I stroked my fingertips over the scruff along his cheekbone. I liked how he kept it short. Enough to darken his jaw without overshadowing just how attractive he really was. He wasn’t trying to hide a baby face like so many other men who were obsessed with their beards.

With a contented sigh, he leaned into my touch, his eyes closing. “Let’s go home.”

His voice had gone all gravelly, almost like a tiger purring. Between that sexy sound and the way my heart gave a happy jolt at the word home, I was breathless and unable to form words. Thankfully, he opened his eyes and saw me nod.

“Sit tight, princess.” As he walked around the front of the truck, I let him see me roll my eyes. Opening my door, he ducked his head inside, crowding me into the confined cab space. “You being sassy with me, baby girl?”

“I didn’t say anything, Daddy.” I didn’t know why I kept calling him that, but it felt right. Perfect, actually.

He skimmed his nose over my jaw, producing a whimper I was helpless to contain. Those little touches. Caresses that were so playful and intimate and addictive. They filled a void I didn’t even realize was empty inside me.

“You don’t have to say a word and I know what you’re thinking, Sammy.”

Part of me suspected that was true. Even as I prayed it wasn’t. If he knew what went through my head when it came to him—loving him, my entire world and well-being dependent on him and only him—he would never let me near him again.

What I felt for Elias wasn’t normal. It was a sickness that didn’t have a cure.

Even after watching my brother continue to go through the same obsessive disease with Nova despite all the years they had been married, I still didn’t understand it. But I wasn’t about to fight it.

Not when I could be expending that energy to ensure Elias became just as obsessed with me as I was with him.

CHAPTER TEN

elias

I COULD FEEL MY CONTROL SLIPPING AS SOON AS I PULLED into the apartment parking lot.

That was something that rarely happened. The few times it had occurred had been when I was a kid and had zero tolerance for stupid people and their bullshit.

Yet, seeing Samara taking her sweet time gathering her things before opening her car door was nearly my breaking point. I wanted her out of that damn tin can and upstairs in bed.

Right fucking now.

Watching. Waiting. Craving. Those were my favorite things. Letting the anticipation build until all I could think about was release...

But I wasn't sure I could do that with Samara.

My hunger for her had already reached a point of no return that I'd never experienced before—and I hadn't even kissed her. I didn't just want to touch and taste and watch as I made her fall apart for me. I wanted to fucking own her.

Want no longer had anything to do with what was tearing at the walls of my mind.

Need. Need. Need.

It echoed through my head on repeat, shredding my sanity, annihilating every sensible thought that urged me to take things slow. Gratification was momentary. Anticipation was exhilarating.

Both meant nothing when it came to Samara.

Capture. Possess. Own. Those were the only words that made sense.

Two days. Hell, less than forty-eight hours, and I was already slipping. I was already outside my comfort zone. Heading toward a free fall into some dark obsession I didn't come close to understanding.

And I didn't give a fuck.

Everything I'd done, thought—felt—where Samara Vitucci was concerned had already turned me into a man I no longer recognized. I refused to examine my actions.

My mental state.

But even if I paused to wonder if any of this was healthy, the truth was, I didn't give a single fuck.

Exiting my truck, I slammed the door and jogged over to take the tote from her that held blueprints and sketches, all the exquisite designs her precious hands created. So much raw talent. Her brain was just as beautiful as the rest of her.

“I need a shower,” she said, sounding tired as we climbed the stairs together. “And a drink. Not necessarily in that order.”

I stopped outside her door. “I have whiskey, vodka, and beer. What would you like me to bring over?”

“Yes.”

Laughing, I dropped a kiss on her forehead. When I heard her breath hitch, it was all I could do not to back her up against the door and pound into her. But then I heard one of the tenants on the second floor. Shit, that guy paid his rent on time. I'd hate to have to kill him if he heard Samara coming. He was a nosy motherfucker, always leaving his living room window open so he could listen to everyone's conversations when he was home.

“Go shower, baby girl,” I instructed. “I'll grab a quick one at my place and be right back.”

“Or...” She twisted her fingers in my shirt, tugging me closer. “We could conserve water and shower together.”

My cock jerked at the offer. But as badly as I wanted to take her up on it, I knew shower sex was not how we were going to start off. “You aren’t ready for that yet, princess.”

Her bottom lip pouted out. “You don’t know what I’m ready for.”

Lowering my head, I skimmed my nose over her ear, keeping my voice low so only she could hear me. “I know you were tight as fuck when I stuffed two fingers inside you earlier, Sammy. And I don’t want to hurt you. I get you in the shower, and I’m going to destroy that sweet little pussy. Won’t be able to stop myself, baby girl.”

“Yes, please,” she whimpered.

“No. I’m not hurting my princess the first time.” Grasping her ass in one hand, I squeezed the perfect globe through her skirt. “Go shower.”

“But, Daddy,” she whined.

I pushed her back against the door, my cock already straining against the confines of my clothes. Her skirt was too tight for her to spread her legs wide enough so I could press directly into her clit, but that didn’t stop her from trying to writhe against me.

Pinning her in place with my lower half, I tipped her chin up. “Do not argue with me, Samara,” I snapped. “Take that sweet ass inside and be a good girl.”

“And if I don’t?” she sassed with a glare.

I stepped back and untangled her fingers from my shirt. “Then you will be going to bed without tasting Daddy’s cock tonight, baby girl. What’s it going to be?”

Taking the tote from me, she jerked her keys out of the bag and sullenly unlocked the door. Grinning, I watched her stomp toward the bathroom. Extracting the key after ensuring the lock was engaged, I took it with me. Fifteen minutes later, I used it to let myself inside.

Dropping the bottles of liquor on the kitchen counter, I opened the fridge and set the six-pack of bottled beer on the bottom shelf before grabbing two and crossing to the couch. Hearing Samara talking from the bedroom, I figured she was on the phone.

“You know what, I’m not even going to argue with you about this. We made a deal. You wouldn’t interfere if I fulfilled that favor for you.” There was a pause, and then she huffed. “That’s not my fault and definitely not my problem.”

Stepping out of the bedroom, she rolled her eyes when she saw me sitting on the couch, already drinking one of the beers. She walked into the kitchen, giving me time to eat up the sight of her wet hair hanging over one shoulder. Dressed in a cami and matching booty shorts that left half her ass cheeks sticking out, she looked so good, I sat back to enjoy the view.

“I have to go,” she said into the phone, grabbing a bag of pretzels from a cabinet. “Yeah, sure. I’d love to spend tomorrow night anticipating your call so you can bitch at me more, Mom. Really looking forward to it. Highlight of my goddamn day.”

Ending the call, she crossed to the couch and flopped down with one leg tucked under herself. Tossing her phone onto the end table, she tore open the bag of snacks and started crunching.

We sat in silence for a few minutes, me drinking my beer and her chomping angrily on the pretzels. “Want to talk about it?”

“About how my mother wants to control every aspect of my life? Nah, I’m good. Thanks.” She popped another into her mouth. “I have my own plans. Goals. Dreams. None of them come close to the life she expects me to live. I don’t want—” she waved her hand over her shoulder “—all of that bullshit. I don’t need, nor do I want, any of the Vitucci or Volkov drama. I just want to be me.”

“Tell me one of your goals or dreams,” I urged, wanting to distract her from whatever Anya had said to her.

She ate two more pretzels, and I simply sat there, letting her gather her thoughts. Not rushing her. Not pushing. Letting her decide if or what she wanted to confide in me.

Please give me something, baby girl.

“I want a simple life. To wake up every morning beside someone who genuinely loves me. Have a cup of coffee together. Go to work and do all the basic things like bicker over what to have for dinner that night.” She smiled wistfully. “I want a life where the biggest thing I have to stress over is getting a design just right for a client. Not...”

Her voice trailed off, but I didn’t miss the way she rubbed her hand over the outside of her thigh where the still-healing gunshot scar was located.

My gut knotted up at the sight. Setting my beer down, I reached for her. She didn’t resist when I lifted her onto my lap, my fingers caressing the somewhat recent wound, and I felt her shiver. Just thinking of her in pain made me crazy. Knowing someone had taken a shot at her—that they could have taken her from me before I could even hold her like this—was enough to make me sweat.

“It probably sounds ridiculous,” she muttered. “If you asked other people what their life goals were, they would definitely say dream homes, exotic cars, blah, blah, blah.”

“I don’t think you sound ridiculous at all, baby girl.” I traced the scar with my thumb. “Those things most people crave are material. If they achieve those goals, they only want more and more. They spend their entire lives attempting to fill whatever void they have inside themselves. You’re being real, Sammy. You know what you want.”

“I do,” she whispered. “I’ve known for a long time.”

Grasping her chin, I tipped her head back. “But I meant what I said earlier today, Sammy. Whatever you did that caused you to get shot, that stops.”

“Elias—”

Wrapping her damp hair around my wrist, I jerked her head back. Her eyes dilated, her breath suddenly coming in

choppy pants that caused her breasts to nearly spill out of the cami every time she inhaled. “Do not argue with me, Samara. Not on this. I’m not going to make you tell me what happened. But someone took a shot at you. They. Could. Have. Killed. You.”

I felt sick with dread merely thinking about what could have happened. Just the sight of the red marks on her leg was enough to make me howl in pain and rage. I should have known something was off...

She opened her mouth, but I silenced her with a look. “You promised not to do it again. I’m holding you to that. If you ever knowingly put yourself in danger, I’ll...”

“What?” she husked. “Spank me?”

“Ah, little girl. We both know you would like that way too much for it to ever be a punishment.” Pulling her head back a little more, I leaned in, nuzzling my nose against her throat. Her pulse was fluttering faster than a hummingbird’s wings. I nipped at it, earning a whimper from her. “No, princess. I won’t spank you. I’ll edge you until you’re crying. Screaming and begging for me to let you come. It will hurt, baby. Hurt so fucking good.”

Her skin had a sweet, floral scent to it. It was drugging, just like the rest of her. I’d only ever smelled it on her. Not roses, but definitely something wild and fragrant. Unique and beautiful. Just like her.

Kissing her pulse, I moved lower, nipping at her clavicle before sinking my teeth into the top of her left breast, where a single freckle winked at me so temptingly, I couldn’t stop myself from tasting it.

Moaning, she grabbed on to the back of my head, her fingers spiking through my hair, alternately tugging and pushing me closer. “Elias!”

I sucked until I was sure there would be a mark left behind before lifting my head. Releasing her hair, I traced over the love bite. Unable to stop myself, I cupped the globe and

squeezed. Fuck, she was perfect. Just shy of a handful, the tip already puckered and diamond hard against my palm.

Massaging left then right, I absently tugged on her nipple through her top, my mouth watering for a taste. Her next exhale left her with a sob, and I tugged harder, feeling her tremble as her body edged closer to release. I wanted her so lost that a flick of my thumb on her clit would set her off.

I wanted her out of her mind for me. So fucking lost in her hunger that she would promise me anything. Let me have whatever I asked for.

And what I wanted was all of her. Every goddamn inch, inside and out.

I was going to make her want to stay. To need me so badly that she wouldn't think twice about ever returning to New York.

All her dreams? I'd make them come true for her. I would help her accomplish every goal she'd set for herself.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

samara

NOTHING IN MY LIFE HAD EVER FELT AS GOOD AS HAVING Elias Reid's hands on me. It was pure euphoria. Everything I'd ever done, every sacrifice, manipulation, sabotage I'd had to execute to get to this moment was worth it. I wouldn't have changed anything if it meant that I got to experience this one perfect instant.

With a growl, he pushed up my cami, exposing both my breasts to his heated gaze.

His cock pulsed against my bottom. He'd changed into a muscle shirt and athletic shorts after his shower. All he would have to do was push them down enough to free that tree trunk and tear away my panties. I was so wet I could take him in one thrust.

But that wasn't Elias's style. I took his threat to edge me until I cried seriously. This man was the king of self-denial. It was his kink. What drove him when he was stuck on a project. I didn't doubt for a second he would torture me by not allowing me to come.

And fuck, I wanted that too. Whatever he gave me, I would lick up and beg for more. Because it was him.

Turning me so I was straddling his lap, he buried his face between my breasts. Involuntarily, my hips began to rock, his thickness hitting my core in a way that had light exploding in front of my eyes.

He grabbed hold of my ass and locked me in place, with his shaft right against my clit. I could feel my heartbeat in the

little bundle of nerves, my entrance so saturated, my panties were glued to me from front to back. All while he feasted on my tits.

My apartment filled with the sounds of my pitiful moans and his hungry, rumbling growls. His mouth was starving for me, sucking one nipple against the roof of his mouth before releasing it with a pop to show the same affection to the other. I was already mindless. If he would just let me rock against him a few more times, I knew I would detonate.

But he only dug his fingers into me, and I stayed perfectly still while he feasted on my flesh.

“Come here,” he commanded, releasing my ass to grab the back of my neck and pull me in for a kiss.

As soon as his lips grazed mine, I was lost. Having his hands on me while getting to taste him for the first time became too much. When his tongue curled around mine, something short-circuited in my brain, and a part of me I’d tried all my life to hold back took control. It was no longer him and me, two desperate beings. It was *us*.

Ravenous, I reached down and wrapped my hand around him through his shorts. “Fuck!” he shouted, his head dropping back onto the couch. “Sammy, slow down.”

“Can’t,” I whimpered, pushing the waistband out of my way. “Need you inside me.”

“Baby girl,” he groaned. “You’re going to hurt yourself.”

“I feel no pain when I’m with you,” I confessed, wiggling my panties over my hips. There was no time to savor the sight of his thick cock, veins pulsing in time to his heartbeat. I couldn’t appreciate the silk-covered iron or the contrast of color or the heat radiating from the long shaft.

All I knew was that if I didn’t sit on his cock then and there, I was going to die.

Instinct took over, and I notched him to my opening. He sat there, arms stretched along the back of the couch, his eyes blazing. Mr. Self-Denial wasn’t going to stop me. I doubted he could even if he tried. But when his gaze trapped mine, some

of the wildness calmed inside me, and I slowly slid down on him instead of splitting myself in half on his massive dick.

“Oh God!” I wasn’t sure if I whispered or shouted. I was deaf to everything around me. Which was dangerous, but I no longer cared. This was everything I’d ever wanted wrapped up in one moment. Not even death could take this memory from me.

Elias curled his fingers into the couch cushions, his neck muscles straining more and more as I slowly took each inch of him. “That’s it, baby girl,” he encouraged. “Take what you need.”

“You feel so good.”

“You do too, Sammy. So fucking good. I’m bare, baby. I’ve never not worn protection before.”

Jealousy sliced through me at the reminder that there had been others before me. I didn’t want him to see it. To know the sickness that ate at me day and night. He was mine. No one else was ever allowed to touch him.

“Samara?” He cupped both sides of my face when I didn’t answer. “If you don’t want me bare, baby, you have to get off me. I’ll go get a condom from my apartment.”

“No.” I shook my head vigorously. “No, we don’t need one. It’s safe. I’m clean. I’m protected. There’s no risk of pregnancy.” I was more religious about my birth control than anything else. I didn’t want kids. Just the idea of being a mom was a nightmare to me.

“Jesus,” he groaned, letting his head fall back onto the couch. “Already about to blow.”

“Are you?” I whispered, rolling my hips. “Feels so good. Give it to me. Let me have it.”

“Baby, I’m not even halfway inside you yet. Let me get balls deep before you steal my nut.”

Gazing down, I was mesmerized by the sight of him half inside me. My cream was already dripping all over him. I

pushed down a little harder, feeling my inner muscles protest the intrusion.

“You’re so big.” I worked another inch into me. “Nothing has ever felt this good.”

He slapped his hand down on my ass, startling me. My eyes shot to his, and for a few heartbeats, I thought I saw the same sickness that rotted my brain staring back at me from his blazing blues.

But then he blinked, and it disappeared, leaving only hunger. “Ride me, princess.”

Somewhere nearby, I heard my phone go off and nearly screamed in frustration. I was so close, and I could feel Elias swelling inside me. Stretching me even more than my distressed inner walls had ever been before.

It was Mom’s ringtone—the only one that was different from all the others in my contact list—the one that always made me tense when I heard it. Our earlier argument flooded into my head, trying to cancel out the mind-altering pleasure of being fucked by Elias.

“Shh, shh,” he soothed, stroking one hand up and down my back while the other rocked me on his cock. “Whoever it is, they don’t matter. It’s just me and you, baby girl.”

Moaning, I wrapped my arms around his neck and moved my hips faster, needing to drown out everything but him. Tears pricked the backs of my eyes, threatening to ruin everything I’d worked so hard to achieve. His tortured, guttural shout of pleasure sent a thrill through me, knocking all other thoughts out of my head.

“That’s it, baby. Fuck, you are so wet. So goddamn tight. You’re choking the come out of me, princess.”

Everything stopped for a moment. There was no noise, no light, nothing but the intense pleasure of falling apart with Elias inside me. Muffling my scream in his neck, I let go. Of my fear that I never gave voice to. My insecurities that only fed the sickness that festered every damn day.

My *rage* that was always there, right below the surface. Suffocating me.

All of it was gone for one bliss-filled moment, and the world was right side up for the very first time.

It was the kind of freedom I'd been chasing my entire life.

As the contractions slowly ebbed, Elias gave in to his own release, his hands biting into my hips as he pounded up into me.

My muscles turned to liquid, and I gave myself over to his tender care as he whispered into my hair while still struggling to catch his breath. "Shh, little one. I'm here. Daddy's got you."

CHAPTER TWELVE

elias

WITH SAMARA WRAPPED AROUND ME LIKE A BABY KOALA, I got to my feet. We both groaned as my cock slid out of her, causing my come to drip on the floor. Making a mental note to clean that up later, I carried her through the apartment to her bedroom.

This was all new territory to me.

I didn't do *after*. Past hookups were just that. We met, we fucked, we went our separate ways immediately after.

That wasn't how it was going to be with Samara. She wasn't some random chick. When I laid her on the bed, she curled into a ball, cuddling the extra pillow to her chest before releasing a sleepy sigh.

Leaving her long enough to grab a warm, damp washcloth and a towel, I returned and carefully rolled her onto her back. She whined, half asleep until I gently spread her legs and cleaned her up.

Another first for me.

My thumb accidentally brushed her clit, and she moaned, her thighs already trembling. My cock jumped to attention, ready for round two. That was something new as well.

I'd just blown harder than I could ever remember. Yet as hard as I was again, I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't experienced the sweet bliss of having Samara's pussy strangling my cock only minutes before. This kind of need—hunger—was only typical after I'd denied myself for weeks.

Tucking the covers up over her, I went to toss the washcloth and towel in the bathroom before cleaning up the mess in the living room. Once the come splatter was wiped up, I picked up her ruined panties and tucked them in the pocket of my shorts before locking up and returning to the bedroom.

She was already breathing evenly as I pulled the covers back so I could climb in behind her. Her entire body tensed when she felt me, but then I kissed her neck. “Easy. Daddy’s here.”

A strangled sob left her, and she rolled over, wrapping herself around me. “You stayed,” she choked against my chest.

“Did you think I would be able to get a taste of how good we are together and have the strength to leave after, Sammy?”

Burying her face deeper into my chest was her only response. Sighing, I rubbed my hand up and down her back. “Sleep, baby girl. I’m not going anywhere.”

She shifted her legs restlessly. One lifted up over mine, and I slid my thigh between hers. Her heat soaked into me, turning my cock to forged iron. Mewling in contentment, she fell back to sleep. Kissing the top of her head, I closed my eyes.

Wet heat wrapping around my cock like a vise jerked me awake. My eyes snapped open to discover I had pinned Samara to the bed and was already balls deep.

“Don’t stop,” she whined, bending her knees back to give me a deeper angle.

Groaning, I buried my face in her tits, too blinded by the nirvana of being inside her again to allow even a drop of shame to invade my mind for attacking her in my sleep. Feeling the ripples of contractions squeezing me, sucking me deeper, demanding my surrender, I knew she was just as lost as I was.

“You have the perfect pussy, baby girl,” I told her. “Thank you for letting me inside, princess. Thank you for giving it to me.”

She raked her nails down my back. Fuck, that felt good. But the scratches didn't feel deep enough. I needed her mark on my skin to match the claim she'd already made on my soul.

"It's mine, isn't it, Sammy?" I thrust harder, trying to imprint myself inside her. Needing her to feel me there all day.

"Yes," she whimpered.

"Only mine," I growled, possessiveness gripping me even harder than her pussy was. I was going to have to find somewhere I could start digging holes. Anyone who even tried to look twice at my baby girl would be buried alive.

"Yes," she affirmed, her entire body clenching in response to my tone. "Only yours. Always. *Always.*"

My release hit me out of nowhere. With a strangled groan, I pistoned into her until every drop had flooded out of me. At the first splash of my come, she started screaming, her own orgasm twisting her body in pleasure.

Her inner muscles clamping and releasing on my ultrasensitive cock had my vision going dim. It was too much. This was what I'd been trying to find. All the self-denial, the edging until I was mindless for release, it had always been to try to create this kind of euphoric experience.

But all along, all I'd needed was Samara.

And now, I knew I'd never get enough. I was addicted. To this pleasure haze. To her scent. Her laugh. Her mind and talent. Her sass and pouts.

Her.

Feeling her go limp beneath me, I rested back on my knees. "Baby?" Her eyes were closed, but her breathing was soft and steady. Panic fading, I dropped onto the bed beside her and pulled her across me. "Are you going to be mad at me when you wake up, Sammy?"

"Why would I be mad?" she mumbled, sleep thick in her voice.

"Attacking you in your sleep."

She snorted. “I’ve been attacked in my sleep, Elias. Neither of those times was fun. You waking me up to the best orgasm of my life? Nope, sorry, can’t bring myself to be mad.”

My entire body turned to ice. She’d been attacked. In her sleep. More than once. “Who?” I grated out. “When?”

She tensed, as if only just realizing what she’d said. “I would rather not talk about that.”

“Samara, who attacked you?” When she didn’t answer, I reached out to turn on the lamp, but she rolled onto me, her fingers wrapping around my wrist to stop me.

“It was a long time ago. I don’t want to think about it.”

Feeling her tremble, I shifted her under me so my body heat would warm her. She exhaled slowly, and her muscles began to relax once again. “That was a different world. One I have no desire ever to return to. Just let me enjoy this, okay?”

Hearing the quaver in her voice, seeing the way her chin trembled even in the darkness, I gave her what she asked for. Whatever she’d experienced was in the past. I couldn’t protect her then. But I sure as fuck would now. “Okay, baby girl. I won’t push. But you don’t have to be scared now. Not of anything. I’m here. I’ll take care of you. Protect you.”

Love you.

Those two words bounced around in my head, clutching at my chest. I ached to speak them aloud, but it was too soon. Not willing to risk freaking her out, I bottled them up for later and kissed her forehead instead.

“Because that’s what daddies do?” she husked and squirmed beneath me.

“Yeah, baby girl,” I rasped, spreading her legs wide for me. She was already panting for it—for me. I needed to wipe away the bad memories, feed her new ones. “Especially this daddy.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

samara

GRABBING MY COFFEE AND MY BAG, I USED MY BUTT TO CLOSE the car door. Humming happily, I walked into work without a care in the world.

I'd gotten up for my run, only to have Elias pin me to the wall before I could reach the closet. After being thoroughly worked over—twice—I'd showered with him before Elias had to leave to check on something for a tenant on the first floor.

Best Wednesday ever.

Not even the insistent ringing of the phone or Crystal's voice when she finally answered as I walked past the reception desk could kill my mood. My cell had already buzzed so much that I'd put it on silent so I didn't have to deal with my mom.

Nothing and no one were going to take my glow away.

"Good morning, sweetheart," Jos greeted as she came out of her office.

"Morning." I stopped in front of her. It took everything inside me not to throw my arms around her and thank her for giving birth to Elias. That would definitely raise suspicion, and I wasn't sure if he wanted to tell his mom about us yet. Soon, though. I hoped. Not that I was going to rush him or this. Or... God, I was so happy. "What can I do to get started today? Anything you need from me to help make your day easier?"

My smile must have been contagious because she returned it. "It's pretty slow this morning. Elias is working on some designs for three new clients that need to be finalized soon.

When he gets here, check with him to see where he is with them.”

“Will do.” Sipping my coffee, I walked to my office.

As I stepped inside, I noticed my phone screen light up. I was about to ignore it yet again when I saw it was my brother. “You miss me?” I teased in greeting.

“Like a bad hangover,” he grumbled.

“Ah, you say the sweetest things.” Placing my bag on the desk, I took another savory drink of the coffee I’d stopped to get at the bakery and sat down. “What do you want, Ryan?”

He might love me, but my brother never called me without a reason. And he didn’t make me wait to find out the reason for this particular phone call.

“You have been ignoring Mom’s calls.”

Tossing my hair over my shoulder to get it out of my way, I placed my coffee safely to the side and took the sketch I was working on from my bag. “I tend to do that when I don’t want to be constantly bitched at. If you would like to be added to my list of people whose calls I avoid answering, please do annoy me.”

His heavy sigh told me more than if he had started yelling. Ryan didn’t raise his voice often. When he did, it typically had something to do with Nova. Aggravating my brother was a fun hobby, but that sound alone told me he wasn’t in the mood to be fucked with. Too bad for him I was the least likely person to care.

“What’s this tension between the two of you, Samara? I’ve felt it building for a while now. I don’t like it.”

“You know how it is with us,” I excused. “We’re too much alike.”

“What I know is that Mom is stressed enough over Pop, and you are adding to it by not answering your fucking phone.”

“You think she’s the only one stressed over what’s going on?” I whispered, my glow fading as hurt sliced through me.

“Ryan, I can’t even go near Papa because I trigger him. We both know he has more bad days than good ones when I’m under the same roof with him. Last time...” My throat tried to close up, and I had to blink hard to keep the tears from spilling.

Damn it.

Damn him.

“Last time, he cried. He fell to his knees in front of me and begged me to forgive him for not being there when our brother died, Ryan. He thinks I’m Mom. Just seeing me sends him back to the past. He has so much regret in him that he can barely live with himself. And I’m the catalyst. My face causes him pain.”

Slamming my hand on the desk, I attempted to rein in my emotions. “So don’t you start on me about Mom being stressed. We are all fucking stressed right now!”

“You’re right. I’m sorry.”

Closing my eyes, I squeezed the bridge of my nose.

“But why won’t you take her calls?”

Fighting a hysterical laugh, I shook my head. “Because she says the same thing every time, and I’m tired.”

“Of what?” he demanded in exasperation. “What the hell do *you* have to be tired of, Samara?”

Scrubbing at the tear that spilled down my face, I glared out the window. “I realize you have a lot of responsibilities on your shoulders, Ryan. That it can weigh you down and make it seem like no one else understands. And I know... God, I *know* you have a lot of baggage from your biological mother and losing Nova for a little while. But that doesn’t mean the rest of us are just skipping through life with no worries of our own.”

“Samara—”

“You have your demons, but try to understand that I have some of my own. The world might seem to stop and go at your command, but the rest of us have to live in it even when you hit pause.”

A heavy silence stretched between us, and I could picture him trying to digest my outburst. But if I thought he had any empathy for me, the joke was on me. “Just talk to me, Samara. Tell me why you’re so angry with Mom.”

“I’m not angry,” I assured him. “Anger requires too much energy. I’m simply numb where she’s concerned. And honestly, I’m growing numb with you as well.”

“Tell me why,” he commanded.

But I wasn’t one of his soldiers. That tone didn’t scare me. There were bigger boogeymen in the world, and none of them had the power to make me quake.

Mom had made sure of that.

“Don’t pretend you don’t know why, Ryan. It just makes you look like a fool. And we both know you aren’t one.”

His sharp inhale was all I needed to hear. Disconnecting, I tossed my phone on the desk and slowly turned in the chair.

Only to see the orchid sitting on the drafting table. I’d been so focused on the phone call that I hadn’t even noticed it when I walked in.

Laughing, I stood and snatched the folded note that was attached to the flowerpot.

What is your favorite flower, Baby V?

I glanced back at the pretty flower. It was red like the rose petals had been. Red flowers typically symbolized passion, love, romance. Was my stalker in love with me?

Or did they just want to play a game until they thought my guard was down and then finish me off?

Maybe...

Maybe I was tired of all the chaotic insanity inside me and would let them.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

elias

I WALKED INTO WORK WITH A BAG FROM AGGIE'S, MY MIND ON one thing.

Sammy.

After being pulled away from Samara before I was done with her—fuck, would I ever be done? *Doubtful*—to deal with an electrical issue in one of the first-floor apartments, I had already been grumpy by the time I was done.

All I wanted was to feed my baby girl and get my hands on her. Not necessarily in that order. I'd been on edge from the moment I walked out of her apartment. She'd needed to get ready for the day, but I'd wanted to throw her over my shoulder and take her with me. Each minute that ticked away while she wasn't near me, a gnawing ache spread from the center of my chest outward, consuming my entire body until I was one big throb.

I knew it wouldn't ease until I saw her again. Had my hands on her, her sweet, floral scent in my nose, her taste on my tongue. My need was turning into obsession.

Fuck, it had bypassed obsession and tipped over into some yet-to-be-named mental illness long before I'd gotten my first taste.

"Morning, Elias."

"Yeah," I grunted as I walked by the reception desk.

I detoured long enough to leave my mom a muffin on her desk since she wasn't in her office and kept walking. *Need her.*

Need her. Need her. Her office door was closed, but I didn't stop to knock. I couldn't. My heartbeat was pounding in my ears, my stomach twisting with the urgency to have my eyes on her again.

"Got you the last double-chocolate muffin, baby girl," I announced as I stepped inside.

She had her head in her hands, elbows on the desk, hair falling forward to curtain her face. Jerking upright, she beamed, but I could feel her tension, see the shimmer of tears that lingered in her blue eyes.

Fucking tears.

I was across the room and dropping to my knees beside her chair before I realized my feet were even moving. Tossing the bag on the desk, I grabbed the armrests and turned her so she was facing me.

"Tell me what's wrong."

Her laugh came out slightly brittle. "Nothing's wrong, boss man. I'm fine."

"Do not lie to me, Samara." I tucked her hair behind her ears and cupped her face in both hands, desperate to find out what had caused her to cry so I could make sure it never happened again. "Tell me what upset you, and I'll fix it."

For a brief moment, her chin wobbled, but she quickly laughed it off. "There's nothing to fix."

"Please, princess."

Lashes lowering, she sucked in a shuddery breath. "I just had an argument with my brother. Typical sibling bullshit."

Rage began to boil in my gut, but I tried to remind myself that killing her brother would only cause her more pain. "He hurt you."

"We had a difference of opinion," she excused. "I'll be over it by lunchtime."

Jaw clenched hard enough to shatter, I slowly got to my feet, pausing only long enough to kiss her forehead. Her hands

grasped on to my shirt, twisting and tugging me closer. “I missed you,” she whispered.

Jesus Christ. She could so easily flip a switch inside me, having me ready to rage out at just the sight of her tears glazing her eyes—and then turning me to goo in the palm of her hand with three small words in a matter of seconds.

Pressing my forehead to hers, I closed my eyes. “Missed you too, baby. I couldn’t get here fast enough.”

She released my shirt to walk her fingers up my chest, teasing around my collar. I’d lost count of how many times I’d fucked her between last night and this morning, but my cock didn’t seem to care, the tip leaking in my boxer briefs just from her playing with my shirt button.

“You brought me a muffin?” she purred.

“I need to feed you,” I grumbled, touching my lips to the tip of her nose, wanting to be good, to give her time to recover from how raw I must have fucked her tight pussy all night.

“You keep feeding me treats like that, and my ass is going to get ginormous.”

Groaning, I jerked her to her feet so I could palm her perfect, luscious ass. “It will just give me more to hold on to when you’re riding my cock, baby girl.”

She wrapped her arms around my neck, her entire body trembling against mine. “God, Elias. You’re worth it. Nothing else matters. Nothing. I don’t want anything else. Just you. *Just you.*”

She had the power to make me feel like I was a fucking king and struggle to breathe all at once.

Hearing the catch in her voice, I dropped into the chair and pulled her into my lap. Pushing her hair back from her face, I tipped her chin up so I could see her eyes, groaning when I saw the tears were back.

“Is this still about your brother?” I asked quietly, trying to bank my growing anger. If I got my hands on Ryan Vitucci, I

was going to make him swallow his teeth for causing my baby girl to cry.

“No. I’m just an emotional mess today. Last night was perfect, and I was so happy. But then Ryan burst my bubble.” She laid her head on my shoulder. “I’m sorry I’m being such a crybaby. I promise it won’t happen again.”

Knowing she was lying, I shifted so she was more secure in my lap and just held her. “You’re allowed to have emotional moments, baby girl. I simply need you to tell me what caused your heart to hurt so I can figure out how to take the pain away.”

Samara cuddled closer, burying her face in my neck. “It doesn’t matter.”

“If it makes you cry, it matters to me.”

Lifting her head, she blinked up at me. Those blue gems drilled all the way to my soul, where her name was already tattooed over and over again. “Confession?”

Oxygen suddenly seemed to be trapped in my lungs. I wanted all of her confessions. All of her secrets. I already knew many of them anyway, but I wanted her to give me more. I wanted her to tell me what her brother had said that upset her. To trust me with everything. Including her heart. “Tell me.”

“You take all of my pain away just by existing.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

samara

I NEEDED TO STOP MAKING CONFESSIONS BEFORE I SPOOKED Elias. Everything was going too smoothly for me to overwhelm him with all the intensity I'd been bottling up for years.

Thankfully, someone laughed loudly as they went past my office, and then Crystal's grating voice followed. Not two seconds later, there was a knock on the closed door, and Jos walked in.

She didn't outwardly react to the sight of me sitting on her son's lap, and Elias made no move to stand. Instead, they had an entire conversation while I sat there, trying to get my emotions in check so I didn't do something stupid.

Like blurt out how in love I was with Elias.

Or worse, cry again.

"Once you're ready to present the final plans, we can get the sign-off and break ground. Can we make that happen by next week? I have Chance spread thin on three different sites. We seriously need to get at least two more electricians." Jos made a frustrated humming noise. "He's a pain in the ass, but he's a hell of an electrician. I can't keep overworking him."

"I offered to help out," Elias commented while skimming his thumb up and down my arm. I wasn't even sure he realized he was doing it, he was so focused on his mom. But the contact was soothing, and I was able to push all my crazy that was so close to the surface back into the deep, dark hole it had attempted to overflow from.

“You’re needed here. Sammy is a godsend and can handle the clients, but we would be scrambling without you in the office. Reid is too hotheaded. And even if he weren’t, and I was desperate enough to get him back in here to deal with some of these assholes, he’s overseeing our top projects.” She rolled her eyes. “Sammy, did anyone tell you about the time Reid punched a client?”

I grinned. “Which time?”

She snorted. “The time Ben actually had to arrest him. He only got taken down to the station to make the client happy. When the dickhead left, Ben released him. But still. We lost a lot of projects when Elias was in New York for his internship. I love both my sons, really, I do, but Reid keeps me up at night. Elias is the good one.”

“I know.” I knew exactly how good of a man Elias was. I’d stalked him long enough that I was well aware of every last detail about the man who was the key to my happiness.

Giving me a wink, she changed the subject, and Elias had to get her something from his office. “Hop up, baby girl. This won’t take long.”

I stood. “Take your time. I’ll grab us some coffee.”

“Eat your muffin,” he called over his shoulder as he followed Jos out.

“Sure thing, boss man,” I said with a roll of my eyes.

“I saw that,” he growled without turning around.

A silly grin spread across my face, my earlier meltdown fading away as a happiness I’d only ever felt with Elias zinged through my entire body. Taking a bite of the chocolatey goodness, I left the rest on my desk while I went to pour us both coffee since I was sure the one I’d picked up on my way to work was cold now.

A coffee station was set up behind the reception desk, but there was none brewed. Crystal wasn’t at her desk, but I had no issue making a pot of coffee. Humming to myself, I set everything up and flipped the button.

While I waited, I swiped through my emails, trashing most of them and saving the rest for after work to reply to. I wasn't surprised to see one from my brother with the subject line: WE STILL NEED TO TALK.

I deleted it without opening the damned thing.

How Nova put up with him, I didn't know. My sister-in-law was a freaking saint for loving him. God knew I would have killed him years ago if it weren't for her.

When the ringing phone became too much for me to endure, I answered it myself since Crystal was still MIA. Two calls later, I was talking to a potential new client when a deliveryman walked in.

I gave him a brief once-over, making sure he wasn't a threat before focusing on the conversation once again. He set the box on the floor and leaned against the desk, waiting. Keeping him in my peripheral, I jotted down a few notes and then scheduled the new client appointment before hanging up.

“Do you need me to sign for that?” I asked.

He gave me a leer and leaned down a little more. “What I need is your number, pretty baby.”

Reclining in the chair, I took a closer look at him. Short, dark-blond hair, brown eyes, decent physique. His shirt was a size too small, no doubt to make his biceps look bigger than they actually were. His smile would have been nice if there weren't a cockiness to it that set my teeth on edge.

And the whole “pretty baby” thing?

Cringe.

Although I had to admit, if it were Elias calling me that, I probably would have melted. He could have called me his dirty little whore, and I would have happily dropped to my knees and sucked his cock.

Not so much for the skeevy delivery guy.

“Sure,” I said with a coy smile as I fluttered my lashes at him. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Crystal coming down

the hall, and I didn't miss that she paused right in front of Elias's office. "It's 328-7448."

His smile turned into a glare, letting me know I wasn't the first person to tell him to EAT-SHIT.

"Bitch," he muttered as he turned to go.

"Call anytime," I cooed, as Crystal finally reached the reception desk.

"Wow. Slut much?" she muttered just loud enough for me to hear. "Thirsty whore."

I rolled back from the desk, ignoring her. Picking up the now full coffeepot, I poured two mugs and then added a few teaspoons of sugar to Elias's, leaving my own alone.

Crystal took her seat and actually picked up the phone on the first ring. Coffee mug in each hand, I turned to go, but I paused behind her chair. Bending my knees, I lowered my head so I could speak quietly into her ear that didn't have the phone pressed to it.

"If I see you within three feet of Elias again, I will torch your car," I promised, keeping my voice light and sweet. "If you try to touch him, I will do it while you're still inside." I took a sip of my coffee, sighing with pleasure when the fragrant roast flavor danced over my tongue. "And if you actually touch him, I'll make sure you're completely conscious during the entire thing."

I straightened and smiled down at her when she gave me a scathing look.

Aw, she didn't believe me.

Adorable.

"I made plenty of coffee. It's delicious. Be sure to have yourself a cup. Life is far too short. Enjoy the little things. While you still can. Toodles."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

samara

WEDNESDAY WAS OVER SOON, THANK CHRIST. I WAS ALL THE more thankful that Thursday morning, I woke up to Elias with his head between my legs, eating me for breakfast. Not even my mom and brother attempting to call me throughout the day—which I completely ignored—could bring me down from the pleasure high I walked around in.

Even better was when I fell asleep that night on top of him, both our bodies slowly cooling after hours of being insatiable for each other. When I woke up Friday morning, however, I knew I couldn't keep missing my daily runs. Elias might give me a hell of a workout all night long, but I couldn't risk getting lazy.

Budapest was still too fresh in my mind. Using that for my motivation, I reluctantly left a still-sleeping Elias in my bed. It would have been so easy to climb in beside him, cuddle up, and fall back to sleep. Or push the sheet off his hips and return the favor of waking him with my mouth.

My heart wasn't in the run. I'd only skipped two days, but it was enough for the muscles around my recent gunshot wound to tighten up. My entire thigh was on fire with pain before I reached the halfway mark. My mother's voice in the back of my head shouting at me to keep running only pissed me off.

On my way back, I ran into my running friend. Red gave me another chin lift and a smile this time, her blue eyes warm. My eyes scanned over her, taking in her long legs and slender physique, making sure she wasn't hurt. She was gorgeous,

even sweating through her clothes and with flyaways sticking to her cheeks and forehead. A part of me that was still human wanted to grab her and shake her, however.

Didn't she know how dangerous it was to run alone? Was she clueless to the monsters that preyed on beautiful girls? Creswell Springs was safer than most places, but fuck, she screamed innocent, and I wanted to protect her so damn badly.

But she was also an adult, and I couldn't exactly lecture her when I was doing the same thing.

She just didn't know that I was one of the monsters lurking in the shadows that could potentially harm her. Clocking her steps, I watched her until she was out of sight before continuing home, fighting back the need bubbling up again that screamed to protect her.

Reaching the apartment parking lot later than expected because I hadn't been able to achieve my normal speed, I saw several of my neighbors already leaving for work.

"Sammy?" I turned toward my name and gave Chance a tight smile as I tried not to limp. Sweat had glued my clothes to me and was rolling down my skin as if I'd been running through the sprinklers like I used to do with Nova when I was a little girl. "You okay?"

"Yup. Couldn't be better." Which was the truth. My leg pain and sore body were just an annoyance. Finally having Elias made anything and everything better. Times a million.

"Did you pull a muscle?" He frowned down at my bare legs with concern. "Or sprain an ankle?"

Damn it, my discomfort must have been more pronounced than I realized. Grimacing, I rubbed my throbbing thigh. "No, it's a recent injury that is still healing. Didn't get my run in the last two days, so my thigh is complaining. Just need to keep it loose."

Crouching down, he examined my leg without touching me. When he saw the scar, his brows pinched together. Tilting his head slightly, he frowned up at me. "How old is this?"

He had the same blue eyes as Elias. The same dark hair. It didn't take a genealogist to know who was related when it came to the Reid family. But none of them could take my breath away like Elias.

Chance glowering at me from below did nothing but amuse me. "Old enough. That's how you prefer them, isn't it?"

Shaking his head, he stood, one side of his mouth twitching as he fought a smile. "I don't do jailbait. Sorority girls just want to have a little fun. Might as well help them out." He stepped closer. "Have you ever joined a sorority, Sammy?"

"I'm not knocking it, but it wasn't my scene. I had more important things to focus on." Like watching Elias's every move.

An apartment door on the first floor opened, the one that had the electrical issues earlier in the week. I barely flicked a glance that way as a woman in a pair of green scrubs stepped out. I smiled and laughed as Chance made a joke, but my sickness was bouncing around, agitation making it difficult to keep from fidgeting.

A pretty woman in green scrubs that hugged her curves like a second skin. It couldn't be comfortable working all day with those pants glued to her thighs and ass. It was a nice ass, though, better than mine.

Did she do squats?

Did Elias like her ass?

Maybe I should start doing squats.

Blond hair up in a tight ponytail, two different bags slung over her shoulder, keys in hand, she walked toward a Volkswagen Bug. It was cute. White with a sunflower decal on the trunk. Cheerful. Happy.

Had she giggled when Elias had shown up to fix whatever issue she'd had earlier in the week? Was she wearing those tight-ass scrubs? Or was she in pajamas?

I wondered how many people would miss her if she didn't show up for work one day. How hard it would be to wipe away her existence.

Don't do it. Hide your crazy, Sammy. Don't do it.

Chance and I were only a few yards from the car, and she glanced our way when she neared. Her reaction to seeing Chance was unmistakable, but it only lasted a moment before her brown eyes snapped to me. A quick sweep from head to toe had her rolling her eyes.

Testing my theory, I stepped closer to Chance and smiled up at him. He blinked at me in surprise, his brows scrunching up again. Glancing back at Miss Perfect Ass in her tight green scrubs, I could practically feel the jealousy vibrating off her.

I turned, giving her my back, and looked up at Chance over my shoulder. "Hey, has my ass gotten bigger?"

His throat bobbed when his gaze dropped, but it was the feral-like growl that was quickly followed by a slamming door that had my pulse spiking.

"You trying to get me killed, Sammy?" Chance muttered, taking a huge step back from me as Elias charged down the stairs.

"Just testing a theory."

Chance's eyes narrowed on me. "Is that theory whether Elias knows how to clean up a crime scene? Because if you keep shaking that sweet ass in my direction, he's going to murder me."

Goose bumps lifted along my entire body. Would Elias kill for me?

I wanted the answer to be yes. So damn badly.

Hiding my crazy, I tipped my chin toward the white Bug that was being angrily reversed. "You have a fan."

He didn't even glance her way, not that I could blame him. I could hear the anger in every step Elias took, and I had to stop myself from pressing my thighs together as my body began to ache.

“She likes you,” I teased.

“Everyone likes me,” he shot back, eyes still locked on his cousin. Unease oozed off him, but it was kind of hot how he didn’t back down even though it was obvious he wanted to. “Until they talk to me.”

“That’s fair,” I said with a laugh, turning when I felt Elias behind me.

It was a wonder he didn’t leave tread on the asphalt from his shoes with how hard he stopped, his chest heaving, murder in his eyes.

He would definitely kill for me.

I nearly moaned at that realization.

“Daddy,” I breathed against his ear, jumping up and wrapping my legs around his waist, the pain in my right thigh no longer even a whisper of discomfort. He grabbed on to my ass, holding me against him, but I could still feel his rage bubbling. “I’m cold.”

“You fucking think?” he snarled, slapping a hand down on my ass. I nearly begged him for another. “You go running practically naked in these temperatures. Are you trying to catch pneumonia, little girl?”

I leaned back with a pout. “Are you mad at me for what I’m wearing?”

“Wear whatever the fuck you want. I have a gun, and I know how to use it. But it’s still technically winter, Samara.” His big hand caressed the sting he’d delivered. *Need him. More than air. More than food. More than life.* “And you ever ask any other man but me anything about your ass, we’re going to have problems.”

“Imma just go to work now,” Chance muttered half under his breath.

“Look at her ass again, and it will be the last thing you ever see,” Elias promised.

“At least I’ll have seen a masterpiece before I go blind, cuz.”

I felt Elias's growl rumbling in his chest and nearly blacked out from all the happy chatter that caused inside me. "As hot as it makes me to think of you dripping with someone's blood for me, I'd really rather make you drip with my come right now instead."

My mouth snapped shut as soon as I realized what I'd said. Shit, I'd just showed my crazy in a big way.

But Elias only groaned as he turned to carry me back up to my apartment. "You need me, baby girl?"

Heart racing, I nodded, blinking back tears of relief that he hadn't shoved me away in disgust and run in the other direction. "So bad, Daddy."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

elias

“Boy!”

Tossing my pencil on the drafting table, I leaned back in my chair and waited for my door to be flung open. Moments later, my dad walked in, a scowl on his face. “Haven’t seen you in fuck knows how long.”

“I saw you last night at Church,” I reminded him patiently.

“That was Church. We need to bond more.”

What he meant was he wanted to watch me shark the frat boys who came into Hannigans’. He never let on, but I knew his arthritis was getting worse. It got harder and harder for him to swing a hammer, so it was a chore to work a pool stick with the efficiency he once had. When the frat boys pissed him off, which tended to be most Friday nights, he liked to watch Reid or me shark them. Sometimes Uncle Matt helped, but mostly, he just sat back with my dad and watched us scam money out of the stupid college kids.

“I have plans,” I dismissed.

He snorted. “These plans have anything to do with the lethal Russian princess I just passed?”

“Yup.”

“No wonder your mom has been all giddy about coming to work all week. Damn, I was about to go kick Eugene’s ass for flirting with my wife.” We shared a look and both laughed. Eugene would piss himself after one menacing glance from Tanner Reid.

“Bring her with you,” Dad suggested. “Teach her to play. It will make for a good con to lure in this one group of cocky little bastards that have been stinking up the place all week.”

“Get Reid to deal with them.”

Dad grunted in annoyance. “That boy is in a mood. Your mom said something about him having to get a tooth looked at because it was loose.”

I popped my knuckles. “Sucks for him.”

Blue eyes glittered knowingly at me. “Sure does. Boy must have been running his mouth. Don’t know where he gets shit like that from. Must be the Barker side of the family.”

“That’s why I never let you change his last name,” Mom shot out as she walked by my open office door, not even bothering to look inside as she passed.

“Fine.” I gave in, just so I could get him out of my office faster and I could get back to work. “If Sammy wants to stop by the bar, we’ll come in for a little while.”

“Perfect. See you tonight.” He smirked. “Gonna take your mom to lunch. Don’t be surprised if she comes back late. Or not at all.”

“Gross, but have fun.” As he walked away, I saw the way his fingers were curled into claws. He was definitely having a bad pain day. The scar—from where he’d had surgery to repair the broken arm he’d gotten while being tortured by one of the MC’s enemies for weeks while everyone thought he was dead—only reminded me just how much he’d been through in his lifetime.

He’d nearly died. All the stories I’d heard since I was a kid were gruesome. How badly he’d stunk of rotting flesh and death when they’d found him in a basement was the tale that had been told the most frequently.

But no matter what story Dad or anyone else recounted from that horrific time, they always ended the same. Thinking of my mom kept him fighting. It was her face he saw when he nearly met the angel of death.

“Hey, boss man.” I lifted my head at the first sound of Samara’s sultry voice. “Your parents just left for lunch. At home.” She waggled her brows and grinned at my look of disgust.

Dad wasn’t necessarily the most affectionate man, but he wasn’t shy about showing Mom how much he loved her.

“Tanner said I was getting pool lessons,” she commented as she walked around my desk to study the layout of the building I was working on. “From the best, apparently.”

“Since you’ll be getting the lessons from me, baby girl, I can assure you that you will be getting an Ivy League education in the fine art of pool.” Catching her around the waist, I pulled her between my legs. “But only if you want to go out tonight. I was thinking we could have dinner at Aggie’s and then stop by for a little while.”

Her mouth fell open on a soft gasp as she looked down at me with emotions clouding her blue gems. “Like...a date?”

“Exactly like a date. Because that’s what it is.” When she continued to stare down at me without blinking, I wondered if I’d moved too fast. Sex was one thing, but was she ready for the nonphysical part of what I ached for? “Unless you don’t want to go on a date with me. Maybe you want me to be your secret daddy,” I teased to hide my nervousness at her lack of response.

She closed her mouth with a snap and swallowed hard. “I...” She swiped her tongue over her ripe bottom lip. “I want what you want. Dates. Secrets. I don’t care. *I just want you.*”

Those last words came out in a whisper so low I almost didn’t hear her, but as soon as they reached my ears, I jerked her down onto my lap and ravished her mouth.

Hearing some of the others leaving for lunch pulled me back before I started tearing off her skirt. Lifting my head, I pressed a kiss to her forehead in an attempt to calm myself and hopefully get blood flow back to my brain.

I wanted everything with her. But she was already feeling pressure from her brother and, I suspected, from her mom as

well.

What the fuck was I going to do if her family tried to get between us? I'd take whatever they wanted to throw at me, because fuck, being with Samara was worth it.

But what if I wasn't worth it—worthy—to her?

Deciding none of that mattered because I'd make myself worthy, I gave her another quick kiss. "We're going on a date, Sammy."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

samara

CAREFULLY PLACING EVERYTHING IN MY BAG, I TOSSED THE straps over my shoulder and picked up my phone. Only three missed calls from Mom was a new daily low. Hoping that was a sign she was calming down—*eye roll*—I hit the light on my way out of my office, shutting the door behind me.

“Hey, boss man,” I called as I peeked into Elias’s office. He was leaning forward over his drafting table, a serious, focused pucker to his brow, the sleeves of his gray dress shirt rolled up to his elbows and the top three buttons undone.

Hot.

But I nearly melted on the spot when he lifted his eyes to give me his attention. “I’m cutting out early. Got a hot date tonight.”

His lips lifted into a tease of a smile when I wagged my brows. “Yeah?”

“Oh yeah. Sexy older guy. Biker. Going to teach me to play pool.” I leaned against the doorframe. “Maybe I’ll give it up to him afterward.”

“Sounds to me like that’s one lucky bastard.”

My teeth sank into my bottom lip to keep from giggling like a stupid little girl. “I need to doll myself up. See you Monday.”

“Samara.” His deep voice stopped me when I turned to go. “Don’t speed. And wear jeans. I want you on the back of my bike tonight.”

Breathless with excitement, I looked at him over my shoulder. “Later, boss man.”

Crystal was on the phone when I passed the reception desk, shockingly working even with Jos out of the office. I felt her glare all the way to my car. It was more than an hour before the office closed for the weekend, but I was too excited about my date with Elias to even attempt to work.

As soon as I got home, I jumped into the shower. It wasn’t my first date—there’d been a time when I’d actually tried to fight my obsession for Elias—but this was the only one that mattered.

Taking my time getting ready, I dried my hair and paid extra attention to my makeup. It was just dinner at Aggie’s and then drinks and pool at Hannigans’—nothing out of the ordinary for most of the citizens of Creswell Springs.

But this was different.

Elias Reid was taking me on a date.

I pulled on my favorite jeans, the ones that made my ass look just right. As I examined it in my floor-length mirror, I determined that my ass looked just as good as Miss Green Scrubs’ had that morning.

A pair of black ankle boots, a top that only hinted at cleavage but would be more distracting when I was bent over to shoot pool later, and a leather jacket completed my outfit.

I heard Elias knock, and I picked up my phone. Seeing the texts from my mom, I was about to slip it into my pocket when the words registered.

Mom: There’s been some chatter. Watch your back.

I clenched my jaw as I debated calling or just continuing to ignore her. She could have legitimately had reason for concern, but this just as easily could be a new tactic to get me to talk to her. With my mother, I wasn’t sure.

Yet there *was* my stalker to consider. No more flowers had shown up mysteriously, which was kind of a letdown. But a note had been on my desk Thursday. A frowny face with a

single sentence that said my favorite flower was considered an endangered species.

I definitely had not gotten a sick thrill when I'd seen the note on my drafting table.

Pushing my phone into the pocket of my jacket after sending a thumbs-up emoji to let Mom know I'd seen her message and would take it seriously, I opened the door.

He was dressed in jeans, a simple black T-shirt with his MC cut over it, and a leather jacket that I knew had a huge Angel's Halo MC across the back, and I had to lick my lips to stop myself from drooling. His work attire was enough to make my mouth water, but casual biker Elias was edible.

Smirking at my reaction, he grabbed my hand and tugged me out of the apartment. "You look beautiful, baby girl."

A detached garage was located behind the apartment building. Using a side door, we stepped inside. Three motorcycles were parked in different bays. I barely took note of the first two before Elias stopped by the third. Securing an extra helmet on my head, he climbed on before offering me his hand.

My entire body pulsed with excitement from just looking down at him on the back of his bike. Countless times, I'd fantasized about this happening. Now that the time had come, I wanted to soak it all up.

"Princess?"

Blinking away my daze, I placed my hand in his and let him help me on behind him. When the garage bay door opened and he started his bike, I couldn't stop my moan as the vibrations from the sexy rumble of the motorcycle traveled through my body.

"Hold on tight, baby girl."

* * *

Aggie's on a Friday night was always crowded. A waitress was clearing a booth when we entered the diner, the only free place to sit. Right by the window.

Pulse picking up, I excused myself to the bathroom. After the thrill of holding on to Elias on the back of his bike, I was not going to let a little thing like panic stop me from enjoying our date. Remembering Mom's text didn't help.

She was just bullshitting me.

Right?

Washing my hands in cold water to stop them from sweating, I exited the bathroom.

Bulletproof windows. No reason to panic. Stop showing your crazy.

My gaze went straight to the booth, but to my surprise, Elias wasn't sitting there. Two couples had taken the vacant spot.

"Baby girl," Elias called, standing from a table in the very back of the diner.

Nearly sick with relief, I weaved past the other tables and booths to get to him. "This table was full when I went into the bathroom."

"Sitting by the window makes you anxious, so I asked them to trade," he said with a shrug, before pulling out my chair—the one against the wall so my back wasn't to everyone.

I'm so in love with you, I think I might die if you never love me back.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

samara

EVERYTHING WAS PERFECT UNTIL MY CRAZY GOT TESTED.

Beer in hand, I watched as Chance took his shot while, behind me, Elias laughed alongside his dad over something his uncle Matt was saying. We'd taken our time over dinner, and I'd even talked him into sharing some dessert with me. When we'd gotten to the bar, it was already crowded, but his dad and uncle were at their usual pool table in the back.

Chance joined us about two hours in. It wasn't late, but I was definitely ready for Elias to take me home. It didn't have anything to do with the half-drunk college girls giggling at the pool table beside us, shooting him thirsty glances.

That definitely didn't make me want to break my pool stick over their faces.

Definitely not.

His random touches only heightened my need to get him alone. Sweet little grazes of his fingers over mine when I handed him the pool stick for his turn. Or a brush of his thigh against mine. From the glimmer in his blue eyes, he knew exactly what he was doing.

And those damn college girls kept on giggling.

I drank my beer, took my shot when it was my turn, and kept my cool.

My crazy was safely locked away.

Mostly.

Until it wasn't.

It wasn't Elias's fault. I knew that—kind of. But it still hurt when I got the notification on my phone.

I only tracked one contact in his phone. I'd been doing it since the first time I'd followed him to the club in Oakland years before. An establishment like that didn't stay in business long if the members weren't discreet. When I'd found out Elias was a member, I'd become one as well. It hadn't been the easiest thing to accomplish at the time.

It wasn't the club that sent him the text, though.

It was *her*—the one who had initially invited him.

I tried not to think about all the people Elias had hooked up with over the years. That only stirred the crazy, festering my sickness. But for some reason, I couldn't shake her.

He liked to self-deny so much that he didn't have all that many women in his past. I knew the exact number, and it was fairly low, considering his brother's track record. They were typically one-and-done partners who rarely made a reappearance. They didn't contact each other again...because reasons.

But not her.

She'd been around for years.

Elias hadn't hooked up with her since the first...date, but they still talked and had gone to the club together a few times. I was well aware of their friendship.

He didn't look at his phone as soon as he got the message, but my phone was in my hand as I pretended to peruse social media while keeping the giggling college girls in sight. I got a quick notification that appeared on my screen in code.

I clicked it, and my fingers tightened reflexively around the neck of my beer.

Berkeley: Taking a trip tomorrow. Want to join me?

Draining the contents of the nearly full bottle, I set it on the corner of the pool table and picked up the half-empty one

beside it, wishing it were something considerably harder.

I should have killed her when I'd first found out she was in his contacts. He wouldn't have missed her.

Would he?

Don't show your crazy.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched him pull his phone from his pocket. He had no reaction on his face when he read the text. He was still laughing with Tanner when he typed out a reply.

I received his reply in real time.

Elias: Not this time. Have fun.

That was the same response he gave eighty percent of the time when she texted. But it wasn't a direct no. He wasn't cutting her off. She was still in his contact list.

"Not this time" meant there was the possibility of a next time. And every time he told her that, it only spiked my crazy higher.

But this time?

It was so much worse.

We were on a date, damn it.

He was out with me. He was randomly touching me like he couldn't help himself. No more than five minutes passed, and he would find a reason to brush against me. Or look at my lips. Even when he was shooting pool. He was so attuned to my presence that his dad and uncle had been giving him shit about his lacking pool skills all evening. Every time, he would wink at me, not even bothering to make an excuse for his lack of focus.

With how quickly things had happened between us, I'd thought he was growing addicted to me. That maybe he would catch my sickness. But not shutting her down told its own story.

And it hurt.

Chance walked around the table, eyeing his next shot. From my left, the college girls were still giggling, but I was deaf to the annoying sound with my head full of chatter.

Maybe I'd cut her brakes. Anything could happen on a long drive to Oakland. Or mess with a gas valve in her apartment. She would pass peacefully in her sleep from carbon monoxide. No one would know. No one ever knew.

But I didn't want a peaceful end for her.

I wanted her to hurt like I was hurting.

And I wanted to stop loving a man who would never in a million years love me back if he ever found out how warped my mind was.

That wasn't going to happen, however. As much as I'd tried in the past, I couldn't stop loving him. I'd learned to live with it, and now I was working on making him love me anyway. I could hide my crazy. I could live with faking it, as long as I had him.

Only, I didn't really have him if he was still telling Berkeley "not this time."

Because there was going to be a time when he got bored with me and told her yes. Not this time. Or the next or the one after that. Maybe not even for months and months. But he would eventually.

Maybe I'd save a few drops of her blood and put it in a vial for him since he liked her so fucking much.

Don't show your crazy.

I pushed it all down, drank the rest of the beer, took my next shot, laughed with Chance and Kingston when he brought us another round of beers, didn't break my pool stick over the college girls' pretty faces.

I could do this.

Don't show your crazy.

CHAPTER TWENTY

elias

I DIDN'T IMMEDIATELY FEEL THE CHANGE IN HER. IT WAS subtle at first, but when she stepped away from my touch when I went to rub my hand over her ass, I knew something was wrong.

Leaning back on the stool beside my dad, I watched the people around her a little closer, trying to figure out what I'd missed that could have made her withdraw.

"How about I get you a vodka soda?" Kingston offered. He was back. Again. It had to be the fourth time. Everyone else was lucky if he stopped long enough to take an order once. But since we'd gotten there, he'd been showing our section some attention, and it had nothing to do with the sorority bitches at the next table taking selfies as they pretended to play pool.

"Nah, but I won't turn down another beer. Or six."

"I'll be right back," he said, smacking a kiss to her cheek.

"Easy, boy," Dad cautioned beside me with a snicker. "He's just being friendly."

"You like it when other people get friendly with Mom?" I gritted out, glaring after Kingston. He paused at a table, nodded, and then kept going to the bar.

"Fuck no, boy. I would lay a fucker out if they got close enough to sniff her hair."

"Yeah," I agreed, draining my beer.

"You getting a Russian in-law, brother?" Uncle Matt muttered to my dad, who grunted.

“Am I, boy?” I shot my dad a look that had Uncle Matt throwing his head back and laughing hard.

“Fuck, kid. You gonna be able to handle Anya Vitucci as a mother-in-law?”

“I’ll handle whatever I have to handle.” Pushing to my feet, I left them still cackling like old biddies as I moved up beside Samara.

She didn’t tense, but she shifted her weight so that there was space between us while she kept her gaze on Chance as he took another shot.

“Let’s go home,” I suggested, brushing her hair over her shoulder. “You’re tired.”

“Maybe after this game. I’m having a good time.” She sipped her new beer that Kingston had left. When Chance changed positions to take yet another shot, she had an excuse to put more distance between us.

Several yards away, a group of frat boys in polos were getting loud. Samara side-eyed them a few times, her fingers twisting around the pool stick she held.

Obviously, she was mad at me, but I didn’t have a clue what I’d done to upset her. We’d been having a good time as far as I could tell. All during dinner, she’d barely taken her eyes off me. I knew, because I’d been just as bad. Not having at least one of my senses engaged with her at any given time was painful.

If I wasn’t touching her, I was looking at her. If I wasn’t looking at her, I was smelling her. As long as I could hear her voice, or laugh, then I was calm. Fuck, I was surprised I hadn’t started licking her yet. It took half my strength not to kiss her every time I looked at her mouth.

Which made it even harder to figure out where I’d fucked up.

Chance bumped my shoulder when it was my turn. “Here, use mine,” he offered, giving me his pool stick.

Muttering a curse, I tried to focus on the balls, but all I saw was Samara, drinking her seventh beer and looking at everyone but me.

Look at me, I willed her with my eyes. Please, baby girl, just look at me. I'll make whatever hurt you better. I promise.

Samara was so damn strong, but she had a fragile heart. I knew that. I knew everything about her. If she would just look at me, I would be able to figure out what hurt her heart and fix it.

Behind her, I saw Jack walking through the crowd, looking to cull the overly drunk and disorderly. Hannigans' attracted all walks of life, from college kids to businessmen to cougars looking for a hookup. But it was primarily the MC's domain. It was where we had Church on Thursday nights and got shit-faced Friday and Saturday. Every brother would protect the sanctity of Hannigans' because it was home.

But if the fire marshal showed up and saw how many people were inside, he'd shut the place down.

"Sammy?" Jack said with a brief flash of genuine emotion in his voice.

Beer paused halfway to her mouth, Samara turned. "Hey!" Shifting her beer bottle and pool stick around, she hugged him.

I clenched my hand around my own stick so hard, the wood creaked. There was no one in that room I trusted more than Jack Hannigan to have my back, except my dad. But fuck it all, I didn't like his hands on her, even for an impersonal hug.

While the two of them caught up, I pretended to line up a shot, but my mind wasn't focused enough to be able to sink a ball.

Samara nodded toward me. "My new boss decided to take me out for a drink after work, and now he's trying to impress me with his mad skills."

Unsurprisingly, my shot was a total fail, but I could hear the tinge of anger just below the surface of her voice now.

Dad and Uncle Matt were practically howling with laughter over my scratch. “You tired, kid?”

“It’s too fucking loud in here,” I excused. “Jack needs to kick some of these assholes out before Hannigans’ gets fined and shut down.”

“Maybe he should show you to the door.” She finally looked at me.

Fucking hell. My princess didn’t think I could see it, but I did. All that pain in her eyes nearly dropped me to my knees.

“You’re either drunk or not nearly as good as you claimed to be all day,” she taunted.

“Is that how you talk to your *boss*, Sammy?” I asked softly as I walked toward her.

Avoiding my gaze, she glanced down at the watch on her wrist, but not before I saw the fire flare a little hotter in her eyes. Her pain was still there, but she was working herself up. To her, being pissed was safer than letting herself feel the hurt.

“You’re only my boss from nine to five, Monday through Friday. It is currently eleven thirty on a Friday night. You’re not my boss at the moment, dipshit. You’re just the drunk biker who can’t hit the white ball.”

I didn’t want her in pain. God, I would burn the entire world down to keep her from hurting. But I didn’t want her anger unleashed in an overcrowded bar either.

Too many potential casualties.

Stepping into her space, I attempted to keep my hands to myself. Glittering blue gems snapped on to me, and I felt scorched, destroyed by her pain and anger, but so damn alive. I never wanted her to look away.

“You’re awfully mouthy, little girl.”

It was almost indiscernible, a barely there hitch in her breathing, a darkening of her irises. Someone would have to know her inside and out to have detected it. But I noticed. Like I noticed everything when it came to her.

Samara tossed her hair back and tipped her chin up, rolling those pretty blue eyes, practically begging me to spank her sexy ass. “As my boss, you shouldn’t be concerned about my mouth.”

Crossing my arms over my chest to keep from reaching for her, denying her what she wanted when she was being a naughty little princess, I lowered my head to skim the tip of my nose over her cheek. Her breath hitched again. “I’m only your boss between the hours of nine and five.”

But I was always her daddy.

I could practically taste her anger when she pushed against my chest. “I’m sure that rough, deep voice gets every other woman’s panties wet, but you forget that I know how you work, Elias Reid. I have standards, and you are miles beneath them.”

“Ah, little girl.” Bending my knees, I brushed my lips over her ear. “Do you need Daddy to take you to the bathroom and teach you a lesson?”

There was no denying how hard I got when she was territorial and possessive. Even though she didn’t need to be. Fuck, if she knew how lost I was over her, she would never doubt me. But she didn’t have a clue. She was so beautiful and brilliant, but so blind to it all.

My precious baby girl was so trapped in her head with all the things she thought were wrong with her, she couldn’t see the good.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

samara

GETTING TURNED ON WHEN ALL I WANTED TO DO WAS SMASH something was not a good thing. Taking pain and giving pain were two sides of the same tarnished coin. Both were messy; both could leave behind destruction.

Especially when I was added to the equation.

I wanted him to take me to the bathroom and fuck me until the only thought in my head was how good his cock felt. But I wanted to hold on to my anger. We hadn't put a label on our relationship, but in my twisted mind, Elias had been mine for years.

Now that I'd gotten a taste of us together, he was more mine than ever.

Logically, he had every right to go to the club in Oakland whenever and with whomever he wanted.

I wasn't logical, though.

Not where he was concerned.

My rage might not have been justifiable to anyone else, but I held on to it. Because if—when—I let go of it, the pain would be too much to bear.

Stepping back from Elias took more strength than I realized, but somehow, I turned away from the delicious heat of his mouth against my ear. Those stupid college girls were still giggling, and the pool stick was still in my hand.

Don't. Show. Your. Crazy.

Thankfully—for those stupid girls—Jack caught my attention. He'd spotted the drunk frat boys in their pastel polos harassing a group of girls across the bar. They were getting mouthy, and I could see how irritated Jack was getting with them.

Things would have been so much easier if I'd fallen for Jack instead of Elias. Like attracted like. But if that were true, Jack and I would have been perfect for each other. He just didn't hide his darkness behind a fake smile and a flirty attitude like I did.

Guys didn't have to hide how fucked in the head they truly were like girls did. Not that Jack broadcast his mental illness. He didn't need to. People gave him a wide berth without his advertising that he craved the taste of blood.

When the drunken idiots surrounded Jack, and the noise level faded into near silence, I decided it was safe to release an itty-bitty ounce of my crazy.

“*Ahhhh!*” Yellow Polo screamed as he fell forward, his left knee buckling.

I had to bite back my whimper of pleasure from the vibrations of the pool stick as the wood splintered, making my fingers numb from how tightly I held on to my weapon.

Jack turned sharply to face me, but I found it a little more difficult than anticipated to rein in my rage. It felt too good; the guy's screams were too sweet. But they weren't the pained cries I craved. I needed Berkeley's blood to flow. She couldn't keep tempting Elias. One day, she'd find a way to take him from me. And I couldn't let that happen.

“He said, get the fuck out,” I told the still-screaming pussy.

Maybe if I carved out his heart with a broken piece of the pool stick, I wouldn't want her blood coating my hands as badly.

“That bitch broke my leg!” Yellow Polo screamed while leaning on one of his frat brothers.

“You know who you're dealing with, bitch?” Blue Polo seethed. He seemed to be the leader of the five-man pastel-

polo boyband. His ego was the biggest. It was doubtful he'd ever heard the word "no."

"I couldn't care less who you are, motherfucker, but something tells me you're going to let us all know anyway."

"My father is—"

"Don't care," I singsonged, causing Blue Polo to make a high-pitched sound to voice his displeasure. Annoying.

"My father is Brentwood Novac."

I gasped. "Not Brentwood Novac!"

"Who the fuck is that?" Elias demanded as he moved up beside me, discreetly putting his body between mine and the frat boys'. It was sweet he wanted to protect me.

God, I love him.

Rein in your crazy, dumbass.

"No idea," I answered with a shrug. "But he sounds like a villain in some B movie. Terrifying."

"What am I going to do with you, Sammy?" Elias smirked down at me, and I wanted to get lost in his blue eyes.

No! I wanted to be mad, damn it.

"Wait until my father hears about how you treated me," Blue Polo whined, a mostly welcome distraction. "He'll own you and this piece-of-shit bar." He stepped toward me in an attempt to intimidate. He'd become progressively more aggressive with the women in the bar as the night had worn on. That was why Jack had been ready to throw him out. I'd kept my eyes on him and the other four to make sure he didn't take things too far.

Elias shifted so he was completely in front of me, giving Blue Polo pause. But not even having the giant biker step into his path stopped him from rubbing his mouth. "Get out of my way so I can teach this cunt a lesson."

"Cunt," I repeated, my giggle sounding too happy to be sane. "He wants to teach me a lesson. OMG. He's adorable. Move out of the way, Elias."

“No fucking way, Sammy. I’m not letting this creep touch you.”

“I don’t need you to protect me,” I growled in frustration. Didn’t he understand that if I was unable to take out my building rage on this drunk moron, I wouldn’t be able to stop myself from shredding his kink buddy? Of course he fucking didn’t. Because he had no idea I even knew about Berkeley. She was his secret. Just like the kink club. “Get out of the way so I can deal with Brentwood Novac’s precious baby boy.”

“He’s drunk and pissed off. He might hurt you.”

“I’m about to hurt *you*.”

“Sammy—”

“Elias!”

I would never hurt him. Never. But I kind of wanted to punch him. He didn’t get to have his kink buddy and me too. He was mine. I didn’t share. Ever.

While we were still having our stare-off, Jack got bored. Holding Blue Polo by the back of the neck, he forced him to bend in half.

“You three, help this shithead to your car. He should get his leg X-rayed at the hospital. Your pal will be right behind you.”

“My father—” Blue Polo started again.

“No one gives a fuck about your daddy, dumbass,” Jack cut him off with a frustrated sigh. “You haven’t lived in Creswell Springs long enough if you don’t know who the scariest person in this town is.”

“I will own you after this. Just wait. I will own you, this bar, and this town!”

All the locals burst out laughing, and I took the moment to gather myself. Stomping through the crowd, I slammed into the bathroom. Three other women were inside. I recognized them all, which meant they were locals, but I didn’t know their names. A pretty blonde, the youngest of the group, was about to walk into a stall.

Wordlessly, I held the door open, and they were smart enough to rush out. As I shut the door behind the last one, I saw Elias storming toward me. If I'd wanted to, I could have gotten the door shut and locked before he reached me. Even after drinking all night, I had faster reflexes than him and anyone else in the bar.

He pushed his way in before the door could completely close. Slapping his hand against the metal, he flipped the lock. Leaning back against the door, he folded his arms over his chest as if he was waiting.

I walked into the stall, slammed and locked the thin piece of metal. It hurt to look at him. To be in the same room with him. But the thought of not having him there was too much. *Too much. Too much.*

My scream was so loud, my ears rang.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

elias

HER SECOND SCREAM WAS LOUDER THAN HER FIRST. WHEN SHE stomped her feet, I had to fight a laugh, but I couldn't stop my grin.

This little girl was too much. Every minute of every day was a new adventure with her.

And I fucking loved it.

Honestly, I was surprised that only one of the five pricks who had been stinking up the place had been subjected to her wrath. His pal in the prissy blue polo should be thanking me that I'd stepped in. She would have eviscerated him, but if he'd so much as touched her, I'd have killed the motherfucker then and there.

None of the locals would have batted an eye. More than half the bar patrons would have helped me bury his body. But the other college kids and tourists? I would have had to torch the place, and then my entire MC would have made me rebuild it on my own.

I had more important things to focus on than construction.

Like getting my baby girl to trust me.

A third scream turned into a cute shriek, and I watched the stall shake as she kicked one side of it. I pulled out my phone and texted my brother to order a new frame so I could install it.

Plastic hitting the tile floor had me smothering another laugh, the toilet paper holder her next casualty. Tissue rolled

across the floor. I started a list while Reid sent me laughing emojis.

Reid: Three different people have sent me videos of what happened.

Pocketing my phone without responding, I leaned my head back against the door and waited. A few more screams later and I heard the lock on the stall click. Slowly, the door swung inward, and Samara took a hesitant step out.

Other than her hair being slightly tangled, she showed no outward sign that she'd just spent the last few minutes throwing a princess-sized tantrum.

“Do you feel better now, baby girl?”

She lifted one shoulder in a half shrug, looking anywhere but at my face as she wrapped her arms around herself. My fragile little girl, trying so hard to pretend she wasn't hurting. She needed me to kiss it and make it all better.

“Come here.”

Her next inhale was sharply sucked in. Stubbornly, she shook her head twice.

“Samara,” I gritted in warning. “Don't make me repeat myself.”

Gaze lowered to the floor, she slowly walked forward, her fingers biting into her sides as she approached me. Widening my stance, I waited, needing her to come to me—to trust me to be the one who took away all her pain.

Stopping a little over a foot away, she lowered her chin, causing her hair to curtain around her face. She was so close, but not there yet. I had to be patient, give her more time. Until she did, neither one of us was going to be complete.

Lifting her into my arms, I cradled her to my chest as I crossed to the sink and set her on the edge. Her gasp was just a soft puff of air against my neck, but she couldn't completely hide the surprise in her eyes when I stepped back.

Surprise. Doubt. Torment.

Swallowing my groan at the sight, I pulled her shirt up over her head. Her black bra was sheer, giving me a perfect view of her beaded nipples. Unsnapping her jeans, I lifted her just enough to push them and her panties over her hips before dropping down to my knees. I carefully pulled off each shoe before stripping her clothes the rest of the way down her long legs.

“Elias?” she whispered, the quaver in her voice gutting me.

“Shh.” Spreading her legs, I kissed the scar on the inside of her thigh before jerking her to the edge of the sink and spreading her glistening pussy lips. “Fuck, you smell sweet, baby girl.” I swiped my tongue up her slit before flicking the tip over her clit. “So goddamn addictive.”

A needy whimper greeted my ears. I lifted my head, licking my lips, refusing to waste a single drop of her honey. “No, no, princess. You wanted to scream. You’re going to scream.”

Her pupils dilated. “What are you doing?”

“Giving you what you need.” I spread her folds. “I want to hear you, Samara. I want this entire bar to know Daddy is making it better.” I kissed her clit, petting her. “I’m the only one who can make it better.”

“Yes,” she moaned, falling back against the mirror on the wall. “Only you. *Only you.*”

I sucked one lip, then the other before teasing her clit again. “You throw your tantrums all you want, baby. Daddy will be here to make sure you are safe while you kick and scream.” I thrust my middle and ring finger into her, making her cry out. “But then you’re going to spread these legs and give me what I want.”

Vulnerability filtered through those blue gems before she masked it. “Wh-what do you want, Daddy?”

“All of you, little girl.” I jerked her closer to my mouth. “But right now, I want you to scream my name.”

Her moan was so soft, I could barely hear it as I hungrily ate at her soaked cunt. I growled, causing vibrations against

her clit, and she cried out again. “Sammy. You’re going to scream for me.”

“Do you really...want me?” she panted, her brows pulling together even as her fingers thrust into my hair to pull me closer.

“Always, baby. Only death will stop me from wanting you,” I vowed.

“R-really?”

“I don’t make a habit of lying, Samara.” I skimmed my nose over her swollen nub. “Now fucking scream, little girl.”

My teeth scraped over her clit, nipping twice before I bit a little harder. And she finally gave me what I craved.

“Daddy!”

Her scream was louder than before. Not one person in the bar could have doubted that she was over her tantrum and coming on my tongue. I licked her through it, pumping my fingers deep as her pussy clamped down on them so hard my cock was jealous.

Breaths shredding my chest, I pushed to my feet. Her glazed eyes were frantic on mine as she helped me tear my jeans down enough for my cock to spring free. I’d never been so desperate to come in my life. She was still contracting from her release as I slammed into her, balls deep.

“Daddy!”

Snarling from the blinding pleasure, I buried my face in her tits, sucking and scraping my teeth over the supple flesh. That bra was a little cocktease. I licked the mark I’d made our first night together, gritting my teeth when I realized that had been only a few days before.

Should have been longer. I should have had her for years now. Took too long. Too long. Too motherfucking long to get to this moment.

“Daddy, please,” she whined, clawing at my arms. “More. Harder.”

“You feel so good,” I rasped into her neck. “Been waiting my whole life for this. For you. Can’t stop, baby. I can’t stop.”

“Elias!” she screamed, her pussy clamping down on me so hard, I nearly blacked out from the pleasure.

“That’s it,” I groaned, trying to control myself. “Such a good girl, coming so hard on Daddy’s cock.”

“Too much,” she whimpered, shaking her head from side to side, eyes clenched closed. “Elias, please. It’s too much.”

I was seconds away from blowing, but the agony in her voice had me stopping mid-thrust. Cradling her jaw in my hand, I forced her head back. “Look at me.”

“It’s too intense. I’m too sensitive.”

My hand tightened, barely cutting off her air, but it was commanding enough that her lashes flickered. “Look at me, baby girl.”

Opening her eyes, she looked drugged. Eyes wild, cheeks pink, mouth open as she panted. I’d never seen a more beautiful sight.

My throat ached with all the words I fought to hold back.

I love you.

Trust me.

Trust yourself.

I didn’t utter a single one because my entire body locked up as my release hit me so hard, the world around me felt like it was shaking.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

samara

MY THROAT FELT RAW BY THE TIME ELIAS RE-DRESSED ME AND lifted me from the sink. His hands on my waist steadied me when my weak legs threatened to buckle.

For a moment, I glanced around the bathroom, taking in the destruction I was responsible for. One of the stalls was bent, and there was toilet paper all over the place. I didn't remember half of what I'd done in there, but I knew I'd caused some serious damage.

Hannigans' women's bathroom was going to be out of service for at least a few days.

I wasn't sure I'd ever thrown a tantrum in my life. Maybe when I was a toddler. Mom started my education when I was five. I didn't have a lot of memories from before then. After that, I had to start pretending. No one was supposed to know about the things she was teaching me. Our enemies couldn't know what I was capable of.

Pretending was easy, though. It was cold, harsh reality that was hard to deal with the majority of the time.

My stomach turned sour at the proof of how much of my crazy I'd let slip.

Yet...

Elias still wanted me.

I was still trying to digest that when he tucked my hair behind my ear and kissed my forehead. "Better?"

Swallowing around the boulder-sized lump in my throat, I nodded, unable to form words. His smile was gentle when he clasped my hand, his thick fingers entwining with my much smaller ones as he led me from the bathroom. I didn't miss the "Out of Order" sign someone had already taped to the door.

A few people gave us wide-eyed looks as we walked through the bar toward the pool tables, but most of the patrons didn't even glance our way. Even if they had, I couldn't bring myself to feel the least bit embarrassed for having spent the last half hour screaming "Daddy" at the top of my lungs while Elias fucked me on the bathroom sink.

My entire body hummed with pleasure that not a single person had the power to take from me.

Chance was still playing pool, a few other MC brothers having joined. Tanner and Matt were both gone. They enjoyed their Friday nights at the bar, but they always went home to their wives by midnight. Having spent enough time in Creswell Springs in my life, I knew Jos and Rory typically had a girls' night or just relaxed at home. They loved their husbands, but they were always the first to tell anyone that both men were exhausting.

I understood that, but at the same time, I didn't. There would never be a time when I would need a break from Elias. My heart ached when I wasn't near him. And my mind...

No, it was impossible. My obsession was too severe.

"Hey, man," Elias said when Kingston picked up a bunch of empties from the pool table where the giggling college girls had been. I was kind of disappointed they hadn't stuck around. I wanted them to have heard me screaming my head off. "I'll replace everything that's broken before Church next week."

Kingston gave me a wink before smirking at Elias. "No problem, brother. Just let me know if you need help installing anything. Jack has other stuff going on right now with Nishia, but I'm free."

"Who is Nishia?" I hadn't heard that name before.

“She’s a new Sanctuary resident.” Kingston grimaced. “Poor kid was tossed half dead at the shelter’s gates. Jack was taking care of her while she was in the hospital. Tonight was the first time he’s worked in over two weeks.”

“Jack took care of her?” I asked in surprise. He lived at the shelter, offering the women who came in search of a new life away from their monstrous abusers a semblance of safety in their terror-filled lives.

But I’d never known him to take an interest in any of the residents enough to actually care for them. It would be too much for his demons to get close to them.

“Yeah. She’s got him all kinds of fucked up,” Kingston said with a shake of his blond head. “Think Max with Delaney on steroids.”

“Whoa.”

Elias picked up my jacket and released my hand so he could help me into it before shrugging on his own. “We’re heading home.”

“Night, man.” Kingston gave me another wink. “Sweet dreams, Sammy.”

“Fuck off,” Elias grumbled, shoving his shoulder and making him laugh.

Grinning, I waved at him and then at Chance and the other brothers as Elias put a hand at the small of my back and guided me toward the door. Riding home on the back of his bike was even more exhilarating. He’d barely turned off the beast of a motorcycle before he grabbed me and kissed the air right out of my lungs.

I was in a slow, need-induced haze getting from the garage up to my apartment. As soon as the locks clicked into place, he lifted me and carried me into my bedroom.

For the first time in forever, I woke up late the next day. Naked and cuddled against a still-sleeping Elias, I was having the epitome of a perfect morning. I had no desire to go for my usual run, not before dawn and sure as hell not when I woke

up with Elias spooned behind me with the sun already shining brightly through my window.

My head was pillowed on his bicep, his even breaths brushing like a caress on my neck, the heat of his body soaking into mine, making it that much easier to choose between a run I hated and more sleep. More everything with the man who was sound asleep, his arm locked around my waist and his thick cock nestled up against my ass.

Elias didn't do sleepovers. Ever. Except, apparently, with me. I'd woken up every morning since our first night together with him in my bed. Each time, the euphoria grew at the evidence that whatever was going on between us was beyond his norm.

I wanted to pinch myself to see if this was part of some new, twisted delusion my mind had concocted. But if it was, and I snapped out of my delirium to find myself not in the warm, loving, safe arms of Elias Reid, I would torch the apartment.

My grumbling stomach was loud, but I ignored it. Basic bodily necessities like food could wait. Being cuddled up to the man I loved on the first true day I'd ever had off was something that needed to be savored.

Elias stroked his hand over my stomach the second time it rumbled, the sound of his breaths no longer right beside my ear. I nearly whined at the loss. But then his hand traveled lower until he was cupping my pussy, and it didn't matter nearly as much.

His thick fingers spread my lips and lazily teased over my clit. "Good morning, baby girl."

I burrowed back into him, teasing my ass along his rapidly hardening cock. "Morning, Daddy."

"Mmm." He nuzzled his nose against my ear. "Be good, Sammy. You keep rubbing that sweet ass against me like that, and I'm not going to be able to stop from taking it."

There was no way he could miss the way I clenched at the thought of his taking me...there. I'd never been curious about

that, and I'd never observed any indication that he enjoyed it either. But I had to admit, now that the idea was in my mind, I was curious to explore.

“Ah, little girl,” he groaned, strumming my clit a little rougher. “You want that?”

“Maybe,” I answered honestly.

“You ever—” He cut himself off before he could finish, his thumb pressing down hard on my clit, his breathing suddenly more labored. “Never mind. Don't answer that. I don't want to know what you've done with other motherfuckers. Let me pretend I'm your first everything.”

Hearing the possessive rumble in his voice made me weak. Rolling onto my back, I cupped his face in one hand. “You are my first everything, Elias.”

“Damn right, baby.”

Seeing the flash of jealousy in his eyes made me dizzy with happiness, but I refused to let him doubt even for a moment. I was already keeping too much from him. Giving him a small piece of my true self the night before had shown me it was safe to give him a little more.

“You are my first everything.” When I was eleven, he'd kissed me on the cheek. An innocent little peck to say goodbye after one of my family's visits to see Nova. But it had quickly turned into him becoming my first crush. From there, I'd grown obsessed until all I could see was him. Every step I've ever taken had been to get to this moment in my life. I was loyal to my feelings for him, even when I'd tried to fight them during my teens.

He sucked in a breath and held it. “What are you saying, Sammy?”

“I kept it all safe just for you, Daddy.”

“You telling me I was the first man to ever be inside you, princess?” he rasped. His eyes danced over my face in wonder, while lower, his cock stabbed into my thigh.

“Yes, Daddy.”

With a curse, he dragged my legs open and thrust into my
drenched channel. “Mine,” he gritted out. “Mine.”

“Yours,” I agreed with a moan.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

samara

MONDAY, I WALKED INTO MY OFFICE TO THE SCENT OF something wildly fragrant. It didn't take long to find the source. On the edge of my desk was a bowl-like black vase with a lotus floating on top. Bright pink with the roots still intact.

Beside it was a note from my stalker.

Its beauty and sweet scent made me think of you, Baby V.

I sucked my bottom lip between my teeth, debating what to do. I loved lotus. It was what my hair products were scented with. They were easily my second-favorite flower. This lotus was exquisite, and I loved it on sight.

But keeping it felt wrong.

Flirting with my stalker wasn't right on so many levels. For one—hello, *stalker*. Not that I could judge. Leaving me a few notes and flowers was child's play compared to all the things I'd done to violate Elias's privacy over the years. And two—I was flirting with the person. I flirted with everyone, but this was different. I liked it. Too much.

Not just the thrill of toying with the stalker. But in a short time, I'd begun to look forward to those creepy little notes.

My red orchid still sat on my drafting table. I had picked up a bottle of plant food spray for it on Thursday that I kept in one of my desk drawers. I should have chucked the pretty flower in the trash, but it looked so beautiful sitting there. And the lotus...

No, I couldn't throw either of them away. Just the thought of tossing them out made my heart race.

Instead, I searched my phone for how to care for the new floral addition to my office as I sipped my coffee. Part of me felt sorry for the poor, unfortunate soul. Stalking was a sickness. An obsession. An addiction, really. What I felt for mine was empathy. Plain, but definitely not so simple.

A tap on my door had me calling, "It's open," without fully lifting my gaze from my phone. Jos stepped in, sniffing the air. "What is that smell? It's divine."

"I'm starting a floral collection," I told her as I placed my phone on the desk.

"Pretty. Maybe I'll put a few of those out front. It will brighten up the place and make it smell nice at the same time." She took one of the seats in front of my desk. "I have a meeting in twenty minutes. Want to sit in?"

"Absolutely," I answered enthusiastically.

My interest in architecture might have started because of my obsession with Elias, but I'd discovered early that I loved every aspect of it. From the moment I'd decided what my career path would be, I'd started shadowing everyone in my family's construction company. Not just the architects, but their assistants, office managers, even the receptionists. My plan wasn't just to make Elias fall in love with me because we had similar interests. I wanted to help run Barker & Reid and make the company as successful as possible.

Jos had back-to-back meetings, all of which I sat in on. I took a few notes throughout so I could refer back to them or pass them along to Elias. Ninety percent of Barker & Reid's clients were male, but Jos handled them all with perfect professionalism. Her grandfather had started grooming her to take over the company when she was a kid, but it wasn't until Reid was a toddler, and the old biker had passed away, that she'd come back to Creswell Springs.

At the time, everyone had thought Tanner had died. It was weeks later that they'd found him, close to death, broken, flesh

rotting, in the basement of an enemy. I was thankful they'd found and saved him. Because without Tanner, there would be no Elias.

Jos's ability to run the construction company so effortlessly was no doubt a result of having Tanner as a husband. He was a handful at times, as were a number of the clients who had to be walked through many of the steps that came before, during, and after construction of a project.

Throughout each meeting, Jos included me in the conversations. To her, I was an equal, which was a far cry from how Mom tended to treat me. Anya Vitucci was a great mom—to my brother. I *knew* she loved me. But she was so focused on teaching me how to protect myself, she forgot to turn her affection for me back on.

After the second meeting concluded, we walked the client to the front. As soon as we opened the conference room door, we heard the phones going off incessantly. Crystal, who had been tapping away on her phone, noticed us and picked up the receiver. "Barker & Reid..."

Jos's eyes twitched, but she offered the client a smile and shook his hand. "We will have those numbers to you by end of business tomorrow."

I offered my hand next. "I hope we get the chance to work together, sir. It was a pleasure speaking with you."

Releasing my fingers after a respectable time, he grinned at us. "Jos, you would be letting a good thing go if you don't keep this young woman on after her internship is over. She's already charmed me into two more locations, and we haven't even finished the first."

My boss threaded her arm through mine. "Trust me, Arnold, I'm going to do my best to keep Sammy from leaving us."

She wouldn't have to try hard. Or at all. Because I didn't ever want to leave her or Creswell Springs. But I especially didn't want to leave Elias.

As the door closed behind Arnold, Elias came out of his office holding a ball of white fluff against his chest. I stopped in my tracks, my heart squeezing at the sight of the giant man with the tiniest white kitten I'd ever seen.

"What did you do?" Jos asked with a laugh when she saw her son.

"What?" His hand swallowed the fluff ball, but his touch was gentle when he stroked the kitten's head, causing the little thing to purr in pleasure. "I found her on the side of the road near Aggie's this morning. I couldn't just leave her to get run over. Now she's my buddy."

I couldn't seem to find my voice as I stood there, unable to tear my gaze from the itty-bitty baby feline and the gentle giant who held her protectively. "I'm going to the store now to grab a litter box and food. Maybe a pet carrier. And toys." He gave me big, pleading eyes.

As if asking my permission.

"I called the vet already. They have an opening this evening at four thirty." He pulled the kitty away from his chest and placed her in my hands.

My fingers curled around her protectively, and I tried not to let my heart melt.

I tried hard.

It would be so easy to let myself care about the kitten. How was I supposed to not fall in love with her when she meowed up at me so pitifully and then began to purr again as soon as I rubbed my fingers over her soft head? Desperate to keep my eyes dry, I brushed a kiss over her forehead to give myself an excuse to lower my lashes.

"What are we going to name her, baby girl?"

"Daisy?" I murmured, trying to swallow the emotion still choking me.

"Like the duck?" Crystal said with a mean-girl laugh behind me. I could almost smell the smoke that would linger

in the air when I burned everything she valued to the ground. She pushed me closer and closer to arson every day.

Jos made a sound that was close to a hiss in the other woman's direction, causing Crystal's laugh to cut off abruptly.

Elias stroked the back of his index finger down the kitten's head, his full attention on me and the kitten. "I like it. Come on. We have to get Little Miss Daisy all the things."

Jos laughed again. "Have fun, you two. Take the rest of the day to get my new grand-kitten settled at home."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

elias

I'D STOPPED FOR MUFFINS AND ENDED UP A FUR-DAD WHEN A little ball of fluff walked out of the bushes beside Aggie's parking lot. A car zoomed past on the highway, making her tremble, and I'd scooped her up.

I searched the area for thirty minutes looking for its momma, only to find she had been run over about a mile and a half down the road. Not bothering to get my usual breakfast pastries, I'd stuffed my new friend into my coat pocket and driven to work.

Mom and Samara had been in a meeting when I'd first arrived, so I'd kept the kitten in my office while I set up a vet check and then returned a few calls. Meanwhile, the floof had slept peacefully on my lap.

Seeing Samara with her cuddled against her chest, fighting not to fall head over heels for the baby, sealed the deal. Daisy was ours.

Humming softly to the kitten, Samara sat beside me in the vet's waiting room. From all the barking in the back and the other animal smells, Daisy had been uneasy when we'd first arrived. But the vibrations coming from her new mommy and her reassuring strokes to the head had calmed our fur baby down.

"Daisy Reid?" a woman in purple scrubs with black paw print designs on them called from an open exam room door.

She smiled when we stood. "Aww. Look at your sweet baby."

We stepped into the exam room, but when she reached for Daisy, Samara tensed.

“Easy, momma. I need to check the kitten’s weight,” Connie, the vet tech, said with a reassuring smile. “I’ll give her right back the instant we’re done.”

Daisy mewled in protest when Connie took her away from Samara, her claws sticking into her shirt in an attempt to hold on to her new safe place. “Shh, shh, little one. It will be over soon,” she promised as the tech placed the kitten on a small scale.

I hugged her to my side as we watched the other woman place Daisy on the scale, trying to soothe her, even though I didn’t like the way Daisy was crying any more than Samara did. Samara watched every move Connie made with narrowed eyes. It took less than thirty seconds, and then our fur baby was back in her momma’s arms.

Kissing Daisy’s head, she whispered, “You are such a brave girl.”

Connie gave us a bright smile. “Doc will be with you soon.”

By the time we got home, I wasn’t sure who was more emotionally exhausted—Daisy or Samara. Our fur baby was right at five weeks old, but slightly underweight. With a prescription for lots of affection and attention, we had been scheduled for a follow-up appointment two weeks later so Daisy could start her vaccinations.

“I can take her for the shots by myself if you’re not up for it,” I offered as Samara cuddled into my side on the couch in her apartment with Daisy between us. Seeing how draining it had been for my baby girl from just a few unhappy meows had been bad enough. I wasn’t sure how either of us would handle it when Daisy had to get shots and cried.

Honestly, I was more concerned for the vet and her staff’s well-being if Samara couldn’t handle Daisy’s crying.

She nibbled her lip for only a moment before shaking her head. “No. I want to be there. I want her to know I’ll be with

her, no matter what.”

Grasping the back of her neck, I pulled her head down to my shoulder and kissed her brow. “That’s my brave girl.”

She slid her arm around my waist. “I’m so mad at you right now.”

“Yeah?” I closed my eyes and breathed in her sweet, floral scent. “Why’s that, princess?”

“You made me love this rotten little kitty.”

“It’s all part of my wicked plan to keep you in Creswell Springs,” I teased. “If you go back to New York, I get to keep custody of Daisy. You won’t break our fur baby’s heart by abandoning her, will you?”

She was quiet for a long while as she stroked the kitten’s fur. “No,” she whispered a few minutes later. “I won’t ever abandon her.”

* * *

“It’s only for a few weeks,” Samara muttered as she placed Daisy’s litter box by the window in her office. “When she’s older, we can leave her home.”

“Of course it is, baby girl,” I agreed as I set up the cat tree with the castle-style condo on the third tier.

“The doctor said we need to give her lots of attention because she’s so tiny. And we have to make sure she’s eating often enough.”

I hid my grin as I attached the next tier. “It only makes sense to keep her in the office with us. Otherwise, one of us would be driving home every few hours to check in on her.”

“Exactly!”

Fuck, she was adorable.

* * *

“Don’t cry,” Samara whispered as the vet administered the first shot. “Be brave. It’s okay. Everything will be over soon.”

I wasn’t sure who she was giving the pep talk to—Daisy or herself. Hearing the quaver in her voice, my heart broke. Shot one didn’t seem to bother the kitten, but the second one had her letting out a very displeased mewl.

My body tensed, unsure how the next minute would unfold. Samara was in protective momma mode, which could have meant anything. I didn’t know if she would take the hypodermic from the doctor and make a kabob with her eyes, or hug Daisy.

Two huge tears dripped from Samara’s eyes, and I couldn’t have cared less if she killed every member of the vet’s staff then and there. As long as she didn’t cry anymore. Her tears killed me. I would burn the world to nothing but ash to keep her eyes dry.

“Be brave,” she repeated with a sniffle, still holding Daisy tight so the vet could finish up.

As soon as the vet stepped away from them, I pulled Samara into my arms. “You both did great,” I praised. “My girls were so brave.”

“I hate this,” she sobbed, burying her face in my chest.

“I know, baby. But you were so strong. Daisy wasn’t scared at all. Just mad. She knows she’s safe with us.” I touched my lips to her brow. “With you.”

Dr. Beamer disposed of the hypodermic. “All done, folks. We’ll see you again in three to four weeks for the next round.”

I nodded my thanks and waited for the door to close behind her before leaning back so I could see Samara’s face. Her chin wobbled, but her tears had receded. “We’re going home. I’m going to make you tomato soup and cheese quesadillas, and we’re going to cuddle on the couch all night with Daisy on our lap.”

Tipping her chin up, I brushed my nose over hers. “Will that make my princess feel better?”

She searched my eyes for a moment, the blue gems melting me like a blowtorch to an ice cube. Finally, she nodded.

Tucking her hair behind her ear, I nipped playfully at her lobe. “And then we will tuck our little fur baby in, and I’ll spend the rest of the night licking up the cream my baby girl makes just for me.”

“Yes, please, Daddy.”

* * *

Mom shut the door to my office with a grunt. “Okay, it’s done. I have a new receptionist starting on Monday.”

I leaned back in my chair as she took the seat in front of my desk. “Only took a month. Have you told the current one?”

“She knows I’ve been interviewing candidates for the position, but she’s not aware I hired someone. Her smug ass thinks she’s irreplaceable.” Mom pressed her lips into a grim line. “I was starting to think the same thing. The few people I interviewed in the past few weeks were okay on paper, but in person, they were worse than Crystal. I was about to give up when the résumé for this woman landed in my email. She’s thirty. Has experience. And a personality.”

“Downside?”

“Maybe she has more than *one* personality?” Mom sighed when I burst out laughing. “She will be a better fit than Crystal. I made the offer, and she accepted.”

“I trust your judgment, Mom.” I checked the time on my phone. “You and Sammy have a meeting?”

“Yes.” With a groan, she stood and stretched her neck left and right. “We should be done by lunch. Then you can steal my favorite girl away. I’ll get Crystal’s exit package together while you’re out.”

“I’ll bring you back a slice of cake from Aggie’s,” I promised.

Her eyes brightened. “I knew I had the best son in the world.”

When the door closed behind her, it opened again almost immediately. Samara had her phone in one hand and our fur baby in the other. I couldn’t have stopped the happy grin that split my face at the sight of them even if I’d wanted to.

“The survey team has the specs for the Magnus project. Can we take an hour this afternoon to review it?”

I pulled up my email and saw the team hadn’t sent me any information yet. Those assholes seemed to communicate with Samara first these days. Trying to impress her or some shit.

She walked around my desk and saw I was searching for the email. “I’ll forward it to you,” she promised.

I snaked an arm around her waist and pulled her in for a kiss. She gave a pleased little sigh, kissing me back. But Daisy meowed a warning, reminding us both she was there and not to squish her.

Lifting her head, Samara smiled. “Can Daisy hang out with you for the morning?”

“Why are you asking?” I gently scooped my fur baby into my arms. “I’m her dad. Of course she’s gonna hang with me while Mommy is working.”

Blue gems darkened for a moment, but then she dropped another kiss on my lips. “See you both soon.”

I waited until the door closed behind her before I picked Daisy up. “You think she trusts me yet?”

A tiny meow was my fur-daughter’s response. I kissed her head and laid her back on my lap. “Yeah, I don’t think she’s quite there either.”

But I was getting closer. Every day I saw a small change in my baby girl. It didn’t matter if it took a hundred years, though. Giving up wasn’t an option.

Even if all I ever got was an hour of Samara having complete faith in me, I’d take it in a heartbeat.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

samara

I STOOD AT THE END OF THE COUCH, STUCK BETWEEN WANTING to scream and cry. I blamed Elias. He'd already left for the office because of an early meeting on-site with a client, leaving me there to have to deal with this emotional shit.

Our new receptionist, Gina, was allergic to cats. And not just a few sneezes allergic. On Friday, her eyes had swollen up, and she'd been making a scary wheezing sound by lunch. I kind of felt bad for her. But did I care enough to leave my sweet little Daisy home alone for the first time?

In the six weeks since she had become ours, Elias and I had taken her everywhere. Even to MC barbecues and dinner at his parents' house. I'd found these cute cat-sling pet-carrier bags, so we could tuck her in and she would poke her head out to people watch. Daisy was always a hit with the kids at the cookouts.

Elias spent most of the time crouched down so the smaller kids could pet the kitten's head. Jos, Tanner, and Reid all claimed that Daisy was an official member of the family. Raven had even made her a little leather cut that said Property of Angel's Halo MC Elias on the back. Dr. Beamer hadn't been able to stop giggling the entire time during Daisy's latest vet visit.

I wasn't even sure why I needed to be so accommodating to Gina. It wasn't like she could do much of anything except fuck up. Gina was the second new hire in three weeks. The first receptionist who had replaced Crystal had only lasted a week. She had experience, but I wasn't sure what that

experience was in. Answering phones was a given, sure. But the way she answered them caused me to wonder if her last job was as a sex phone operator.

Miss Sexy Voice had been a better fit than Crystal, but Elias had fired her by the Thursday of the same week she'd started. I still wasn't sure why, except he'd been increasingly growly as the days had passed. Then one day, I'd come back from lunch with Delaney and discovered that she'd been fired. Elias had been pissed, and Jos had been scrambling to find a replacement.

Gina had been there for the last week and a half. So far, she had transferred three calls to the wrong person off-site. Scheduled two new client appointments for the same time with the same architect, somehow rearranged all of Jos's personal schedule, which included meetings with at least two suppliers and a safety inspector.

Would it be so bad if I took Daisy and Gina went into anaphylaxis?

Would Ben arrest me for murder if I knowingly sent someone into an allergic reaction that ended in death? But more importantly...would it be considered premeditated?

Daisy looked up at me expectantly, as if asking why I was still standing there staring at her instead of tucking her into her sling so we could go to work.

Crouching, I scratched her head and then under her chin, earning me the pretty little purr I loved so much. "I'm sorry, precious baby," I explained softly. "Mommy can't take you with her today. Maybe when we get a new receptionist. Grandma Jos is already looking for Gina's replacement. Which is good, because I don't think either Daddy or I could talk her out of murder if Gina messes up even bigger than she did last week."

Daisy gave me soulful eyes that I had to fight to resist and her prissy little meow that meant I needed to pick her up already.

“All of your toys are here. Daddy even brought your office cat tree home Friday night because you love it so much. I’ll be back at lunchtime to check on you. If you’re a good girl, I’ll give you some tuna.” With that promise, I grabbed my things and locked up before running down to my car. If I’d stayed even a second longer, I knew I would have said to hell with it and taken my fur baby with me.

It wasn’t like Ben would arrest me anyway. And on the very, very slim chance he did, Lexa would tell him to let me go, which would mean I wouldn’t have to call the family lawyer.

I was seconds away from running back upstairs to scoop Daisy into her cat sling when my phone rang. Seeing it was my brother, I sent him to voice mail. “Not today, Satan.”

Talking to Ryan was the last thing I wanted to do. It was rare I answered his or my mother’s calls. All of Mom’s texts were cryptic, telling me to be careful and watch my back or stay focused. Like I wasn’t hyperaware of my surroundings every minute of the day to begin with.

If she was so worried, she would have told me why she felt the need to caution me. Her lack of information further proved it was nothing more than a ploy to either attempt to scare me into coming home or make me answer my phone when she called.

Ryan didn’t give up easily. His name popped up on my car’s touchscreen three more times before I made it to work. He didn’t leave a voice mail. Why would he? He couldn’t make me cry in a fucking voice mail.

I didn’t stop for my usual cup of coffee, knowing I would give in to temptation and drive back to my apartment to snatch up Daisy if I did.

Walking into the lobby, I went straight for the coffeepot. At least with Miss Sexy Voice, she’d kept us supplied with fresh caffeine throughout the entire day. Gina didn’t seem to be able to talk and walk at the same time. If she tried to make coffee and answer the phones, she would probably burn the building down.

Having the relentless ringing phones quiet was enough for me. Decades before, Jos had had to fight to win bids for any project the company could get. Now, clients were happy to get on a waiting list to have Barker & Reid fulfill their construction needs.

While I brewed a pot, Gina nervously took care of business, and I checked emails on my phone. Ryan's name was at the top of the list. Instead of texting me, he'd sent a freaking email. Which was fair since I didn't even look at his messages ninety percent of the time.

Maybe if he'd bothered to leave me a voice mail, I would have clicked the email. Instead, I left it unopened and poured myself a cup of coffee.

Behind me, I heard the door open and Gina's hesitant greeting. "Good morning. Welcome to Barker & Reid. How can I help you?"

"Hi. I have an appointment with Elias."

I was glad I had taken my time to turn around because the sound of that voice hit me in all the wrong ways. My vision turned red around the edges, and my mind was already coming up with ways to "accidentally" spill coffee in the newcomer's face.

Blinking back the jealous, murderous haze, I slowly turned to find Lynn Berkeley standing in front of the receptionist with her sexy, confident smile, dressed in a skirt that might as well have been painted on her perfect ass. Her top was designer, but not appropriate for work, given the amount of cleavage she was showcasing.

She'd definitely done that for Elias's benefit, knowing all too well that he was a tits man.

I waited for Berkeley to give her name before I stepped forward to greet her myself, pretending I didn't already know every last detail of Elias's kink buddy.

In the weeks since our first date, when he'd gotten that text from Berkeley, I hadn't allowed myself to think about her. It wasn't safe to go down that road. My crazy got too close to the

surface when my jealousy was forced into the equation. Thankfully, she hadn't texted him again. And I was able to live in my little fantasy world where kink buddies didn't exist.

Now she stood in front of me, her gaze full of longing as she glanced around, hoping to catch sight of Elias. I wanted to pull out her blond extensions so bad my fingers itched.

Putting on my most professional smile, I stepped around the desk and offered my hand. "Miss Berkeley, hello. I'm Samara, Elias's intern. I apologize, but we didn't have you on our schedule today. Elias is still off-site meeting with a client."

Her eyes raked over me, lingering on my chest and then my waist. Her chin lifted and her nose twitched, but she still shook my hand. I made sure to keep my grip light to hold my temptation for violence to a minimum.

I'd withstood burning Crystal's home and car to ash for over an entire month. I could keep my need to taste Berkeley's blood in check for a little while.

"I made the appointment last week," Berkeley said, dropping her hand back to her side. "Elias spoke to me personally about coming in, but I believe your receptionist made the appointment."

He'd spoken to her.

Personally.

I brightened my smile to keep from gritting my teeth. There was no way she'd called or texted his personal phone without my knowing about it. Which meant she had actually called the office.

"I apologize for any confusion. We've been having a few technical issues with our system." All appointments made were sent straight to my task calendar, so I knew exactly who Elias and I were meeting with throughout each day. It helped me prepare for any potential surprises.

This one was not only unexpected, but so unwelcome I wasn't sure how I was going to keep my crazy from spilling over. My regret over not bringing Daisy evaporated. I was

thankful she wouldn't be there to see her mommy lose her mind. Or be in the vicinity of potential danger.

“Let me show you to the conference room, and then I'll call Elias to let him know you are here,” I offered. “Would you like a cup of coffee?”

Luckily for her, she declined because I had no faith in myself not to poison her beverage.

As I left her in the conference room, I lifted my phone to my ear and walked into my office. Slamming the door did nothing to quiet the noise in my head.

“Hey, baby girl. I just made it back to town. Did you eat breakfast? I can stop at Aggie's if you didn't.”

Closing my eyes, I tried to focus on his voice instead of my need to play in Berkeley's blood. But all that did was help me picture how pretty she would look bleeding out at my feet. “Did you schedule a meeting with Lynn Berkeley?”

His hesitation caused my throat to tighten. “I spoke to her last week about setting up a time to come in for a consultation, but I'm not sure when she's on the books.”

“She's here,” I informed him, staring blankly at the African violets that were on the opposite end of my desk from my lotus. My office was a jungle of beautiful flowers. Along with the orchid, lotus, and violets, I'd also acquired gardenias and red tulips. All of them left with notes from my stalker, calling me Baby V. “I put her in the conference room.”

“Okay. I should be there in five,” Elias responded with a heavy sigh. “Start without me.”

“Yeah, sure,” I muttered. Disconnecting before he could say anything else, I stood there for a long moment.

He knew she was coming for a consultation. Maybe not the specifics, but he'd still been aware of it happening soon. Apparently he had no qualms about doing business with his previous hookup. Who also still happened to be his kink buddy.

I had zero doubts he wouldn't bring up the fact that he and Berkeley had history. He never even mentioned his kink to me, didn't even explore it with me. I knew all about his voyeurism, but not once had he even hinted that he wanted to watch me do anything to myself. I'd even touched myself in front of him a few times to get a reaction, and all it had done was make him growl at me.

“This pussy is mine. Only I get to touch it,” he'd snarled against my wet folds before biting my clit. “Do you understand me, Samara? Say it, little girl. Tell me I'm the only one who gets to touch this pretty pussy.”

I'd been so turned on, I'd barely been able to whine, “Yes, Daddy. Only you,” before I was coming on his tongue. But later, as we were both struggling to catch our breath, I couldn't help wondering why he didn't want to enjoy his kink with me.

My phone went off, but I didn't immediately look down at the screen. Instead, I focused on the new flowerpot sitting on the windowsill. Little kittens were painted on the glazed ceramic, and inside were white daisies. I'd noticed them when I'd first walked in, but it had barely registered as I'd spoken to Elias.

Walking over to them, I searched for the note. There was always a note, and this one was hidden beneath the adorable pot.

Now you can still have your Daisy with you in the office, Baby V.

My fingers clenched around the card when my phone rang for what felt like the hundredth time. Seeing it was my brother yet again, I muffled my frustrated scream behind clenched teeth.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

elias

AFTER DEALING WITH ONE RECEPTIONIST WHO DID NOTHING but stare at Samara's ass, followed by one who couldn't schedule a meeting to save her life, I had started to wonder if maybe the one who was always late and only answered the phones when Mom yelled was the better option.

Mom was already bitching at the new girl when I walked in, but at least no one was screaming. Or crying. That was a plus.

Frustrated, I stormed past them toward the conference room. When Lynn had called me at work the week before, I'd figured she wouldn't be able to get a new client consultation for months. I should have scheduled it myself, but I'd been distracted at the time and hadn't thought much of passing her call back to the receptionist to handle it.

Entering the room, I found Lynn sitting on one side of the long table and Samara across from her. She had her legal pad out, ready to take notes, a professional smile on her face. But her blue gems were emotionless.

Christ.

My baby girl had checked out. Which was probably for the best. Otherwise, I might have walked into a bloodbath. But I would have preferred that over her locking herself down on me.

Lynn stood as I walked forward, pulling my gaze from Samara. "Hey, stranger."

I held out my hand. Irritation flickered across Lynn's face, but she shook my hand. "Sorry I'm running behind. Our computer system is still glitching. Your appointment didn't carry over to my agenda."

"Your intern was telling me you had a few issues with it recently. If I'd known that, I would have texted you over the weekend to confirm." She stepped closer, but I dropped her hand and motioned toward the table.

"You mentioned purchasing a new property and wanting to do a full remodel." I waited for her to retake her seat before sliding into my usual spot beside Samara. Leaning back, I listened to Lynn explain her vision, while taking Sammy's hand beneath the table.

She curled her fingers into a ball, shying away from my touch.

Fuck that shit.

Lifting her wrist, I placed her fist on the table and covered it with my hand. Lynn stopped talking, her gaze narrowed on our hands. Beside me, Samara remained silent and unmoving.

I rubbed my thumb over her knuckles. "First, we will need to see the blueprints of the original building. From there, Samara will be able to give you a full layout to your specifications."

That had Lynn's full attention. "Samara will? But I came here for you."

I shrugged. "I'm not available, which I told you last week when you called. Samara is taking point on all projects."

She pouted out her bottom lip, annoying the hell out of me. "I thought you would make an exception since we're friends."

"I'm too busy. If you want Barker & Reid to handle this remodel, you'll need to work with Samara."

"She's just an intern," Lynn argued.

"I will be supervising, but only until she graduates. She has my full confidence." I glanced over at Samara, but her

gaze was on our hands. I gave her fingers a firm squeeze. “How open is your schedule, baby girl?”

Blinking a few times, she finally looked up at me. “I have a few projects I’m finishing up, but I can fit in Miss Berkeley since she’s such a good friend of yours. Once I have the original layout, I can get the model done within the next two weeks.”

Lynn grumbled something under her breath but gave me a tight smile. “I was looking forward to working with you, Elias. But if you have faith in Samara, and will be supervising, I guess I will have to make do.”

I pushed back my chair and stood. Lynn was slower to rise, while Samara didn’t move. Reaching across the table, I shook Lynn’s hand again. “Samara will be in touch as soon as she gets what she needs.”

“Of course. I’ll have my assistant email everything over this afternoon.” She glanced at Samara but quickly shifted her gaze back to me, her bottom lip puffing out yet again. “Hopefully we can catch up sometime soon.”

Samara jerked to her feet before I could tell the other woman that wasn’t going to happen. “If you will excuse me, I have a few calls to return.” Gathering her notepad and phone, she walked out of the room without glancing back.

“Well, this didn’t go quite as I anticipated,” Lynn laughed. “But at least I got to see you again. It feels like forever, Elias.”

I thrust my hands into my pockets, my gaze on the open door. After weeks of trying to prove to Samara she could trust me, I’d thought I was gaining ground. But obviously, I’d been wrong. That wasn’t going to stop me from continuing to try, though. I wouldn’t give up until I met the angel of death. Fuck, not even then.

First, I had to deal with the woman in front of me. “I’m not into the club scene anymore, Berkeley.”

“I didn’t even mention the club. I wanted to see *you*.” Hearing her take a step, I turned my head to find her leaning

forward enough that her tits were about to spill out of her top. “I’ve missed you. Don’t you miss me, just a little?”

She didn’t know how to take a hint, so I gave it to her straight. “No. You don’t even cross my mind. Look, we hooked up once. You introduced me to the club, which was fun, but I’ve got something good going on. Don’t come in here trying to play games. You won’t like what happens if you fuck up my relationship with Samara.”

Her face scrunched up in displeasure. “You don’t do relationships.”

Lowering my head, I met her gaze full on. “I’m with Samara. She’s my present and my future. You want my company to work on your remodel, fine. But you try to pull any bullshit with my girl, and I will take a wrecking ball to the place.”

“Fine.” Her whine was like nails on a chalkboard. Picking up her purse, she stomped toward the exit. “I just wanted to see you. God. You’re such a killjoy.”

Following her out, I watched her go until I reached Samara’s office. Not bothering to knock, I walked in, prepared to duck in case she was throwing another tantrum.

Instead, I found her pacing in front of her desk with her phone to her ear. Her face had gone pale, and she was worrying her bottom lip between her teeth as she listened.

I closed the door behind me and waited. Seeing me, she rolled her eyes and turned to face the window.

“Why didn’t he leave a voice mail?” she demanded when whoever was on the other end stopped speaking. “I don’t want to argue with you about it, Nova. He should have left a fucking message the first time he called this morning!”

Hearing the way her voice shook with suppressed emotion, I crossed the room to her. With each step that took me closer, I felt her tension grow. Was it because of what Nova was saying or because she didn’t want me to touch her?

Wrapping my arms around her from behind caused her to stiffen, but at least she didn’t pull away. Closing my eyes in

relief, I pressed a kiss to the back of her head.

“Is Papa okay?”

Even as close as I was, I could only hear random words of what Nova was saying. I was more focused on how Samara reacted to what her sister-in-law said. Her choppy breaths, the soft gulp, a barely there whine.

“...war...” Caught my attention, but there was no outward reaction that I could hear or feel from Samara, until Nova said, “You have to come home.”

Samara leaned her head back against me, one of her hands covering both of mine linked just below her navel. “What if I make it worse?”

“After taking the pros and cons into account, Anya and Ryan are both in agreement. You have to come home, Samara,” Nova said again. “Now.”

“Of course I’m coming home. Papa needs me.”

“The jet is already on its way to you,” Nova informed her. The sound of her voice was usually reassuring for me. Not this time. Not when she was talking about taking Samara away. “It left about two hours ago. You have plenty of time to grab your things and get to the airport.”

“Yeah, okay. I’ll meet the pilot.” Hanging up, she dropped her hand and turned in my arms, hiding her face in my shirt. “Don’t ask questions. I know you have them. But I can’t right now. Just...hold me?”

She was right. I had a million questions, the one I wanted answered the most desperately was *when* she was going to be back. Because she was coming back, goddamn it. I couldn’t let myself consider any other option. But she sounded so lost, I swallowed the questions that needed a response before I lost my fucking mind.

Every instinct inside me demanded I go with her. All but one, and it told me I couldn’t force my way through this. She had to trust me enough to ask me to go.

And she wasn’t there yet.

Giving her what she needed, even though it felt like I was pouring acid directly onto my heart, I wrapped her tighter. “Okay, baby girl.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

samara

MY MIND WAS IN COMPLETE CHAOS BY THE TIME THE JET touched down in New York, my heart pulled in two different directions.

Papa in NYC.

Elias and Daisy back in Creswell Springs.

As much as I'd ached to bring both with me, I couldn't. It wouldn't have been fair to put my little fur baby through a long flight and then subject her to being locked in my bedroom at the mansion. And Elias...

I needed space so I could rein in my crazy after the intense morning I'd already had, coming face-to-face with Berkeley. Not to mention the bullshit of witnessing her trying to flirt with him right in front of me.

Getting Nova's call had only sent me spinning deeper into madness.

For whatever reason, no one would tell me for sure, Papa had left the compound the night before, convinced I was in danger because I wasn't in my room. I'd lost count of the times he'd called me since I'd moved to Creswell Springs, thinking I'd snuck out. But during none of those instances had he been the least bit concerned I had been hurt or taken. Every time, he'd only been worried I would get in trouble with Mom.

Which only confused me more as to why he would suddenly think I had been abducted

According to my sister-in-law, Papa had stormed into a warehouse operated by one of our family's rivals, Kovak, hell-bent on getting me back. He'd been alone, with nothing more than two Glocks and his favorite knives in hand. After taking out six men, he'd finally been captured and beaten.

By that time, Mom had found him, but the damage was already done. Now it seemed like Ryan had a possible war on his hands.

I couldn't give two fucks about that.

It was Papa I was worried about.

He had a laceration to the back of his head that had required staples to close, as well as a few busted ribs. Despite the sedative he was given, he was still agitated and demanding everyone look for me.

Not only had he been hurt by Kovak's men, but his dementia was getting worse. And once again, I was the catalyst.

Not for the first time, I cursed and questioned my existence.

Panic tried to smother me as the pilot taxied toward the private hangar where a caravan of men already waited for me. I could take whatever life threw at me. But when the people who mattered most were in danger, I couldn't think straight.

Mom once said my heart was my biggest weakness. She'd taught me to turn it off. Around then was when my mind started working against me, the obsessions began to trickle in, and she had to teach me to keep them quiet. But I never fully mastered the ability to keep my heart and obsession switched off at the same time.

I'd tried to keep my emotions in check, but when it came to Elias and my papa, there was no way of turning off my love. Being the trigger for Papa's episodes was torture. Nothing my mother had ever taught me could have prepared me for that kind of agony.

Fifteen men were waiting for me when I stepped off the plane, a mixture of Vitucci and Volkov soldiers. I'd stopped

trying to keep up with their names when I was a kid. After Bain O'Farrell and his men had swept through, killing anyone who got in his way of taking my cousin Ciana, I'd stopped letting any of them become more than just a number.

In my late teens, my parents had no longer required me to have bodyguards when I left the compound. They drew too much attention, and Mom knew what I was capable of. Papa suspected, but never asked.

Honestly, I'd always thought he was too scared to hear the truth. If I spoke the words aloud, he would have been angry at Mom. As much as they loved each other, I wasn't sure even their strong relationship would have withstood his knowing the lengths Mom had gone to in order to protect me.

But there was no way anyone in our family didn't suspect. I might have appeared normal on the outside, but they had to know I was broken.

Walking past the human shields, I slid into the back of a waiting SUV. Papa was still in the hospital because of the severity of his concussion. Keeping his mental health a secret from the rest of the family seemed like an impossibility at this point.

Considering Zia Scarlett lived in the mansion with Zio Ciro, I was surprised we'd been able to keep it from them as long as we had. But they tended to spend half their time on the private island where Ciana lived with her husband and children rather than in New York. Their other four children visited there often as well, especially Zariah and her little family.

I wasn't a fan of the island, or of Bain. He could call himself Torin all he wanted, but fuck that noise. Most of my family had let what he'd done go without holding a grudge. I wasn't one of them. I wasn't all that fond of Ciana either. It didn't matter how many times she told me she'd been trying to protect my brother way back then. She could have prevented half the disaster that followed if she'd simply confided in someone who had happened when she'd first met the man who was now her husband.

But I kept that to myself. If Ryan and everyone else wanted to let that shit go, that was their business. Forgive, but don't forget.

I could forgive, just not what happened back then.

After I watched everything play out at the time through a broken, grieving kid's point of view, the only lesson I'd learned was that there were few consequences for people's selfishness. Maybe I couldn't throw stones, considering how selfish I was over Elias, but at least I'd avoided getting innocent people killed in the name of love.

Six of the men escorted me into the hospital when we arrived. A private elevator took us to an even more private ward that was just for members of my family. Not all the Vitucci fortune was soaked in blood. But laundering what was through donations like a new MRI machine or an entire research wing in a hospital, however, got it nice and clean.

Even with the private ward locked, twenty guards were still standing at the ready when the elevator doors opened. I stepped off, and the Vitucci head of security moved forward.

"Hands up," he grumbled.

I shifted my gaze from the door behind him to his face. In my head, I'd always called him Number Two. His face was set in grave lines, with a mean scar on his right brow that my cousins Bennie and Vito once told me was from him fighting a bear. I was six at the time, and I'd believed them.

"Are you fucking with me?" I asked when he simply stood there, waiting.

Blocking me from entering.

Keeping me from Papa.

"You've been gone for two months," he said with a casual shrug. "Maybe you've forgotten who your family is."

He doubted me. My loyalty to my family—*my papa*.

After everything else that I had dealt with all day, that was the final straw. The noise in my head was suddenly louder than ever.

Lifting my hands, I allowed him to pat me down, starting with my arms. I was dressed in a lacy white cami with a pastel blue blazer over it and matching pants. With my heels on, I was almost as tall as him. While Number Two felt along my arms and waist, searching for any possible weapons, I stared straight ahead.

On either side of us, the other guards remained deceptively quiet. At the ready for any attack.

Did they also question my family loyalty?

When the head of security started to bend, his hands patting over my ass, I lifted my knee, clipping him in the chin so hard, everyone heard his teeth snap together. All the other soldiers tensed, but they didn't move to restrain me. Maybe Number Two was the only one who thought I was a danger to his boss. Which was a good thing—for them.

Number Two was only slightly dazed from the knee blow, so I hit him with my elbow to the eye. And then again to the nose. Number Two groaned and dropped to his knees.

Spitting on him, I pushed him out of my way. "Next time you doubt me, I'll put a bullet in your skull."

Opening the door, I felt my rage evaporate the moment I saw Papa lying in the hospital bed. There were oxygen tubes in his nose, a bandage wrapped around his head, and restraints on his wrists, trapping him to the bed.

My heart felt like it was bleeding as I gazed at the man who was my hero. Having the country between us the past two months had made it easy to pretend I wasn't losing him to the disease that was ravaging his mind. But the proof was right there, strapped to his arms because he was a danger to himself as well as others.

Mom and Ryan stood by the bulletproof window, their heads together as they spoke in whispers to keep from waking Papa. As I stepped into the room, their conversation abruptly halted.

Closing the door behind me, I kept my gaze on the bed but walked over to the others.

“Where’s Nova?”

“Home with the kids,” my brother answered. “Pop was too agitated with her here. Plus, this potential war has her twitchy. She wanted to be with Wren and Gabe.”

Mom grabbed my wrist, lifting my arm to inspect the wet red spot on my sleeve just below my elbow. “Why is there blood on you?”

Jerking away from her touch, I shrugged. “I guess Number Two needs stitches.”

Ryan released a heavy sigh. “What did you do?”

Inwardly, I flinched, but on the surface, I didn’t even blink. “Maybe you should ask what he did to warrant my reaction.”

Madness, similar to what I fought in my own mind every day, brewed in my brother’s eyes. “I’m asking you, Samara.”

“Sounded more like you were accusing me.” I held his gaze, daring him to deny it.

Mom snapped her fingers between us, forcing us to look away at the same time. “Stop acting childish. Both of you. We have bigger issues at hand than the two of you squabbling. Kovak is a storm cloud on the horizon, and your father is barely coherent.”

“Fuck Kovak,” I hissed to myself.

“Not the time to be showing your ignorance, *myshka*,” Mom warned.

Summoning the last of my patience, I nodded. I wasn’t there to argue with anyone. My only concern was my papa’s well-being. Once he was out of danger, I would go back to Creswell Springs and leave them to handle their own bullshit. With Kovak and everything else. This life wasn’t my future. I could barely tolerate it, even for Papa.

“What do the doctors say?”

There was a long pause while Mom and Ryan shared a silent conversation with just a look. It wasn’t that their closeness made me jealous. I was glad they were able to read

each other so effortlessly. What bothered me was being left out.

Like I was a fucking outsider.

It burned just as badly as Number Two questioning my loyalty by wanting to pat me down for weapons.

Mom took my hands in both of hers, squeezing my fingers. Her being gentle was the scariest thing I'd ever had to withstand. My throat closed up, and all I could think was, *I want my Daddy.*

But I'd left Elias back in California.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

samara

MY PHONE VIBRATED WITH A TEXT ALERT ALMOST AT THE SAME time Papa groaned in pain. Blinking the tears from my eyes, I turned to watch him struggle against his restraints.

Confusion and rage clouded his eyes, making me ache in ways I didn't know were possible as he began shouting for us to release him.

“What have you done with my daughter, you fucking impostor?”

“Papa.” I rushed forward, brushing past my brother as I tried to get to him.

Papa's entire body seemed to jolt. “Annie?”

Ryan caught me around the waist and lifted me away, putting himself between our father and me. Whether to protect me or to hide me, I wasn't sure.

“You fucking bastards are playing with me!” Papa shouted, sounding completely awake for someone who was sedated only moments before. “You'll pay for this. I won't let a drop of your blood survive. By the time I'm done, there won't be a single strand of your DNA to pollute the population.”

I tried to move around Ryan, to explain—even though I knew when he was lost like he currently was that there would be no getting through to him. But Mom took my arm and pulled me closer to the window while Ryan stood blocking Papa's view of us both.

“Samara, the doctor thinks he has reached the severe cognitive decline stage. He doesn’t even recognize your brother at the moment. Ever since he saw Ryan when we found him, your father has been adamant Ryan is an impostor.” My tears began to pour down my face, and in a rare show of emotion from her, she cupped my cheeks in both her hands. “I know, *myshka*. I know. My heart aches too. But he needs us to be strong right now. If he sees your tears, it will only upset him more.”

“I shouldn’t be here,” I whispered, fighting a sob. “I just make everything worse.”

“You’re the only one he’s still holding on to,” she soothed. “Even now, he’s trying to protect you. He needs you here for when he does have a moment of clarity.”

Papa’s shouts grew louder, his bed shaking as he tried to get free of his restraints. Closing my eyes, I tried to gather my courage. He needed me to be brave, but I’d never felt less so in my life.

Another vibration of my phone tried to distract me, but it was followed by the door opening, and a nurse rushed in with a syringe in hand.

“Don’t touch me!” Papa bellowed, rattling the bed so hard it moved a few inches. “Don’t. Touch. Me!”

Seeming unfazed by the belligerent patient, the nurse added the medication from the syringe to the IV port. His anger slowly dissolved until there was nothing but the sound of our breathing in the room.

Once Papa was asleep again, the nurse left without a word. As soon as the door shut behind her, I covered my face with my hands, curling into a ball as I squatted at Mom’s feet. I didn’t care that I appeared weak. It didn’t matter that all of my broken parts were laid out for Mom and Ryan to see. I couldn’t have held it back a moment longer.

“He’s been having hallucinations,” Ryan explained after several moments, having given me a reprieve to cry.

A single moment to be human, to hurt and grieve because my papa was gone. Not dead, but no longer there. It was hard to mourn the loss of a person who was still breathing, still right there in front of me, giving me a drop of hope to cling to that maybe—maybe—one day, he might return.

“He said Kovak, or maybe one of Kovak’s people, has been showing up at the house. Taunting him. That was why he thought Kovak took you. And then he keeps saying I’m not his real son. Just a man who looks like him. He freaked Nova out about there being two Ryans. He had such conviction in his voice, but it was laced with fear and confusion.”

Scrubbing my hands over my drenched face, I slowly straightened, absorbing what my brother said. “Are you sure it isn’t true, that someone wasn’t there? Maybe someone who looks like you?”

Makeup, done right, was a powerful talent. How many times had I used it to change the shape of my face to disguise myself?

Ryan frowned at me like he thought I was the one who’d lost their mind. Which was fair, but also not the point at the moment. “How would they have gotten inside the compound, let alone the house, without anyone except Pop seeing them, Samara?”

“Tell me you don’t have a contact inside Kovak’s syndicate,” I dared. “Or any other family’s operations.”

Clenching his jaw, he looked away, unable to lie but unwilling to speak the truth aloud.

“How many of our enemies have eyes on us from within?” I asked, brows raised. “How many of our supposed allies? We have traitors right beside us every day. The only way to stay alive is to never trust anyone completely. Papa may have been having hallucinations, but would he really think Kovak was after me on his own? Really? That limp-dick motherfucker couldn’t find his way out of a cardboard box without someone holding his hand. Kovak might be an enemy, but he doesn’t even make the top ten list.”

While Ryan chewed that over, I turned my back on him. Meeting Mom's gaze, I saw that we were already on the same page. She and Ryan might be able to have full conversations with a look, but I could read body language better than blueprints. My mom might not be the easiest person to get a good vibe on, but she was the one who'd taught me how to search for and find a person's tell.

And then use it against them.

"Who called in the favor for Budapest?"

"Budapest?" Ryan grumbled, but neither Mom nor I looked at him. We hadn't talked about my trip in detail yet. Mostly, she'd bitched at me for what had gone wrong. Getting shot was my own fault. I should have paid more attention. Staying still while out in the open, even in a crowd, was a recipe for getting yourself killed. Her usual criticism for any so-called favor I helped her with. "Samara, Pop has been having hallucinations, and now you're going all random about the capital of Hungary?"

Ignoring him, I wrapped my arms around my middle and waited, refusing to break eye contact with my mother. For nearly a full, tension-filled minute, we had a stare-off. With a huff, she scrubbed her hands over her face in agitation.

"Their code name was Quail. I owed them a favor from another lifetime. Before I even met your father." She pressed her lips into a hard line. "I didn't know until afterward that they'd traded the favor."

"The extraction went smoothly," I reminded her. "I didn't make a single mistake. No one died. The kid got back to his mother without a scratch on him."

My leg throbbed just thinking about what had followed. I felt sweat slide down my back at the remembered adrenaline, the tickle of fear that I wouldn't make it back. Wouldn't see Elias. Wouldn't get a taste of the happiness I'd always envisioned experiencing with him.

"I know," Mom said with another huff. "You did an amazing job."

“Yet you still blamed me for what happened outside of the Parliament Building.” Her praise didn’t even register. Because her words might say one thing, but how she said them meant something completely different. “Even after promising you wouldn’t interfere if I fulfilled your stupid favor, you wouldn’t leave me alone. Since things didn’t end as seamlessly as you wanted, you didn’t have to uphold your part of the deal.”

“I was hearing chatter,” she said with a shrug.

My humorless laugh filled the room. “With you, that could mean anything. I didn’t take it seriously.”

“Hello.” Ryan waved his hands at us. “Can one of you maybe back up and explain to me what you’re talking about? Budapest. Extraction. Chatter. All of it.”

When Mom kept her mouth closed, I snorted. “Right. Still won’t let him in on your not-so-secret secret. Don’t you think he can handle it, Mom?”

“Samara, stop baiting her and talk to me,” he commanded.

Rolling my eyes, I turned to face my brother. “Back in January, someone called in a favor Mom owed. A political figure whose illegitimate offspring was taken and being held for ransom. There was a deadline. I took care of it. Mother and child were reunited on a crowded street in Budapest. Right outside of the Parliament Building.” I felt a chill go through me as the memories of what followed flashed through my mind. “I watched them get in a car and drive away.”

His face blanked. “By taking care of it, you mean...?”

“It was a clean extraction. I left no traces behind. None.” I’d made sure it was the best job I’d ever handled for my mom, because it was supposed to be my last.

She promised.

“If you weren’t careless, then what does any of this have to do with Pop now?” Ryan asked, annoyed, no longer blank-faced since I hadn’t admitted to killing anyone.

He could pretend a little longer. It was fine. I liked to pretend too. It was all part of the sickness that rotted both our

brains.

“Maybe nothing.” I glanced at Mom, who wasn’t quick enough to hide the regret on her face. It gave me pause, but not enough to fight this war for her. She needed to have regrets—I should have been a regret that haunted her. “Maybe everything.”

Instinct had taught me to follow my gut. And right then, my gut said she either knew or highly suspected there was a connection between what had happened in Budapest and the events leading up to Papa losing his shit the night before. Something was definitely sketchy about the favor I’d handled, but she wouldn’t hear it when I’d bitched about it just a few days after returning with a healing gunshot through my leg to mark the happy occasion. “You said the favor was traded. How, when I pulled the politician’s kid out of that nightmare?”

“These people have no compunction when it comes to their own flesh and blood,” Mom said with a sigh, sounding put out. Like I was being overdramatic, when really, nothing was ever dramatic enough.

Eight-year-olds should not know how to take apart a gun, put it back together, kill a man, and disassemble it again. Definitely not to time themselves doing it. Because it had been drilled into me that a few seconds could mean the difference between life and death. My life. My death. Or theirs. But semantics. Little kids should be able to stay innocent. Not have a twisted taste for blood. To know what it was like to see the life drain from another person’s eyes as they choked on their own blood and vomit. All while feeling absolutely nothing.

Vaguely, I wondered if my niece had been subjected to the same fun education Mom had pushed on me—the same, albeit watered-down, version that Nova began when she was ten. If only my own lessons had been an annual week-long trip to Paris to “shop.”

Not an everyday event that started before I even left for private school with four bodyguards in the limo Monday through Friday. I got weekends off. Sometimes. When I

begged Papa for a sleepover because I needed a break. And pretending to be a happy and innocent preteen was less emotionally draining than waking up to some fresh new nightmare scenario that made Hell Week with Marines seem like a cakewalk.

And I was just as fucked up as everyone else who looked the other way when it came to Mom, my education, my *brokenness*. Because maybe I was just like them when it came to Wren. Maybe I didn't want to know. Mom thought she was protecting me. Protecting Nova. And if—Christ, I was sick in the head—but if she was training Wren, then she was doing it to protect her as well.

She loved us.

Sadly, my head didn't want to listen to what my heart kept so valiantly trying to remind me.

“Quail used the kid to help set it all up,” Mom grouched.

My blood turned to ice. Suspecting was one thing, having her actually admit it was entirely different. I hated what Mom had put me through, what she made me feel. Mostly what she made me *not* feel. But I would burn the world down if someone attempted to hurt her. “Someone set all that up to assassinate you?”

Tears glazed her eyes so fast, I felt like I'd been pulled into an alternate universe. “No,” she choked out, blowing my mind with how emotional she suddenly was. My head and my heart were at war with what her wet eyes meant. “They knew I would send you. I'm still trying to figure out who was behind it.”

Ryan made a wheezing noise, taking a stumbling step toward her. “Assassination attempt. Why haven't you mentioned any of this?”

“It was need-to-know, and at the time, you didn't need to worry about it,” Mom told him quietly.

“Did Nova know?” he snarled.

“No, of course not!”

My phone vibrated twice, and I ached to pull it from my pocket. To read Elias's words. To see if he missed me as much as I missed him. But if I let myself focus on him, I wouldn't care about what Mom or Ryan or anyone else did. And I needed to care. For just a little longer. Get all this shit cleared up so I could wash the stink of it off me once and for all in order to start my new life with a clean slate.

I was supposed to have had that after Budapest. Mom hadn't kept her promise.

But maybe it wasn't all her fault.

Someone had set us up from the beginning.

I didn't like it. They weren't just playing with me. They had taken me away from Elias. Tried to hurt Papa.

Unacceptable.

"I took care of Quail after the first chatter reached me. He didn't give up any information about who he'd traded the favor to." I sucked in a breath, knowing how hard that must have been on the man. But it told me more than if he had talked.

Whoever Quail had traded the favor to, whoever he had willingly helped to set up an attempt on Mom's or my life, he was more scared of them than he was of Anya Volkov Vitucci.

"Cristiano has been having more off days than good," Mom explained, dashing away a random tear. "I just thought his illness was progressing faster than expected. The doctors all say the same thing. This disease is unpredictable. No one can guess how slowly or quickly each stage will go."

"But?" I gritted out, my mind already working through what she was saying, trying to piece together what might come out of her mouth next.

"He's been talking about Kovak. Mentioning stuff I didn't know about. And at this point, I can't tell you if any of it actually happened or if it's a hallucination..." Her shoulders sagged. "Or if someone was filling his head with these thoughts."

Ryan stepped closer to me, and for once, it felt like we were a united force. “Why would you think that?”

“I didn’t consider anyone using your father until today,” she admitted. “But maybe whoever targeted Samara in Budapest isn’t just out to hurt me. Maybe they are trying to get to him as well. And they’re using your sister to do it.”

“That’s a hell of a lot of ‘maybes,’ Mom,” Ryan said with a shake of his head, while my stomach sank. Because *maybe* wasn’t *ever* the case with my mother. Maybes were the things of nightmares. Or the death of a person’s soul.

“I know. But my gut is telling me this is connected. I’ve been fighting the sensation all day. But it won’t go away.” She rested her back against the wall beside the window, touching both hands to her stomach. “My gut has kept me alive this long. I can’t ignore it now.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

samara

ADJUSTING MY SCOPE, I FOLLOWED MY PREY AS HE GOT OUT of his overcompensating-for-something car. Kovak was a creep, but he wasn't exactly ugly. His hair was over-gelled. And he always wore too much cologne. He craved power, liked to pretend he was some big player in the underworld games, but really, my niece and nephew had more pull than he did.

For the last three days, I'd stalked him. He was kind of on the boring side, a creature of habit. Which was dangerous even if someone wasn't in a syndicate. Sticking to the same schedule day after day might feel safe, but that knowledge could so easily be used against a person.

I had zero compunction about using it to my advantage.

Papa had come home two days after my arrival, and so far, he'd only had a few instances where he didn't recognize me. Ryan, on the other hand, Papa was wary around. More than once, I'd heard my father mumbling about impostors and doppelgängers and not knowing which was which. But when I asked him about it, he didn't seem to understand what I was talking about.

With him doing so well, I needed to get back to Creswell Springs. I missed Elias. And Daisy. On top of that, work was piling up. Even though I was caught up on all the drafts that needed to be completed, I had responsibilities. Jos was counting on me.

But my brother refused to let me leave. With the threat of war with Kovak still on the horizon, he said it would be irresponsible if I returned.

Which only left me with one option.

Eliminate the threat so I could get back to Elias and our fur baby.

Kovak didn't seem like he was all that concerned with going to war. Which was a rare show of intelligence. Papa might no longer be in a position of power, but my brother was a hell of a lot scarier than our father.

No one wanted to fuck around and find out when it came to Ryan. He and Mom might not share DNA, but he was more like her than Papa. Everyone had seen how close to a feral savage he could become when he'd thought he'd lost Nova. A little more than a decade later and people still whispered about his ruthlessness.

With my earbuds in, keeping me focused, I added in the wind factor and followed Kovak through the scope as he took his time. Not a care in the world other than the debate over which mistress he would allow to share his bed later that night.

He had three, but I could tell he favored the newest one. She was gorgeous, with her Latin heritage features and temper. Kovak had shared her bed two of the last three nights. From what little I knew about her so far, she kind of liked him too. She didn't even seem to care that he had a microdick. At least he wasn't a selfish lover and knew how to use his tongue.

My finger flicked over the trigger, taking the shot. Without blinking, I watched as Kovak's brains splattered across the hood of his white car. Five men shouted and kicked into action, and from my vantage point, I watched them scramble around like flies around a pile of shit, guns drawn, terror on their faces.

Briefly, I wondered if any of them had families. But death was a risk these men took every time they left their homes. That was the price for being a part of the darkest side of the underworld.

Five more shots and Kovak's men were all on the ground, their blood leaking from their bodies. No one would find them until morning, when the day shift came in to start the legitimate part of the operation.

As I climbed into my car an hour later, after making sure no trace of me was left behind—and doctoring the scene to look like a rival syndicate was responsible for the ambush—I checked my phone. Seeing I had a few new texts from Elias, I felt my heart clench.

We hadn't talked often since I'd left. But that was more for my own sanity. Missing him was hard. Even when it came to my love for my father and the need to keep him safe, my obsession with Elias was too overwhelming.

But I was done fighting my crazy. I was going home. And my brother couldn't do shit to stop me with Kovak neutralized.

Daddy: I miss you.

Daddy: If you don't come home soon, I'm coming to get you.

Daddy: You better not be doing anything you shouldn't, baby girl.

Smiling, I was about to hit connect on his name, when I saw a missed alert from the encrypted app that let me see his texts from Berkeley.

She hadn't texted him since our meeting the day I had to leave. Which was a good thing because it had kept me focused on what was going on with Papa and not on her.

Berkeley: I can't wait to see you again.

The time stamp was thirty minutes before, and so far, Elias hadn't responded. I tried to keep that in consideration, but the fact that he hadn't blocked her was something I couldn't help focusing on.

Jealousy pushed in, trying to eat at me, stirring up my crazy. Lynn Berkeley's draft was already done and ready for her approval. I was supposed to have a meeting with her on Monday to discuss it. Another reason I needed to get my

brother to lift his restrictions on letting me return to California. No way I was going to let Elias take that meeting with his kink buddy alone.

Really, everyone should have thanked me for choosing to take out Kovak and not turning my scope sights on my brother. Offing a wannabe power player and a few of his men was less messy than dealing with the family drama that would ensue if I popped Ryan in the head.

Plus, I didn't want to do that to Wren and Gabe. But *wanting to* and *having to* in order to get back to the life I dreamed of were two different things. If Ryan tried to play God with my life again, I wouldn't hesitate to eliminate the threat to my own happiness.

My crazy knew no bounds.

Something my brother would appreciate since his was just as intense where Nova was concerned. If he were faced with the same decision, we both knew I would be floating in the Hudson. No one came before Nova with him.

Just as no one came before Elias with me.

Dropping my phone into the cupholder, I started the car and put it in gear without bothering to call Elias. My head wasn't in a safe space to talk to him. My emotions were too close to the surface. I missed him too much. Freaking him out with how needy I was for him, mixed with how bloodthirsty I was for Berkeley, wasn't something I could stomach.

But knowing she was still texting him began to fester in my mind. I needed to rein it in before I did something stupid.

When I got back to the mansion, I took a shower and made sure my stuff was packed before I checked on Papa. Finding his nurse—a man named Walter, who was dressed in a suit to blend in with the rest of the guards who walked the house and property—outside the home office, I gave the man a nod and knocked on the door to alert Papa to my presence.

Walter had been around for a while, but now he stayed closer to Papa, making sure he didn't sneak out of the house or cause harm to himself. He was a stoic man in his late thirties.

When he was first hired, I followed him for over six weeks to make sure he was trustworthy enough to care for my father. He had a girlfriend in Queens, but they weren't serious. A son from a previous relationship who lived with his mother in New Jersey. After I watched him visit his mom in a nursing home a few times, I began to trust him a little with Papa's care.

"You're up late," Papa said as he watched me walk toward his desk with an indulgent smile.

Once he'd been released from the hospital, he'd been fairly lucid. Other than a few moments of confusion, he'd been more stable than he had been in a while. Mom and the doctors were both wondering about this change since his specialist had been convinced he had reached the severe cognitive decline stage of his illness. If it weren't for his agitation toward Ryan, I would have thought he was getting better, not worse.

Leaving him was going to be hard, but I missed Elias so badly. If I could have taken Papa with me, I would have without hesitation, but the sudden change was likely to cause more harm than good.

"Papa, you should be resting," I chided.

He waved off my concern. "Your mom had to go to the club. I couldn't just lie around in bed. Work has piled up."

I gave him a pout. "Fine. But can you at least take a break and come eat cookies with me?"

Pushing back his chair, he stood without another prompt. "I thought we ate them all last night."

Beaming my delight that he'd remembered, I threaded my arm through his as we walked toward the kitchen. "I picked up more today."

We sat at the island dunking Oreos and sipping milk without a care in the world. Moments like this were what kept me going. Times when I got to have a taste of normalcy, when I could pretend like I wasn't a broken monster with no remorse for the six lives I'd taken just hours before, for no other reason than it got me home to Elias sooner.

“You should be back in Creswell Springs,” Papa said, dunking his last cookie in my glass instead of pouring himself more milk. “You have an internship to finish. People who are missing you.” He bumped his shoulder lightly against mine. “Who you’re missing.”

“You needed me,” I told him with a shrug. “The job and the people will still be there when I get back.”

“I’m never not going to need you, Sammy. But like with your brother, I know your heart isn’t here.” He gave me a sad half smile. “There has to be something in the water in Creswell Springs.”

I popped my last cookie into my mouth and chewed. “Technically, Ryan met Nova here. But you’re not wrong. The air is just easier to breathe there. And the water is cleaner.”

He took our empty glasses to the sink and then turned to face me. “Are you happy, Samara? Does he give you the peace you need?”

“He’s...everything,” I told him honestly.

“Then I’ll do everything I can to keep your mom from interfering.” He scrunched up his face. “She means well. It’s just, she doesn’t know how to turn off wanting to protect you.”

I forced a smile. “I know, Papa. She loves me. But she needs to learn to trust me more. I’m not a kid anymore. I need to make a life for myself.”

“Maybe you need to learn to trust yourself a little more too,” he scolded gently.

Turning my eyes to the island counter, I nodded.

“Your happiness is important, *piccolo mia*. To both of us. She wants the best for you.”

“Elias is the best,” I argued, jerking my gaze back to him. “He makes me happy.”

His lips tilted into a brighter smile, full of the kind of love only Papa could give me. Affection. Adoration. But his eyes were still awash in sadness. “Go home. Tomorrow. Don’t let anyone or anything stop you. Not even me, Sammy.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

sarama

RYAN GRUMBLED AS HE WALKED INTO THE DINING ROOM. I kept my focus on my coffee rather than him as he dropped down into a chair across from me, unbuttoning his suit jacket as he got comfortable.

“Threat of war is officially over. A low-level gang took out Kovak and his men at one of his other warehouses last night. The gang is going to absorb Kovak’s business. They have already reached out to let me know they don’t wish to inherit the possibility of war with us.”

“Smart thinking.” I buttered my toast, disinterested in the topic of business. “I’ve arranged for Walter to be around more. Especially in the evenings. The sundown effect seems to be when Papa has his worst periods of disorientation. Please keep me informed about his appointments and updated on any periods of confusion.”

“If you stick around, you won’t have to worry about being kept in the loop,” my brother snarked.

Refusing to let him guilt me, I bit into my breakfast. “I think I will just maintain contact regarding Papa’s health through Walter. He’s a health care professional. And for some reason, I find I trust his opinion on our father’s illness more so than yours.”

“What happened to family first?” he grumbled.

“You have your little family, and I need to return to mine.”

He snorted. “Tell me something, Sarama. Do you think Elias Reid would be so besotted with you if he knew all the

things you have done to keep his attention?”

Chewing my toast, I tried to ignore the pang his question caused deep in my soul.

“You’ve spun a nice fairy tale. He may even care for you. Or rather, this version of you.” Ryan smirked when I remained silent. “But would he feel the same if he unraveled the truth? Saw just a glimpse of your true, twisted, depraved self?”

Taking my time wiping my mouth with a cloth napkin, I lowered it back to my lap before turning my disdain on a man who had no business lecturing me on the depravation I’d been capable of in the past—and would gladly continue to practice in the future to keep what I ached for the most.

That his words cut, that they only echoed the voice in my head that tried daily to make me see that same reasoning, only made me resent him more. Because I was afraid he was right.

“Asking me that is a tad hypocritical, Ryan. You should worry about your own sins rather than judging me for mine.” Taking one last sip of my coffee, I stood. “I’ve already said goodbye to Papa. Let’s keep any future contact between the two of us to the absolute necessities, shall we?”

Muttering a curse, he stood. “Don’t leave like this. You and I are not enemies. Despite everything, I always thought we were close. You’re my baby sister. I love you.”

I smiled at that. *Despite everything*. Meaning our brokenness.

“I love you too. But trying to keep me from going home—the only place that has ever felt truly welcoming—is quickly making you persona non grata in my book, dearest brother.” I picked up my phone, ready to leave him and everything else behind once and for all. “You’ve made your stance clear. Let me make mine just as crystal. I don’t need your approval for how I live my life.”

By late afternoon, Pacific time, I parked my car in front of my apartment building, releasing a relieved breath that I was finally home. The suffocating feeling that had swallowed me up from the moment I’d had to leave twelve days before lifted.

Closing my eyes, I slowly inhaled, a taste of peace easing its way into my heart.

Elias's truck wasn't in its typical spot, but I knew he was at a construction site. There had been an electrical issue, and all the electricians were working double time. He'd stepped in to help take some of the load off Chance.

Inside my apartment, I found Daisy sitting on the couch watching some nature drama. Elias had texted me two days into my visit to New York to tell me it soothed her while he was at work. I'd cried myself to sleep that night, missing them both so much every inch of my body pulsed with a pain only they could soothe.

Her head tilted as I stepped inside, her huge, blue eyes giving me a displeased once-over. Shutting the door, I stood there for a moment, letting her decide if she hated me for leaving her for so long.

With a meow, she finally made up her mind, jumped down, and came to weave her perfect little furry body between my legs. Bending, I scooped her up and rubbed my cheek against hers. "Mommy missed you so, so much, Daisy."

She licked the tip of my nose but quickly began to squirm. As soon as I set her down, she walked back to the couch, hopped up onto the little nest of blankets Elias must have made for her, and went back to watching an emu tend to her eggs.

Bemused, I rolled my case into the bedroom. Elias must have been sleeping there each night because his side of the bed was in disarray. A pair of athletic shorts was on the floor, along with one discarded sock. When I walked into the bathroom, the shower stall was still wet from his morning routine, the scent of his body wash lingering in the air.

Inhaling deeply, I felt another wave of peace and had to swallow the lump that filled my throat. Fuck, I'd missed him so much.

After a shower, I settled on the couch with my phone and laptop, catching up on any missed emails and letting Jos know

I was back.

“Ah, thank God!” she cried. “I swear this place has gone to hell since the moment you left. Elias has steadily gotten grumpier, and clients are being total assholes. On top of that, we haven’t had a receptionist all week. Gina must have known I was looking for a replacement, because she no-showed every day without calling. If someone hadn’t seen her at Aggie’s twice for dinner, I would have thought the girl was dead.”

“I’m sorry. I wish I could have gotten back sooner. Things were kind of hectic.”

“I completely understand. Is everything okay? Your parents...?”

“Papa is doing much better,” I assured her. “Nova sends her love.”

“Please, I’m begging you, if another emergency pops up, take my son with you so the rest of us aren’t subjected to this side of him.”

I wished I could promise her that.

“I have everything ready for my meeting with Lynn Berkeley on Monday,” I said to change the subject.

She made an annoyed sound. “Oh yeah, her.”

Laughter bubbled out of me. “What’s that about?”

“She’s called here four times this week. To speak to Elias.” She grunted in displeasure. “She may have called yesterday, but I wouldn’t know. Because I was so busy, I turned off the phone to give myself a few hours to catch up without being distracted.”

Irritation slithered down my spine as I remembered Berkeley texting Elias the night before. “She did mention they were old friends when we had our initial meeting.”

“Hmm, I guess. He took her calls, but...”

White noise filled my head, blocking out everything else Jos said. Breathing in and out in slow, measured increments, I tried to focus on anything but what Elias and his kink buddy

could have been talking about each time she called. His office phone. Which I wouldn't know about. Because I hadn't thought about them communicating over a landline.

After the surprise of having her show up for that new consult, I should have covered that base. But I'd gotten distracted with what happened to Papa.

I'd have to fix that.

"Anyway," Jos said with a sigh, and I finally tuned back into the conversation. "I've been talking to Gracie. Nishia had her casts taken off, and her jaw is fully healed now. She's sweet, and I think maybe she could be a good fit for us. What are your thoughts?"

My mind rushed to catch up. "I adore her," I said with sincerity. Nishia was a broken soul who had been tossed at the gates of Sanctuary after having been put through untold horrors. Jack was already in deep with her, which had knocked everyone sideways with how over the top he was when it came to her.

His little fairy pulled at something inside me that I didn't want to examine too closely, but in a surprisingly good way.

"Me too. I'll have Elias offer her the receptionist position. She seems to feel comfortable around him."

Oddly, I didn't feel a jolt of jealousy when she made that comment. Nishia was so besotted with Jack, she didn't see anyone else. Given her dark hair and blue eyes, a few people had commented that we could be related, but I'd taken that as a compliment because Nishia was gorgeous. I was glad she was comfortable around Elias. It meant she felt safe, and she deserved that.

But Berkeley, she kept pushing me closer and closer to doing something I couldn't come back from.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

samara

I WALKED INTO HANNIGANS' LATER THAT EVENING IN HOPES OF blocking out the noise in my mind.

Unless he'd spoken to his mom, Elias wouldn't know I was back yet. And he hadn't come home by the time I'd gone in search of a much-needed distraction. Maybe I should have texted him, let him know I was home, but after talking to Jos, and her unknowingly dropping a bomb about Berkeley calling him at the office—all fucking week—I knew it was a bad idea.

My goal was to let off steam. And hopefully not kill anyone in the process.

Saturdays at the bar could get crazy, and this one was no exception. Scanning the crowd, I glanced for any sign of Elias, hoping maybe he'd come there as soon as he was done with work, but I hadn't seen his truck in the parking lot. Then again, he wouldn't just show up. He'd want a shower first.

Going straight to the bar, I caught sight of Jack dealing with a trio of already drunk girls. As I drew closer, I caught snippets of their conversation over the noise of loud chatter, pool balls slapping together, laughter, and glasses clinking.

"But you can lick me for free," Blondie, the middle of the three, told Jack.

He gave her a dispassionate once-over, no doubt gauging how drunk she was and if he needed to cut her off. "This is a solicitation-free bar. You want to pick up a john, go somewhere else."

I could almost smell her last brain cell frying as she looked up at him with her brows scrunched together. “A what?”

“A john,” I repeated for him as I took the open spot beside the trio.

Blondie’s frown deepened, and I had to remind myself that this girl and her friends were not my enemies. Even if she did remind me a little of Berkeley.

“He’s calling you a whore,” I explained, not sure how I would or even could dumb it down any more than that if she didn’t understand.

“OMG!” her friend to the right exclaimed. “You totally are, Phoebe.”

“She is,” agreed the friend to Blondie’s—Phoebe’s—left. “She sucked one of the pool shark’s dicks last weekend. That’s why she bitched and moaned all night about wanting to come here again. But he’s not here yet. I don’t blame you, though, Phoebe. I would definitely shoot my shot with tall, wide, and delicious here.”

I knew she wasn’t talking about Elias. I fucking knew it. If Blondie had hooked up with anyone, it was Chance or even Reid. My gut told me that, and I trusted my gut. Just like I trusted that Elias wouldn’t have let any of these three near his dick.

But that didn’t stop the jealousy starting to chafe at the inside of my mind. First Berkeley. Now Blondie and her friends.

Don’t show your crazy.

While the trio continued to gush and made plans to give “Mr. Pool Shark” a taste of each of them, I kept up the chant in my head.

“That will be so much fun!” Blondie squealed. “If he comes in tonight, we’re def gonna go home with him.”

“There he is now!” the friend to her right announced, pointing toward the door.

I kept my gaze on Jack, determined not to look. If Elias was there, I wouldn't be able to stop myself. Everyone in the bar would know just how twisted I was when the three ended up with broken necks on the floor.

Ignoring the call for beers from another patron, Jack picked up a glass, adding in some vodka and diet soda before placing it in front of me without having to be asked.

"You going to be good?" he asked, leaning close to me.

I didn't know if I liked Jack seeing the darkness I was trying to hide. Part of me wished I'd fallen for him, obsessed over each and every little detail about his day-to-day. How often he smiled. Frowned. Breathed. It wouldn't have been so difficult with Jack. Because Jack wouldn't have freaked out over my crazy if I were ever stupid enough to let him see all the broken parts of myself.

But Jack wasn't who my sick mind had focused on. He didn't make my heart happy. Or ache. Either would have been okay. I felt nothing except the urge to have him hug me and tell me I wasn't a complete idiot for trusting that Elias hadn't been the one to let Blondie get on her knees for him.

It had to have been Chance.

That still didn't explain Berkeley and their daily chats at the office. Or that fucking text Friday night. He hadn't responded, though. That counted.

Christ, I wanted it to count.

Even as I took a thirsty swallow of my vodka and diet soda, I felt Elias's gaze on me from behind. It caused a delicious shiver to race up my spine, every nerve ending in my body on high alert. I clenched my fingers around the glass, restraining myself from searching him out.

If he was as desperate to see me as I was him, he would come to me. I had to be calm, unaffected. At least on the surface. Inside, I was a quaking mess, silently begging Daddy for just a single, joyous moment of his attention.

Blocking out everything else around me, I focused only on Jack. "I heard your girl got her jaw undone yesterday. How is

she feeling?”

He scanned my face with his green eyes for another moment before seeming to shrug off whatever he was thinking. “She spoke more when she couldn’t fully open her mouth,” he said, unable to hide his concern.

Worry for his little fairy, a girl I liked and considered a friend, flooded through me, and I offered without hesitation, “I could stop by and check on her before I head home.”

“Delaney told me she was going to take Nishia out for dinner. Hopefully that cheers her up.”

“Who is that?” Blondie practically purring caught my attention again. “Oh, yum!”

Curious, I turned so I was half facing the door and found Max Reid holding the door open for his lovely little treasure and Nishia. Both women were holding hands like they’d been lifelong besties, which was fucking adorable.

Their hands swung back and forth, sweet smiles on their beautiful faces as they bounced toward us. Everyone in their way quickly scattered with Max right behind them, scaring the piss out of anyone who even looked at his reason for breathing.

His over-the-top need to protect his treasure was kind of sexy. If Elias ever got that desperate-to-make-the-love-of-my-life-smile-every-minute-of-every-day look in his eyes, I would melt into a puddle and never want to become a solid form again.

“He’s coming this way!” Blondie hissed to her friends. “Forget about Pool Shark. We’re taking *him* home tonight.”

I nearly snickered at how confident Blondie and her friends seemed. Sure, they were hot, but the scent of desperation oozed off them more than the booze that was sweating from their pores. Max was so in love with Delaney, he would have killed every person in the bar if they so much as caused her chin to wobble. No exceptions.

“Sammy!” Delaney greeted me with a hug when she and Nishia reached the bar, the two of them still holding hands.

Heart warming, I hugged her back with a smile and then gave one to Nishia. When the fairy didn't shy away, I focused on that positive rather than all the chaos in my mind.

"I'm jealous you two are so happy. You had the dessert at Aggie's, didn't you?" My stomach growled, reminding me I hadn't eaten anything except a single slice of toast that morning. "Is there any left? I was going to stop for a to-go box on my way home."

"It was so good." Nishia touched her free hand to her belly, her eyes bright. Considering she'd had nothing but protein shakes and soup for the last two months, I didn't doubt she had appreciated the solid food. "I don't know who the better cook is, Kingston or Marcy."

"Kingston." I gave my vote without hesitation.

Delaney agreed with a nod. "Without a doubt. He's been in the kitchen since he could walk. You had the chicken tonight, but wait until you try his burgers."

At Delaney's dreamy sign, Max made his presence known by muttering under his breath about how he would kill his cousin, before asking Jack for a beer.

Ignoring the guys, I leaned back against the bar top. "Seriously, the best I've ever tasted. I can tell when he's in the kitchen without even having to ask. He must season it differently than the other cooks."

While Jack placed a bottle in front of Max, Nishia and Delaney scooped in closer to me to make room. The bar had gotten more crowded since I'd arrived, and my instincts were to stick close to the treasure and the fairy even though their men were right there to protect them.

Behind me, the drunken trio was whispering about Max, psyching one another up to approach him, although it was beyond obvious his eyes were glued to his wife's ass. Delaney had her cochlear implants that gave her the ability to hear most things, but whispers in a crowded bar weren't one of them.

As I stood there trying to block out Blondie and her friends, barely paying attention to Jack, Nishia, and Delaney

discussing dinner, I felt Elias's gaze. I clenched my fingers around my glass, willing him to come to me. Scared he wouldn't.

If he missed me as much as his texts implied, then why hadn't he approached me? I wanted his hands on me, not just his eyes. I wanted to feel his heat soak into my body as his fingers traced every inch of me. I wanted his mouth, his teeth, his tongue tasting and biting and fucking me until I begged for his cock to fill me.

But maybe he hadn't missed me.

Maybe Berkeley had kept him busy while I was gone.

Maybe that was where he'd been all evening when he finished with work.

"Hey."

I nearly groaned when Blondie finally gathered enough courage to approach Max. But at the same time, I welcomed the distraction.

I glanced at her as she tossed her hair back. "I would love a lemon drop."

"Really?" Delaney's sigh gave me a moment of pause. She was obviously frustrated with Blondie, but I could hear the trace of hurt in her voice, made even clearer when her lashes lowered in frustration. "Do not tell me they can't see that ring on his hand. It's right there. He shows it off like a dang trophy if there is so much as another guy in the same room. Even his freaking cousins."

I snickered at the truth of that. "Especially if it's one of his cousins. He nearly took off Chance's head a few weeks back."

We'd been at a barbecue at the clubhouse. Elias and I had taken Daisy. While he was letting the kids love on her, Chance had looked a little too long in Delaney's general direction. Raven had had to step in and cool her son down.

"Chance is an ass," Delaney grumbled.

"Or a margarita," Blondie purred, not giving up, even though Max had yet to so much as glance at her. "Tequila

definitely makes my clothes fall off.”

“Rum punch makes mine disappear,” the friend on Blondie’s right giggled. “They practically evaporate.”

“You don’t even have to buy me a drink,” the friend to the left husked.

Without bothering to look at them, Max lifted his hand, waving his ring finger in their faces. Because he was a mechanic, Delaney had given him a silicone ring so he wouldn’t risk taking his finger off if it got caught on something. He wore it with pride.

Blondie rolled her eyes. “We don’t care if you’re married,” she whined. “You can have all three of us.”

Delaney’s glass of Diet Coke hit the bar top at the same time Jack reached over and lifted Nishia out of the danger zone. I stepped back, letting the treasure get in Blondie’s face.

“Are you freaking blind?” Delaney seethed. “That ring means he belongs to someone else. He. Is. Mine. I’m his wife. The mother of his child. His fucking treasure! And you? You’re nothing but a pathetic whore, willing to suck any man’s cock to make yourself feel like you’re worthy of something. Until he gets off.”

She pushed Blondie back. Fear flashed in the drunk girl’s eyes, while her friends tried hard not to shrink back from Delaney’s rage.

“You think you can walk up to any man you want?” Delaney demanded. “It doesn’t matter to you if he’s married or not? You have zero self-esteem that you would willingly *try* to wreck another woman’s marriage just to feel better about yourself for a few minutes?”

It was as if everyone in the bar held their breath as they watched her, waiting, anticipating what Max Reid’s sweet little wife would do to the college girl who had dared to get too close.

“Go ahead. Try, bitch,” she dared, shoving Blondie back another step, causing the girl to stumble, her hair flying as she struggled to stay upright in her heels. “Try.”

I caught sight of Elias moving through the crowd, his face neutral as he approached. I gritted my teeth and turned my gaze back as Blondie's two friends attempted to intervene.

“Hey—”

Delaney lifted her hand, effectively cutting off the friend to Blondie's right. “Shut up,” she snarled.

Blondie was past the point of self-preservation when she glanced scathingly at the white disks of Delaney's implants that were attached to the sides of her head. “Well, someone has to satisfy him. And I seriously doubt it's going to be you.”

Her two friends snickered, and I decided in that split second they needed to bleed almost as much as Blondie did.

Delaney grabbed her by the hair, pulling her forward. Both friends tried to help, to protect Blondie. Kicking the one on the right in the back of the knee, I caused it to buckle. She crashed to the floor with a startled yelp just as I caught the friend to the left and jerked her backward. Feeling strands break free from her scalp, I slung her face down on the floor. With a sob of pain, she lifted her head, giving me the satisfaction of seeing blood trickling from both nostrils into her mouth.

It wasn't nearly the amount of damage I wanted to inflict, but this wasn't about me and taking my rage out on the friends. Delaney was the one they had insulted. It was her fight. I just wanted to make sure it was fair.

Mostly.

Max growled and lifted his wife off her feet. “Treasure, I need you,” he groaned.

Delaney released the girl in a flash, her eyes dilating as she looked up at him. She licked her lips, and he was lost.

Fighting a laugh, I watched him half stumble out of the bar while they attacked each other's mouths. I would bet serious money on them having sex in their vehicle before they got home.

I felt the tingle of Elias's nearness before his hand even grazed mine. When his fingers wrapped around my wrist—

hard—I jerked back, fighting against the melty sensation that wanted to take hold of my entire body.

No, no, no.

He was not going to show up, smelling delicious, making me want things I'd been craving for twelve days, while chatting with his kink buddy at the office. Nope. It wasn't fair. And I wasn't going to give in.

His blue eyes flamed down at me, and I had to bite my tongue to keep from sticking it out at him.

“Elias.” Jack spoke up from behind the bar where he was still holding on to his fairy. “Take Nishia home for me.”

His fingers bit a little deeper into my flesh. “Sure, man. I was just leaving anyway.”

“I drove myself, dumbass,” I gritted out, locking my legs so he basically had to drag me.

“We will pick your car up tomorrow.”

His growl sent a wave of heat straight to my clit, but I still tried to stay strong. “I'm hungry. I was going to stop by Aggie's for takeout.”

“Sammy!” he snapped, his eyes blazing. “I'll fucking feed you. Let's go.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Nishia flinch and clutch at Jack's cut. Not liking that she was scared, even less because it was of Elias, I tried to jerk away from him. “You're scaring Nishia!”

He lowered his head until I felt his breath on my lips. “The only one who should be afraid of me right now is you, little girl.”

Oh shit.

He was pissed.

Bending, he lifted me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, momentarily knocking the wind out of my sails. But that only lasted for half a second before Berkeley flashed through my mind again, and I started raging.

I beat my fists against his back, and I wriggled, screaming for him to release me. He tightened his arm around my legs possessively as he guided Nishia outside.

“Did Delaney leave?” the other girl asked hesitantly as we neared Elias’s truck.

He laughed as he carefully adjusted me on his shoulder so he could unlock the doors. “Yeah, Max got her out of here before he fucked her in front of everyone. Those two can’t keep it in their pants.”

“Not unlike you,” I taunted.

His hand slapped down on my ass so hard, I felt the vibrations through my entire body. My clit pulsed, making me have to disguise a moan with a yelp. This was a different side to Elias he’d never given me.

When I’d thrown a tantrum, he’d given me his seemingly unending patience.

But apparently, I’d used it all up.

“No more out of you until I get you home, brat,” he warned as he placed me in the back seat.

As soon as my ass touched the cushion, I tried to push him back so I could get out. But he was unmovable. Leaning in, he grabbed a handful of my hair, tilting my head back. “Don’t,” he growled. “Just don’t, Samara. Keep your ass in that seat and your mouth shut until we get home.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

samara

TENSION FILLED THE TRUCK AS ELIAS DROVE TOWARD Aggie's. After dropping Nishia at Sanctuary, and subsequently offering her the reception job, he'd gotten behind the wheel and made a quick call to order my food to-go—without even asking me what I wanted to eat.

I sat in the back, not saying a word. He was beyond pissed, that much was obvious, but I didn't know why *he* was so angry with *me*. Still, I didn't attempt to question him about it. From the glare he shot me in the rearview mirror, I was scared to ask.

Not of him.

Of what he would say.

He was going to end everything. End us. I could sense it. Fear of losing him made my stomach cramp. Holding on to my anger was safer than contemplating how broken I would be when he finally told me he was done.

Berkeley was probably waiting for him.

Elias didn't bother to find a parking spot when he pulled up outside of the diner. "Don't fucking move," he commanded. "I'll be right back."

I remained silent as he hopped out, but as soon as the door slammed behind him, I couldn't hold back a sob. The tortured sound was all I allowed myself, however. Locking my tears away, I sat staring at the back of the seat in front of me, zoning out on everything but the sound of my own breathing.

It was okay. If he told me we were over, I'd be...fine. I'd found a way to make him want me once. I could do it again. Whatever I had to do, as long as I didn't lose him forever.

I could not lose him.

My crazy started to fester, bubbling deep in my mind. I wanted to claw at my head, rip my own hair from my scalp, take away the madness that was screaming over and over and over.

Elias is mine.

Mine, mine, mine.

If I can't have him, I don't want to live.

I won't survive.

Mine.

I need him to be mine.

Only a few minutes passed before he returned, carefully placing two boxes in the passenger seat before putting the truck in gear and turning for the apartment complex. My heart was pounding so hard, it felt like I'd run faster and harder than I ever had before, but I hadn't even moved since he'd stopped in front of Aggie's. Squishing down the hurt that tried to consume me, I attempted to catch his gaze in the mirror, but he didn't shift his eyes from the road for the rest of the drive.

When he eased the truck into his usual spot outside the apartments, dread filled me. Maybe if we didn't go inside, he wouldn't break my heart.

Picking up the to-go containers, he stepped out. I remained where he'd placed me, digging my fingers into the seat. Moments later, he jerked the door open. "Let's go."

"Why are you so angry?" I whispered, unable to hide the wobble in my voice.

A muscle in his jaw began to tick. "Out. Now."

On legs that only slightly trembled, I slid out. Heart pounding so hard, I wondered if I was having a panic attack, I walked beside him up to the third floor.

Using his key, he unlocked my door and held it open. Daisy was where I'd left her, still on her pile of blankets, watching the nature channel. She gave us a sweet meow in welcome, but there was some kind of lemur scurrying across the screen that kept her enraptured.

I stood just a few feet inside the apartment while Elias carried the two boxes to the kitchen. Setting them on the island, he kicked a stool out. "Sit."

Wrapping my arms around myself, I shook my head.

"Samara, sit your ass down and eat your dinner."

"I-I can't," I choked out. Unable to look at him without crying, I focused on the containers. "I'll throw up if I try to eat right now."

Muttering a savage curse to himself, he picked up the boxes and placed them both in the fridge. "Go to bed. I need to make sure Daisy is settled and lock up."

Hope made me dizzy. I struggled to catch my breath. "You... Are you staying?"

Groaning, he scrubbed a hand over the scruff on his jaw before squeezing the back of his neck. "Go to bed, little girl. I'll be there in a few minutes."

It didn't matter that it was ridiculously early on a Saturday night. He said he was staying, and that was all I cared about.

In my bedroom, I quickly changed into one of his T-shirts and fresh panties. Sitting on the edge of the bed, I waited.

Even though he was mad about something, he said he was going to spend the night with me. He still wanted me. Whatever was wrong, I had a chance to fix it.

Please let me be able to fix it.

When the bedroom door opened, I had to bite the inside of my lips together to keep from moaning my relief. Part of me had feared he would change his mind and go to his own apartment.

Or worse...

Go to Berkeley.

Mine!

He'd taken off his cut. As soon as the door shut, he reached for his belt.

"Stand up," he directed as he walked toward me.

My entire body trembling, I stood. As soon as he reached me, he grabbed the hem of the shirt I wore and jerked it up over my head, leaving me in only a pair of panties.

His breath hissed out of him as he stared down at me. Lifting a hand, he traced his index finger around my right nipple. It was already puckered, but at his touch, it tightened even more.

Trailing his hand down, he pushed my panties over my hips. "Step out of them."

Afraid to take my eyes off him, I kicked them away.

Elias grabbed me by my elbows and turned me. Confused when nothing else happened, I glanced at him over my shoulder. "What—"

"Be quiet," he bit out.

Pressing my lips together to keep from asking another question, I watched as he examined the back side of my body. His gaze was intense as he scanned every inch of exposed skin, even crouching down to inspect my ass cheeks and legs one at a time.

Straightening, he turned me so I was facing him once again before doing the same to my front. Once he was satisfied with whatever he was looking for, he pushed me backward so I was seated on the end of the bed.

"Elias—"

"I said, be quiet." Pulling his belt from the loop of his jeans, he grabbed my hands and wrapped the leather around my wrists.

Startled, I jerked back, but he only tightened his hold, threading the ends together and making a cuff. I sucked in a

breath, mentally reminding myself that this was Elias. He wouldn't hurt me. Nothing about this situation was anything like the times before when I'd been trapped. It wasn't a test.

He just...needed to let off steam. My entire body suddenly felt ultrasensitive, every nerve from head to toe feeling like it was being zapped with raw electricity.

Lifting me by the waist, he placed me in the center of the bed and raised my bound hands over my head. Coming down on top of me, he gently brushed my hair back from my face.

"My beautiful little princess," he murmured, skimming his lips over mine. "Do you know what I'm going to do to you?"

"Fuck me?" I panted out.

His lips tilted up for a moment before twisting into an angry, grim line. "No." He brushed his nose against mine then traveled lower, down my neck, across my collarbone, into the valley between my breasts.

Goose bumps popped up along the way, the barely there touch of just his nose causing my clit to throb. It had been twelve days since I'd felt him inside me. Twelve days without his taste. His touch. His warmth.

As he scraped his teeth over my left nipple, his laughter sounded dark when I whimpered for more. "You like that?" He bit down roughly. "You want more?"

"Yes," I whined. "Please."

He sucked and nipped and pinched until my nipple felt raw and achy. I tried to move my hands—to hold on to him or push him away, I wasn't completely sure.

He lifted his head, danger glittering in his eyes. "Keep your hands above your head, or I will tie them to the bed."

"But I want to touch you."

"We don't always get what we want, baby." He lowered his head back to my chest, this time focusing on the other nipple. At the first bite, my hips arched off the bed, wetness spilling down my sex. But he was focused solely on my breasts.

Once that nipple was throbbing, he moved lower, kissing down my torso to my thighs. I felt his breath on my spread lips, but he kissed my inner thigh instead. From my pelvic bone to my knee on one side then upward on the other, licking, kissing, sucking, all while his scruff chafed my skin so deliciously. When he got back to my pussy, I tried to push up against his mouth, but he pressed me down into the bed.

“Elias,” I gasped, writhing beneath him. “Please.”

“Hmm.” His voice was gruff against my skin. “Were you gone so long that you forgot what you call me, little girl?”

“Daddy,” I amended. “Please.”

“No.”

“Are you still mad?”

“Fucking livid,” he said against my stomach, twirling the tip of his tongue around my belly button ring.

I spread my legs a little wider, trying to get him to press down on my core, but he shifted his weight so that he wasn’t even touching the lower half of my body. “Because I helped Delaney?”

“This has nothing to do with the little show at the bar tonight.” He looked up at me through his lashes.

“Then what is it about?” I cried. “Why are you torturing me?”

“What did you do last night, Samara?”

I swiped my tongue over my bottom lip. “Spent time with Papa. I knew I was coming home, so I... *Ahhh!*”

He slapped his hand down right on my clit, exposed and desperately throbbing for even the barest of contact, making me jerk. A delicious combination of pleasure and pain zinging through my core and causing my stomach muscles to tighten.

“Try again,” he bit out. “This time, don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not lying,” I gasped. “I really did— Shit!” I tried to twist away when he slapped my clit again, my inner muscles spasming.

“Do not play with me, little girl. Tell me the truth.” He pressed a gentle kiss to the top of my pussy, his touch and voice belying the angry glint in his blue depths.

My mind raced, wondering what exactly he wanted me to say—and what exactly he knew. There was no way he was aware of what I’d done to Kovak and his crew.

“Nothing to say?” he taunted, his tongue flicking over my clit once, twice, before pulling back so I couldn’t rub against him in search of relief.

“I don’t know what you want,” I finally answered. “I was at my parents’ house all night.” He slapped my clit for the third time, causing my back to bow up off the mattress. “Fuck! Make me come, Daddy. Please, I’m so close.”

“I told you never to put yourself in danger, didn’t I?” he growled. “I warned you, didn’t I?”

My eyes widened before I could stop myself from reacting.

“I’m only going to ask you one more time. What did you do last night, princess?”

How did he know?

Was it a guess, or could he have possibly known my every move?

It wasn’t completely implausible. I had cameras on him everywhere, apps on his phone, a tracker in his truck. But that was because I needed them to help combat the sickness that twisted my mind when I wasn’t with him.

His doing anything even remotely similar was laughable. Elias Reid wanted me, even cared for me, but he wasn’t sick.

Yet...

He was pissed.

Because he thought I’d been doing something I shouldn’t, something that might cause me to get hurt. Like when I’d gotten shot.

Breathing hard, I met his gaze and took a risk I never thought I would be faced with. “I did what I had to do so I

could come home to you.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

elias

I TILTED SAMARA'S CHIN SO SHE WAS FORCED TO HOLD MY gaze.

There.

No more hiding.

“If you can't come to me, then I'll come to you. No matter where you are. I will come for you. You do not stalk people—especially other goddamn men.” Jealousy gnawed at me, turning my anger darker. I was going to make damn sure that my baby girl never did that shit again. “And you sure as fuck don't go hunting.”

Her chest lifted and fell in heaving pants. “You know,” she whispered in awe, her pupils expanding so much that the black nearly eclipsed the blue. “H-how?”

My eyes narrowed on her.

How could she be so blind to how far gone I was for her?

Did she really not know that I had an app on her phone that could not only let me track her, but see everything around her through the camera in real time?

For fuck's sake, I knew all about the ones she'd installed on my phone. Admittedly, the one that monitored any contact with Berkeley was a recent one I'd only discovered following my baby girl's tantrum in Hannigans' bathroom. But the rest, I had already been aware of.

Just like I knew about the cameras throughout my apartment, my office, over my usual pool table at the bar, and

countless other locations that let her follow the majority of my day-to-day. I was well aware of the tracker on my truck as well as the little chip she'd snuck into the lining of my cut two years ago.

With all that technology trained on me, she didn't suspect for a moment that I had my own resources focused solely on her? I thought we were just pretending not to acknowledge the depths of the utter obsession we felt for each other. I figured once she trusted me enough, we wouldn't have to play this game anymore.

But from the shock on her beautiful face, I could tell that I'd been wrong. It wasn't that she didn't trust me, although that was still an issue. She honestly didn't know that I'd been stalking her.

For years.

Thirty-one months, nine days, and twenty-one hours.

From the moment I'd noticed her watching me in the club in Oakland. A dozen scenes of debauchery had been going on around us, but her eyes were on me. So lost in what I was doing, she hadn't noticed when I'd started discreetly watching back.

At first, I hadn't even realized that the knockout who had me hard as steel from just the sensation of her gaze on me was Samara. All I'd known was I'd felt like I'd been shot with a bolt of...something powerful. I couldn't stop looking at her.

But then she'd changed locations so she could observe me better. Something in the way she moved had flashed home who she was. And still, I couldn't stop watching her.

I'd been too stunned over realizing it was her to approach her that night. But later, after my dick had calmed down and my brain started working again, I'd called Nova to feel out if perhaps she might know if her sister-in-law had a possible crush on me.

That was only the first of many calls I'd made to Nova over the years regarding my baby girl. With Nova's help, I was able to keep track of what Samara was doing. But soon, that

wasn't enough. I needed to have my eyes on her every minute of the day or I couldn't focus. My work started to suffer; I couldn't concentrate.

Nova helped me again. Her angelic laughter echoed through the phone as she told me about the cameras she'd set up for me. At first, I limited my viewing to only at night when I was in bed. Watching Samara studying in her room, lying on her bed bingeing some reality television show. Then I found myself checking in throughout the day. As soon as I woke up each morning. At lunch. All afternoon.

I. Was. Addicted.

It wasn't long before that wasn't enough either. Nova hadn't even scoffed when I'd asked her to put the spyware on Samara's phone so I could watch her—along with everything and everyone around her.

If anyone knew what I was feeling, it would be Nova. She wasn't one to judge. No matter what anyone said, or assumed, I knew she was an angel.

But not even that was enough to fulfill my growing obsession to know every single detail about Samara's days. I began to crave everything about her.

If I went to the club, she showed up as well. Always wearing makeup that was contoured to make her face different, sometimes with contacts to hide those blue gems, but I knew it was her. I'd spent too many hours watching her not to know who she was. But getting to breathe the same air as her had its drawbacks.

Men noticed her. Approached her. Tried to entice and lure her away. She never gave them a second glance, her focus solely on me. Her disinterest in them didn't stop my jealousy from festering, however. After the third time, I stopped going completely.

Nothing about the club was thrilling any longer. I wasn't there to watch anything but Samara at that point, to get my fix. And that only made me itch to break the neck of every motherfucker who looked twice at her.

Samara was mine.

When she'd played that little game with my brother, I'd wanted to kill Reid. If I hadn't already known she was just as consumed by me as I was her, I fucking would have.

But I did know.

She wanted to play her games. Make us both seem normal to the outside world.

And as her Daddy, I'd allowed it.

All of that was over, though. I couldn't. Not when I knew the truth now.

My beautiful little psychopath had no clue I was in love with her.

Grasping her bound wrists, I readjusted my belt, freeing one hand just long enough so I could secure her to the headboard. We both were all too aware that she could escape at any time if that was what she wanted.

Anya's killing machine couldn't be locked down by something as simple as a belt. A muscle ticked in my jaw as I fought back a spike of rage at her mother. Part of me understood where Anya was coming from by doing what she'd done. Not just to Samara, but Nova as well. There was a price for being in the Vitucci family, and she wanted to make sure those who might appear weaker never were.

But fuck, she'd nearly destroyed Samara in the process.

My baby girl's lack of struggle told me loud and clear that, at the least, she was curious about what I was doing; the way she unconsciously licked her lips suggested it was more than that.

We had things to discuss. But first, I needed to prove to her that I didn't make idle threats.

I was still reeling over her being shot. While I had known she was in Budapest, I hadn't been aware of her being hurt. She'd left her phone behind that morning, so I'd had no way of knowing what had transpired. Nothing following the incident had led me to worry that she'd been injured. I'd had no clue

she'd taken a bullet until I saw the scar the second day of her internship.

It wasn't an excuse, however. I should have fucking been with her all along so she was never put in a position where she could potentially get shot in the first goddamn place.

But I wouldn't make that mistake again.

There would be no more hiding. No more pretending.

She was mine and I was hers, until death took us both.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

samara

HE HADN'T ANSWERED ME, BUT SOMETHING IN ELIAS'S EYES had that can't-catch-my-breath feeling easing. Even when he fastened the belt to the bed, I didn't protest. I had no sensation of feeling trapped. No overwhelming suffocation or need to free myself.

As long as he didn't tell me it was over, that he still wanted me, he could keep me strapped to his bed for the rest of my life.

If I ever lost him, I wouldn't have a life worth living.

Lowering his head, he skimmed his nose over mine before gently kissing the corner of my mouth. "I told you what would happen, princess. I warned you. It doesn't matter why you did it. I won't tolerate you knowingly putting yourself in danger."

A shiver traveled through my entire body as he lightly cupped my breasts in each hand. My nipples were still ultrasensitive from the assault of his mouth earlier. He ghosted his thumbs over each one, not actually touching, but making them throb nonetheless.

"I'm sorry, Daddy," I gulped. "I won't do it again."

He lifted his head until our gazes locked. "Sweet little psychopath." I moaned when I saw the knowledge—the acceptance—that lit his blue eyes. "My beautiful baby girl. I don't believe you. You don't understand the consequences of your actions. If you're going to so willfully disobey me, then you have to learn to take your punishment."

He trailed his hands down my body, barely grazing over my belly, his thumbs caressing my pelvic bones, and then stopping right above my drenched pussy lips. My clit throbbed, begging for contact.

“I’m not mad you killed while you were away,” he cooed, teasing his middle finger down my slit. “What Daddy is so upset about is that you did it all on your own. He wasn’t there to protect his precious baby.”

“Oh God,” I sobbed.

There it was. Not just a guess of what he might know. How, I had no idea, but he’d just proven that he knew exactly what I’d done.

And from the way his cock pulsed through his pants against my leg, it didn’t turn him off. It was a miracle.

He was my miracle.

One I didn’t deserve, but I would hold on to until there was no breath left in my lungs.

“I tried to be patient, Sammy. Tried to give you the time you needed to trust me. To be gentle with you.” He pressed his lips to my temple. “But you don’t want gentle, do you, baby?”

Whimpering, I shook my head. I heard his laughter rumble in his chest before he licked the shell of my ear. “You need Daddy to take complete control, little girl?”

“Yes, Daddy. Please.”

He grabbed my jaw hard, tilting my head back. I swallowed a sob when I saw the fire banked deep in his eyes. “There will be no more leaving without me, Samara. No more stalking anyone but me. Next time you go to visit your family, I will go with you. And if you ever pull a stunt like you did last night, I won’t let you come for an entire week.”

I nodded emphatically, a part of me scared this was all a dream. “Yes, Daddy. I promise.”

“That’s my sweet little psychopath.” He lightly kissed my mouth. “Now lie there and take your punishment.”

He kissed his way down my body while still teasing my slit with his middle finger. When his breath brushed over my clit, my hips came up off the bed. Knowing he was aware of how twisted I was and wasn't running had me on the edge already.

Elias pressed my lower body back to the bed, his fingers biting into my waist. "Stay still," he barked.

I was obsessed with my sweet, patient Elias. But this man was different. He wasn't Elias any longer. I'd turned him into a frothing, angry Daddy. And I was so in love with him, I couldn't breathe.

His touch eased when I forced my muscles to relax. But it only lasted until he pushed my thighs open wider so he could fit his massive shoulders between them comfortably. Using his thumbs, he spread my pussy lips wide.

"So goddamn beautiful," he groaned, swiping his tongue over my open folds. "I've missed your taste, baby girl. Missed you snuggled up beside me every night." He thrust two fingers into me and scissored them open, stretching me. "I fucking missed *you*, Sammy."

"I missed you so much it hurt," I whispered. "I wanted to come back sooner. I would have. But my brother—"

His fingers contracted. "You're home now. That's all that matters. Next time, I'll go with you so there won't be any issues of when you can leave."

"Thank you, Daddy."

My voice broke when he sucked one lip into his mouth and released it with a pop. Liquid gushed from my opening, letting him know just how much I liked his pleasure-pain punishment. The tip of his tongue swirled around my opening before dipping inside, tasting me.

I ground my head into the pillow, willing my hips not to leave the mattress for fear he would stop. Around and around, he teased then gave me a shallow thrust of his finger before returning to twirling. My inner muscles began to contract, my release so close my toes began to curl.

Elias lifted his head, licking his lips. I bit my bottom lip to keep from crying out. This was my punishment. What he'd promised. To edge me until I hurt. My clit felt like it had a pulse, but that ache wasn't painful to me. He understood so much, but I didn't think he was fully aware that when I told him nothing hurt when I was with him, I meant *nothing*.

He could edge me all night, but this torture was all I'd ever dreamed of. Simply being in his presence was enough for me when I knew he was mine. Having him touch me was heaven. Having him eating me was my personal utopia.

Lifting onto his knees, he pushed his jeans and boxer briefs down his thighs. His dick sprang free, long, thick, and hard, with the tip already leaking. Wrapping his fingers around the shaft, he pumped himself and squeezed. Gathering the thick liquid that poured from his slit onto his thumb, he shoved it into my mouth.

I snaked my tongue around him, licking and sucking greedily.

"Hungry, baby girl?" he rasped, his eyes glued to my mouth.

"Yes. I need more." My gaze dropped to his hand, still stroking himself. "Can I suck it, Daddy?"

"Soon," he promised as he crossed his arms to pull his shirt over his head.

Each exposed inch of his abdomen had my stomach clenching. But then I saw his chest, and everything inside me stilled. While I'd been away, Elias had gotten new ink. It took up the majority of his left pec.

As I blinked it into focus, it took a moment for me to figure out what I was looking at because it was so unexpected. Grinning, he brushed his thumb over one of the flower petals in the bouquet.

My favorite flower, the one that was so rare it was considered an endangered species. Bieberstein's crocus. Tattooed over his heart.

Drawing in a ragged breath, I could only stare as my mind flashed back to all the flowers my stalker had left. His notes that I kept hidden in my desk—the one left on my mirror that first night along with the red rose petal.

I hadn't even considered him when Mom said she thought someone was targeting me to get to her and Papa. Never mentioned him. Because deep down, I knew they weren't connected. Maybe I'd known all along it was Elias.

But I wouldn't let myself have that kind of hope.

“Anything to say, Baby V?” he taunted.

Lovingly, I traced my eyes over the purple and white petals, the yellow centers, each perfectly formed stem. It should have calmed my obsession, but all it did was cause it to become more blisteringly intense as it burned hotter.

“I'm ready for more of my punishment now, Daddy.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

elias

BOTH OF US WERE OUT OF BREATH AS I DROPPED US ONTO THE bed. Arms tangled around each other, my cock still inside her while my come dripped out of her because she was so full, I kissed her lazily.

Dawn was just breaking as I tucked her hair behind her ear and cupped the side of her face. She continued to shake a little. Tucking her head under my chin, I used my body heat to warm her.

Neither of us had gotten any sleep the previous night. I'd promised her she wouldn't get off until she begged for mercy. All she'd done was take the torturously slow edging I'd threatened would be her punishment if she ever knowingly put herself in danger again. No complaining, no begging for relief, not a single tear.

I'd had to jerk myself off three times, marking her skin with my release, then teasing her even more by fingering her with my come back to the point of insanity. Her needy little sounds had made me sweat, keeping my cock rock hard despite all the times I'd gotten off.

It wasn't until she'd started to shake that I realized she wasn't going to beg for mercy. What had started as slight tremors began to shift into her muscles practically convulsing to the point I feared her shoulders would pop out of their sockets if I didn't release her restraints.

As soon as her hands were free, she'd climbed onto my torso, her body weak from the hours of pleasure-filled torture.

But that didn't stop her from taking what she needed. Her legs wrapped around my waist, my cock already thrusting into her swollen channel, she'd started coming as soon as I bottomed out.

From there, I wasn't sure how much time had passed. She came over and over again until I emptied deep inside her, and we both fell to the bed in exhaustion.

“Baby, I lo—”

Whimpering, she buried her face in my chest and shook her head. “No, please. Don't say it yet. I-I don't know how I'm going to react to hearing it for the first time. I-I just know it's going to be intense, and right now, I'm scared of what will happen.”

Swallowing the words that demanded to be set free, I sighed but left them unspoken. Kissing the top of her head, I stroked a hand up and down her back soothingly. “Okay, baby girl. I'll wait until you're ready.”

She tensed for a moment, then went boneless against me once more and whispered a weak, “Thank you, Daddy.”

Soon, I felt her drift off to sleep and then followed her over.

I wasn't sure what time it was when reality drifted back in. It was dark outside, but I could hear birds chirping. Daisy was grumpily meowing and scratching at the bedroom door.

Samara whined in her sleep, snuggling closer. Smiling, I kissed the top of her head and carefully untangled us. Climbing out of bed, I glanced back down as she shifted, pulling my pillow closer so she could breathe in my scent.

Quietly, I left the bedroom to take care of Daisy. While she voiced her displeasure at being ignored for an entire day, I grabbed her a can of her favorite food and scooped it onto her dish. She didn't even give me time to place it in its normal spot before she jumped up beside me and started eating it.

“Spoiled,” I complained with a grin as I scratched her head.

A quick glance at the time had me groaning. No use in going back to bed. If I cuddled up to Sammy again, neither of us would be going to work today. Nishia was coming in to take the receptionist position, and we had meetings that couldn't be rescheduled.

After starting a pot of coffee, I took a quick shower and grabbed clothes out of the closet. All my stuff was in Samara's apartment. Even though mine was just next door, I couldn't remember the last time I'd even been inside.

Seemed like a waste of space to me. I'd have to talk to Samara about which apartment she wanted to live in for the foreseeable future and then clear out the other. Just until we figured out where we wanted to buy a piece of land and build our own house. I wanted us to design it together, so it was perfect.

Hearing movement from the bedroom, I poured her a cup of coffee and waited. Moments later, she walked blindly into the kitchen. Her hair was a tangled mess, and she'd put on one of my T-shirts. Each step she took was stiff, and my cock flexed remembering all the reasons why her muscles were sore.

Even with her eyes closed, she found me. Her arms went around my waist, and she pressed the side of her face to my chest before releasing a contented sigh. Unable to remember the last time I was so happy, I wrapped her in my arms and took a few minutes to savor the moment.

Making a humming noise, she tilted her head back, and I dropped a kiss on her lips. Three words ached to be said, but I swallowed them down, knowing she still wasn't ready.

"I want one of those double-chocolate muffins this morning."

I groaned. "You and me both, baby girl. But the woman who makes the pastries for Aggie's quit last week. Kingston pissed her off. Now we're all suffering."

Her lashes lifted to half-mast. "Damn. How are you holding up?"

Laughing, I dropped a kiss on her lips. "I'll survive. I just have to find a new dealer for my muffin addiction."

My phone got an incoming text, making her whine and hold on to me. "Who is it?" she complained.

Lifting it, I saw the message was from Nishia. "I'm going to give her a ride." I tipped her head up so I could see her eyes and read her better. "You okay with that, my beautiful psychopath?"

She sighed happily. "I like the fairy."

"Doesn't answer my question, Sammy."

Pressing a kiss to my lips, she stepped back. "I'm okay with you giving her a ride, Daddy."

Grinning, I tapped her on the ass. "Get ready. I'll see you at the office. Don't speed."

"You don't speed," she grumbled petulantly.

"Samara."

Pouting her bottom lip out, she crossed her arms. "I'll be careful."

"You better. Swear to fuck, I'm going to put an app on your car that tells me how fast you go."

Blue gems sparkled up at me. "Do it."

"Be careful, little girl," I warned. "Next time, you might not be able to walk after I'm done with you."

"Promises, promises."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

samara

I WALKED INTO THE COFFEE SHOP WITH A SMILE ALREADY teasing at my lips. I couldn't help it; I had too much happiness bubbling inside me.

I quickly placed my order and stepped to the side to wait. Since the shop was closer to campus than Aggie's, it was mostly full of college students rather than locals.

"I haven't seen you running in a few weeks," someone said behind me. "You been doing all right?"

Turning, I found Red sitting at a table, a cup of coffee in front of her with a half-eaten pastry and a textbook opened. My smile grew, and I crossed to her.

"I had a family thing, so I was back east for a little while," I told her as I took the vacant seat across from her without waiting for her to offer.

Concern darkened her blue eyes. "Everything okay?"

I shrugged. "Better now."

Red lifted her hand. "I'm Abi, by the way."

"Sammy," I said, shaking her hand. "Studying hard?"

Her lips twisted as she glanced down at the textbook then back to me. "For this class, I have to. I was way too overconfident when the semester started. Then I got my first quiz back and realized I am nowhere near as smart as I assumed. Of course, the professor was a total tool."

My brows lifted. "Was?"

“He left, about six weeks ago. Right in the middle of the term.” She scrunched her nose, and even that adorable action was beautiful. “I’m actually getting better grades in there now, but I have zero concentration.”

“Why’s that?”

Abi leaned in close and lowered her voice. “My new professor is so hot. I swear, even his scowls are melt-worthy.”

Giggling, I sat back. “I don’t think I’ve ever had an issue like that with a professor. What’s he look like?”

Her eyes turned to slits, jealousy oozing off her. “Don’t turn into a thirsty ho-bag.”

My hands lifted in a surrender pose. “I swear. I’m far too in love with my man to even look twice at Professor Hotpants.”

Lips ticking up in amusement, she relaxed. “He’s older, of course. But I’m into that kind of thing. I like them mature.”

“Same. My guy is in his thirties.”

She picked up her cup and took a savory sip. “Professor Vaughn has these intense brown eyes. They drill into me. Like he can see all the way to my soul. And his voice! I swear, he doesn’t normally have an accent during lectures, but when he calls on me, I can hear the faintest hint of something.”

“Sammy,” the barista called, and I saw her place two cups on the counter.

“A wild affair with a college professor sounds like something you should tick off a bucket list,” I told her with a wink as I stood.

She laughed, the sound so light and pretty that several heads turned in our direction, some in annoyance, others in fascination. I shot the one glaring at Abi’s back a withering stare, and the guy quickly stuck his face in his phone once again.

“It would definitely be fun, but there is no way Professor V is into me.” She sighed. “But a girl can dream.”

“You never know. Good luck.”

“See you tomorrow?” she asked, seeming hopeful.

“Yeah, see you tomorrow. Later, Abi.”

After grabbing my coffees, I made it to work just a few minutes late. I walked in to find Nishia already handling the phones like a pro.

“Happy first day!” I greeted, placing the extra cup of coffee on the desk in front of her. “I hope you like white chocolate mocha. Wasn’t sure what you prefer, but I don’t know another woman who doesn’t like chocolate.”

Pleasure filled her eyes. “Thank you. This is perfect. You’re the best.”

“Just a little something to hopefully make you feel welcome. If it means you don’t leave us, I’ll bring you goodies every morning. Jos spent an entire day figuring out what the last temp had screwed up. Clueless idiot. I really want you to stick around. So, if there’s anything you need, or if I can help in any way, just let me know.”

My phone buzzed, and I had to shift a few plans around before I could pull it from my bag. Seeing it was Mom, I groaned. “Ugh, sorry. My mom is already blowing up my phone. It’s like she expects me to be up to no good.”

Which was kind of fair, but still. I was a good girl at work. Mostly.

“Elias is in the conference room,” Nishia told me, taking a sip of her coffee. “He asked me to tell you to join him and your client as soon as you got here.”

My finger stilled before I could answer my cell. I hadn’t allowed myself to think about the meeting I was supposed to have that morning with Lynn Berkeley. Not after the amazing day Elias and I had had. But now I was reminded that not everything was sunshine and rainbows with us.

Turning my head toward the conference room, I swallowed and tried to rein in my crazy. I was not going to choose

violence. That would only scare Nishia, and I didn't want her ever to be afraid of me.

"She's here already?" I was proud of myself for keeping my voice calm.

"She arrived about ten or fifteen minutes ago," Nishia confirmed.

It was fifteen minutes too long that she got to share the same air as Elias. I wasn't going to allow myself to think of what that thirsty cunt-bag might do while alone with him.

Reminding myself not to frighten the fairy, I smiled. "Well, I guess I should hurry. Don't want to get fired before I complete my internship." Sending my mom's call to voice mail, I dropped the phone back into my bag. "Thanks, Nishia."

"I should be thanking you. This coffee was definitely needed since I already finished what I brought from home."

My smile brightened as I turned away. She was so damn sweet. Despite the nightmare she had been thrown into, she'd come out of it still kind.

But as I neared the conference room, I heard Berkeley's flirty laugh, and all the warmth I'd felt from Nishia's goodness froze over. Why I hadn't killed Berkeley yet was a mystery to me.

Maybe I hadn't wanted Elias to see how dark and twisted I was. But now that he'd made it clear he was aware of how depraved I could be, and miraculously wanted me anyway, I wasn't so sure I could contain the darkness in my mind that needed to watch her bleed out.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

elias

FOR THE SECOND TIME, BERKELEY TOUCHED MY HAND, AND for the second time, I pulled away. She didn't use to be so damn annoying. When I first met her, she was fun, easy to be around, uncomplicated.

We were casual back then. Now, we were nothing. That was how it had been for close to three years. After spotting Samara at the club that night, I hadn't gone back with Berkeley. Every time she tried to tempt me into going with her, I politely declined and told her to have a good time, hoping she would take the hint. As time went on, the texts had been spread out further and further, giving me the illusion that she wasn't a clinger.

I should have just told her I didn't want to be friends anymore.

Every day the previous week, she'd called under the pretense that she had a few more notes to incorporate into her mock-up. But instead of actually telling me what she wanted included, she would ask how I was and if I had plans for the weekend. When I told her point-blank each time that I would be spending the weekend with Samara, she quickly came up with an excuse and would *have to call me back* about the added details.

She did it every damn day, annoying the fuck out of me. Her flirting and touching me like she had the right were pushing me closer to telling her she should just find someone else to handle her remodel.

It would have been the safer option, considering how volatile Samara could be where this woman was concerned.

When she touched my hand for the third time, I couldn't remain silent. "Listen, Berkeley, I think this is a bad idea. You obviously have more than just a professional relationship in mind here, and I'm not interested. I told you before that I'm with Samara."

She pressed her lips into a hard line before giggling. "Don't be silly. I want the best working on this project. That means you and your team, Elias. That's all." Her fingers skimmed over the back of my hand. "But if you are reading more into this, then perhaps it's you who is thinking about us having more than a professional rapport."

I watched her fingers move across my skin, and I wondered how long it would take to get a session with Lyric to have Samara's name tattooed there. She would definitely like having me branded. Lyric was so booked up, though, that it had taken two months to get in for the new piece he'd done on my chest.

Lost in thought, I didn't immediately pull away from her touch. A sharp inhale had my head snapping up to find Samara standing in the doorway of the conference room. Her fingers were bleached white around the strap of her tote bag, her pupils completely blown as her gaze seemed enthralled by the sight of Berkeley's hand on me.

Pushing back my chair, I stood. Samara's head tilted to the right, following each movement I made, like a predator stalking her prey with her gaze. "Don't," I mouthed when my back was to Berkeley.

Eyes narrowed, she pasted on a bright smile and walked toward the table. "Sorry for the delay. I hope I didn't keep you waiting for long."

"Not at all, Sammy." I pulled out a chair at the table. "Let's begin." As she sat, I noticed the sneer on Berkeley's face. "That is, if Lynn is still interested in working with us on this project."

She laughed like I'd just said something hilarious. "Of course I am, Elias. A little tardiness won't deter me."

Samara made a point of glancing down at her smartwatch. "Considering the meeting wasn't scheduled to start for another five minutes, I wouldn't consider myself tardy. Arriving early for an appointment doesn't mean everyone else is late." Spreading the plans across the table, she turned them to face the other woman. "As you can see, I've incorporated all of your requests and added a few modifications so you can hold on to the vibe you asked for, while still being environmentally friendly..."

For the next twenty minutes, she held my full attention as she presented the renovation plans to our client. I could listen to her speak all day long and not get bored, but when she started talking about architecture, I couldn't focus on anything but her.

Berkeley seemed interested, but before Samara could finish, she interrupted her. "Actually? I changed my mind about this west wing. I meant to tell Elias about my decision last week, but we were so busy catching up that I kept forgetting."

"Of course," Samara said with a tight smile, clicking the end of her pen with only slightly more force than necessary. "What were you thinking?"

After jotting down the new notes, she nodded. "Okay, I'm going to need about a week to make these adjustments."

"A week?" Berkeley huffed in annoyance. "You can't do it sooner?"

Samara pulled up her digital schedule on her phone. "Actually, the earliest I can see you again is a week from Thursday. And that's if you're willing to do a Zoom during my lunch. Since you and Elias are such good friends, I'll forgo eating to squeeze you in."

"Zoom. Really?" Berkeley wrinkled her nose in distaste. "It doesn't seem like you're taking this project very seriously."

I thought you were going to act professionally. Instead, it seems like you are already taking half measures.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, already fed up with her bullshit. But Samara only laughed and started typing on her phone. “If you prefer an in-person appointment, I don’t have a free slot until the thirtieth of next month.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me. How are you that booked?” she asked in disbelief. “You’re just an intern.”

“Only as a formality,” I answered, speaking up for the first time since the meeting began. Samara had taken charge, and I hadn’t needed to step in. The only reason I was even there was to make sure my baby girl didn’t murder the other woman. “When Samara graduates, she will be a full-time architect here. She already has projects scheduled out for the next six months. We will need to hire two more crews just to keep up with the demand.”

Berkeley deflated slightly. “I guess I can fit in the Zoom conference next week,” she muttered.

“I’ll make sure to have all the modifications completed by then,” Samara assured her as she stood.

I mirrored her action and got to my feet. “If that’s all settled, I need to steal Samara before my next appointment.” Crossing to the door, I opened it.

Berkeley’s mouth fell open in surprise. “I thought we could grab coffee after—”

“I have a packed schedule, just as Samara does.” I opened the door a little wider. “Exit is straight through the lobby.”

With a cold look in Samara’s direction, Berkeley picked up her purse. “Whatever.”

As soon as she was in the corridor, I shut the door and turned to face Samara, but she was focused on her phone. The dread I’d felt since she’d walked in and seen Berkeley touching me intensified.

“Baby—”

“Hold on,” she said without looking up from the screen. “I need to make sure to add this to my calendar before I forget. Wouldn’t want to upset your *friend* more than I already have.”

Snatching the device from her hands, I tossed it on the table. Her gaze followed the phone until it slid to a stop at the other end. Jaw clenched, she slowly blew out a breath and turned to face me.

I reached up to tuck a lock of hair behind her ear, but she flinched. I dropped my hand back to my side, curling my fingers into a fist. “I’m yours, Sammy.”

Pain flickered across her face. “Apparently, you aren’t. Because I don’t allow other women to touch what is mine.” She took a step back from me. “If you were mine, you wouldn’t have taken her calls every day last week.”

“She said she wanted to make a change, and since you weren’t here, I took the call. That is the only reason I spoke to her,” I explained.

“But you were so busy talking about anything except work that she forgot to tell you. Every time.”

“They were two-minute conversations.” Seeing the doubt in her eyes drove me crazy. Grabbing her hips, I jerked her into me, refusing to let her put more space between us. “There is nothing between her and me. You’re the only one I want, Samara.”

Angrily, she shoved at my chest, but I refused to budge. There was no way in hell I was going to allow her to push me away. “She thinks otherwise. You allow her to text you. Call here. *Touch you*. You’re playing a very dangerous game, Elias.”

I wrapped my hand around her neck, pulling her closer into my space. She didn’t get to put distance between us. Not physically, and sure as fuck not emotionally. “Like you were playing when you tried to go on a date with my brother?”

Fire danced in her eyes. “I flirted a little with Reid, so you’re letting your kink buddy touch you? That doesn’t seem

like a fair trade to me. If we're going tit for tat, I should at least fuck your brother to make us even."

My vision blurred with rage, my fingers reflexively tightening around her delicate throat. "If you ever say that shit again, I won't be responsible for what I do."

"Yeah?" she challenged. "Well, then if she touches you again, I'll slit her fucking throat."

"I'm not playing here, little girl."

"No games, Elias." Her laughter was manic, her blue gems shooting flames at me. "It's a promise. If she texts you again, I will kill her. If she touches you, I don't care if it's by accident, I'll make her beg for her own death."

I could feel her madness, just a fraction of her obsession, filling the air around me. Fuck, it was addictive. Just like her. I slammed my mouth down on hers. Lifting her by the waist, I sat her on the table, my hands already working up the material of her skirt.

"No!" she snarled, tearing her lips away from mine. "You don't get to touch me with the same hand that she was rubbing her fingers all over."

Ignoring her, I dragged her panties to the side and thrust two fingers into her already-drenched pussy. "You don't tell me what I can do with what is mine, princess. Daddy is the boss, not you."

"You let her touch you!"

"I didn't allow her to do anything." My thumb teased over her clit. She arched into my hand, her hips rocking even as the air thickened with her anger. "I was about to pull away."

"You shouldn't have been close enough for her to touch to begin with. She shouldn't have been alone with you." She grasped my forearm but didn't push me away. Using me for leverage, she began to ride my fingers. "She doesn't deserve to breathe the same air as you."

"Give me the word, and I'll end the project right now," I vowed, watching her with a hunger that ravaged my entire

soul.

“If you didn’t want her, you would have ended your relationship with her already.”

“There is no relationship,” I snapped, hating that she still didn’t trust me. Even after knowing I was just as obsessed with her as she was with me, she doubted what I felt. What she meant to me. “Never was.”

“Bullshit!”

“She means nothing to me, Samara.”

“Five years of going to the kink club together isn’t nothing,” she hissed. “Fucking her in front of a hundred people isn’t nothing. Watching and getting off on someone else fucking her is not nothing.”

My hand stilled as realization hit me. “You saw that?”

If it were me and I’d seen her fucking someone else, I would have slaughtered the man then and there. No way I would have been able to stop myself.

“You think that you know how twisted I am, that you can compete on my level. But you don’t even know half of what I’m capable of. I have been stalking you since I was seventeen. I’ve been to that club every time you’ve gone. It wasn’t easy getting inside the first night Berkeley took you there, but I slipped in around the same time you were fucking her from behind. I would have killed her that night, but you seemed besotted.”

“No,” I denied, trying to find the words. Nova hadn’t told me Samara had been following me since she was seventeen. I’d thought it only started when she was twenty, around the time I’d first noticed her at the club. “It wasn’t like that.”

But the pain she couldn’t hide on her face told me she thought that was exactly how it was. Her pain nearly buckled my knees. Groaning, I pulled her to the edge of the table and ripped at my belt, desperate to get my cock free so I could show her exactly who I was besotted with. Who held my heart, my soul. Who owned the air in my lungs.

Her fingers shook as she tried to help, but I pushed her hands aside and wrapped my fingers around my shaft so I could notch it to her dripping opening. “Samara, I lo—”

“No,” she whispered, shaking her head vehemently. “Not yet. Please. I-I’m already fighting the monster in my head. If you say that now, after I saw her touching what is finally mine, I don’t think I’ll be able to stop myself from hunting her.”

With a curse, I sank into her already-clenching channel, my eyes nearly rolling back in my head. I couldn’t get over how amazing she felt. No matter how many times I’d been inside her, I couldn’t get enough.

“Don’t be scared,” I pleaded when I could catch my breath. I pressed my forehead to hers. “Even if you fall, I’ll be right here to catch you.”

Her hands clutched at my shoulders, a flash of fear darkening her irises. “I just need a little more time. Please.”

Rolling my hips, I thrust into her hard. “I can’t wait much longer, baby girl. We both need to hear me say it.”

“I know,” she sobbed, burying her face in my shirt to muffle her pleasure-filled whimpers. “Soon. I promise.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

samara

COFFEE IN HAND, I LEFT THE COFFEE SHOP WITH ABI. SINCE bumping into her the Monday after returning from my visit to New York two weeks before, we'd been running together each morning. I didn't know what it was about the beautiful redhead, but she brought out a protective side in me that I rarely ever felt. Some of that came out for Nishia, but I knew she didn't need me to be her protector when she had Jack.

With Abi, it was different. She wasn't broken. Or in need of anyone. She just...was. My obsessiveness was rolling over to include her. I couldn't stop myself. I needed to know she was safe.

Especially on her morning runs.

Each day, we got to know each other a little better, and it fed the crazy that had only ever been focused on Elias. Not in an "Oh my fucking God, I need to be with you every second of the day. I think I love you" kind of way. It was more a "You're one of my people now. I adore you. I have to make sure nothing happens to you because if I lose you, I will die" way.

Abi St. Charles was easily becoming my best friend.

I'd never had that before. Never allowed myself to have it. I'd had plenty of friends when I was growing up, but never anyone I cared enough about that I would burn down the world for. Two weeks of running with Abi, and I was already contemplating how I'd survived so long without her in my life.

Daughter of two talented rockers, she'd grown up in the background of the celebrity world. Which she preferred, she'd

told me the second day we'd shared a run. She didn't like the spotlight. It was why she'd chosen Trinity for college.

"It's so quiet here," she said as we walked out of the coffee shop, large cups in our hands. It was our new routine. We ran, then grabbed coffee and a pastry. The shop was only a few blocks from her dorm, while my apartment was on the other side of town.

That was one thing I couldn't figure out about my new bestie. She actually liked running. It helped clear her mind. Whereas I only did it to try to outrun my many, many demons.

Abi and I were definitely as different as night and day, that was for fucking sure. But maybe that was why I was so drawn to her.

Closing her eyes, she tilted her face toward the morning sun. "When Hayat and I came to visit her uncle Lyric a few summers ago, I fell in love with the small-town life. The air is cleaner. The noise is less intrusive. I feel like I'm the person I was meant to be when I'm here."

"I'm glad you're here," I said softly.

Opening her eyes, she smiled at me, causing warmth to spread through my chest. She squeezed my arm. "I'm glad you're here too."

Emotion filled my throat, but she seemed to sense that I was unable to speak. She released my arm to thread hers around mine, and we started walking toward her dorm. "Only a few more weeks and the term will be over. My parents are going on tour in Australia. Maddie is working with her stepmom, and Hayat has decided she is going to kick some guy's ass and take over his position as drummer for the band at her dad's club. I guess I'll just take summer classes. What are your thoughts?"

I was already nodding. "That's a great idea." Mostly because I was greedy and didn't want her to go home. I needed more time with her. More everything. Between her and Elias, I knew I didn't need anything or anyone else. I had everything a person could need right there. Love. Friendship. Acceptance.

That was what they both gave me. Like Elias, Abi didn't judge. She didn't know who Samara Vitucci was—what I was capable of. My money and the power that came with my last name weren't something she cared about. When I'd first told her I was a Vitucci and was from New York, she'd rolled her blue eyes and said she didn't know what that meant.

That was when I knew she was my person.

"I'm trying to get into one of Professor V's summer classes," Abi confided quietly as we walked. "It's probably too late to register for it. I bet it's filled up. Especially now with every girl on campus trying to catch his attention. I swear, there are at least eight more girls in our class now who said they wanted to audit the class in case they decide to change their majors."

"You seriously need to take a picture of this guy so I know what all the fuss is about," I told her, taking a sip of my coffee. "I need to see for myself if he's as hot as you keep insisting."

"No way!" she snapped and then groaned. "I'm such a dork. Crushing on my professor is so juvenile."

"Please," I said with a snort. "I think you're past the crush stage and are falling quickly into all-out obsession. Look at you all adorably jealous, not wanting to show me a picture. I swear I won't steal your man, Red. Elias is everything I've ever wanted."

Giggling, she steered me off the path and then paused when something caught her attention. "Speak of the sexy devil," she hissed. "Sammy, there he is."

I slowly shifted my head so as not to embarrass her or look suspicious. Students and professors were already walking toward their early morning classes. I scanned my eyes over each person, eliminating them as Professor V as I did.

Not the shaggy-haired surfer with a backpack over one shoulder. Definitely not the cute blonde with a phone to her ear. No to the middle-aged man with a thick middle and receding hairline, or the tweed jacket skinny guy with bottle cap glasses.

My gaze scrutinized several other people, but I couldn't find Abi's crush. "Where?" I finally asked.

"There..." She sighed. "He's going into the computer science building. You missed him."

Turning my head in that direction, I saw a tall figure with dark hair that was shorter on the sides but a little too long on top entering the building to my right. All I saw was his back, but I found myself suddenly frozen in place, a chill slithering down my spine.

He seemed oddly familiar to me, and I hadn't even seen his face.

"He's definitely not built like he's nearly forty," I told my friend, needing something to say as I tried to calm my racing pulse. "What did you say his name was again?" I asked as we continued walking.

I didn't need her to remind me; I remembered everything she'd already told me about him. Victor Vaughn. Professor V, as she liked to call him. Had no accent when he lectured or spoke to other students, but when he spoke to her, she detected something Eastern European.

She had a major crush, and I'd been encouraging it. If she wanted to have a wild affair with her professor, I was all for her experiencing a little fun. But after catching a glimpse of the man, I needed my new friend to run in the other direction from him.

"Crap," Abi groaned when we reached her dorm. "You're going to be late for work. I didn't realize it was getting so late."

I gave her a hug. "I won't be late. Elias is picking me up." Even as I stepped back, I saw his truck coming down the road.

She followed my gaze and then waved when Elias stopped nearby. Rolling down his window, he returned the wave. "Hey, Abi."

"Hi, Elias. Good to see you again." She turned back to me. "I need a shower. And then I have back-to-back classes. If I

want to get into Professor V's summer class, I need to stop by my adviser's office."

I nodded and grinned, while mentally crossing my fingers that the class was already full. My gut was tossing just thinking of her being in the same room with the man I'd only seen for a few seconds. From behind. Yet, I couldn't ignore my instincts that he was dangerous. "Good luck."

She gave me another hug. "See you tomorrow!"

I watched her go until the door to her dorm closed behind her, and then I slowly walked toward Elias's truck. As soon as I was in the passenger seat, he grabbed my face in both hands and kissed me.

Melting into him, I returned the kiss until he pulled back. His nose brushed over mine. "What's going on in that head of yours, baby girl?"

My teeth sank into my bottom lip, and I found myself looking back at the computer science building. "I need to make a few calls."

CHAPTER FORTY

elias

I HEARD SOMETHING HIT A WALL AND CRASH TO THE FLOOR from the direction of Samara's office. Jumping out of my chair, I rushed to check on her, the door slamming against the wall in my panic to get to her.

With a shriek, she threw her coffee mug against the wall. Flames spiked high in her eyes as she paced back and forth in front of her desk. Other than the broken mug, a paperweight that was still intact, and a few papers scattered on the floor, nothing seemed amiss.

Shutting the door, I crossed my arms over my chest and leaned back against it. "Why are you throwing a tantrum, Sammy?"

Hands on her hips, she turned to march ten steps the other direction before making an abrupt turn and walking toward me ten steps. Back and forth, I watched her go for several moments. Her chest heaved the longer she mentally stewed.

"Nothing," she spat. "I can't find one goddamn piece of information on that prick Victor Vaughn. Six favors, two of which I've been holding on to since I was fifteen, have been used. All I've found are more questions, but no fucking answers. Not one!"

"Sammy?" Mom called as she knocked on the door. "Is everything okay in there, honey?"

Samara didn't appear to hear her as she kept pacing. I flipped the lock but called out, "She's fine, Mom. We just need a minute."

“Ah,” she said, and I could hear the smile in her voice. “Well, let me know if either of you needs anything.”

I waited a beat to give her time to walk away before pushing away from the door and crossing to my pissed-off baby girl. When she turned, I slid my arms around her, and she melted into me. I felt some of her rage evaporate, and I kissed the top of her head.

“Maybe he’s in the witness protection program.” I was only half teasing. At this point, anything was possible. She’d been investigating her new friend Abi’s professor for three days. For the entire weekend, she’d been hyperfocused on learning all she could about the man but had come up with nothing on her own.

“Oh God,” she moaned, pressing her face into my chest. “I have to find out what this guy is doing in this town.”

Her head shot up, and I could feel her panic brewing. “What if Abi isn’t safe around him?”

I traced my thumb over her jaw, the vulnerability in her eyes stabbing at my heart. “Talk to her about it. Explain that you have a bad feeling about this guy and convince her she needs to stay away from him.”

She shook her head frantically. “No, no, I can’t. I’ll only scare her. If I freak her out, she won’t want to be my friend anymore.”

Sighing, I tucked her head under my chin. With a strangled sob, she wrapped her arms around my waist. “My sweet, precious little psychopath. Anyone you care about is a lucky motherfucker. Abi is smart enough to know that.”

Sniffing, she lifted her head, doubt clouding her face. When she looked at me like that, I could feel my heart beating outside of my chest. It was there in her eyes. She owned me, but I wasn’t sure she completely understood that yet. Every time I started to tell her I loved her, she stopped me.

Samara wasn’t scared of anything except those she loved most loving her the way she deserved.

“No, I can’t chance it.”

Groaning, I pressed my forehead to hers, knowing she had to figure this out for herself. “Just be careful, Samara.”

“I will. I promise.”

“Don’t stalk him,” I warned, leaning back to frown down at her.

She pressed her lips into a hard line.

“Sammy, I mean it.”

“But I need to figure out what is going on with this guy. No one has any answers,” she argued.

“I swear to Christ. If you start stalking this prick, I’m going to edge you for a week.”

Her brows lifted skeptically. “That’s not much of a threat, Daddy.”

“Fuck’s sake, baby girl,” I grumbled.

* * *

Without taking my eyes off the blueprints I was working on, I picked up my cell phone as soon as it began to ring. “Hey, baby girl. I just need to finish this, and I’ll be home. Want me to pick up dinner, or are you eating with Abi?”

A heavy silence was my first clue it wasn’t Samara on the other end. Pulling the phone from my ear, I glanced down at the screen and swallowed a groan. Dropping my pencil, I squeezed the bridge of my nose.

Fucking hell.

After taking a cleansing breath, I returned the phone to my ear. “Anya.”

“Elias,” she greeted, her tone dry. “Who is Abi?”

It didn’t surprise me that she didn’t know who her daughter’s friend was. Piss me off, definitely. But surprise me? Not even a little. Honestly, I couldn’t fault Anya for how she’d raised Samara. She’d done what she thought was best, what

she'd been taught herself as a kid. I didn't doubt her love for either of her kids. But I couldn't remember her ever showing actual affection toward Sammy.

"Is there a reason for your call, Anya?" I asked instead of answering. If Samara wanted her mother to know about her new best friend, she would tell her. If not, then I was certain she had her reasons.

"I've heard a few things and wanted to discuss them with you," she replied.

I sat up a little straighter, wondering if I'd really heard a hint of unease in my future mother-in-law's voice or if my mind was playing tricks on me. "What have you heard?"

"Relax. I know the two of you are basically living together. She's not exactly discreet about her relationship with you. If I were displeased about the two of you being together, you would already be dead."

I pressed my thumb into the center of my forehead, feeling a headache starting to pulse. "I'm well aware that I would have already met the angel of death if you were against our relationship. I'm simply curious what you have heard that caused you to call me, when I'm sure whatever is on your mind should be discussed with your daughter."

Another pause on her end had my pulse jackhammering. Whatever the fuck had reached Anya's ears that warranted her calling me couldn't be good if she was bypassing Samara to do it.

"She's digging into someone. Victor Vaughn. Why?"

"Ask her." I wasn't about to break my baby girl's confidence, even to her mother—especially her mother. If Anya didn't know about Abi, then she wouldn't know that Samara was concerned about her friend's crush on her new professor. I didn't understand it myself. But I didn't question it. I trusted Samara's instincts.

She'd made a few calls but so far hadn't found out anything about Professor Victor Vaughn, and it had been almost a week. Instead of getting answers, she was left with

more questions. She was getting restless, and I knew she wouldn't wait around patiently to hear back from the latest contact she'd called in a favor from. Abi was important to her, which meant she was important to me. Professor Vaughn would be getting a new shadow if Samara didn't find out at least a few details about him soon.

Poor motherfucker.

I was going to keep her tied to our bed for a week when she started stalking him—when, not if. My baby girl was too predictable for me not to understand she wouldn't be able to stop herself from hunting the bastard down, finding out every personal detail about him and his life so she could be assured Abi was safe.

Extreme, given that he was nothing more than her professor, but Samara had sensed something off, and there was no stopping her. The only thing I could do at this point was make sure she didn't get hurt.

Anya's irritated inhale scraped over my nerves. "He's a ghost. When Nova came to me about this man because she felt uneasy, I put out a few inquiries myself. There is zero information on him. He doesn't even have a birth record."

"That's nothing we didn't already know," I informed her. "Samara isn't helpless. If she wanted your help finding out who the man is, she would have called you."

"I am well versed in how capable my child is, Elias Reid. And how stubborn she is. We share more than a similar face. Her stubbornness rivals my own." She muttered a curse. "Look, I'm worried about her. About this Vaughn person. If my contacts have no clue who this man is, then there is a reason he's off the grid. She needs to watch her back."

Realizing she had a point, I gritted my teeth. "I'll speak to her about it."

"That's why I called you instead of her. You're probably the only one she will listen to," she said softly. "You're good for her."

My lips lifted in a half smile. “Does that mean you’re gonna give your blessing when I marry her?”

Anya snorted. “Like that would matter.”

My smile dropped. “It does to her.”

She sucked in a sharp breath. “Really?”

“Your opinion matters to her more than anyone else’s, Anya,” I told her honestly. “She craves your respect as much as your affection.”

There was another silence, this one more intense than the previous ones. After a moment, she murmured, “You have my blessing, Elias.”

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

samara

TWO COFFEES IN HAND, I WALKED INTO WORK. ABI HADN'T been able to run with me that morning because she was feeling sick. I planned on taking her some soup from Aggie's later that evening, but her unexpected illness had given me time to put up a few cameras without Elias getting twitchy.

What he didn't know wouldn't kill him.

I'd just placed a few in the classroom where Professor Vaughn taught. One over the door to his office. And a mere handful around other locations throughout the campus that would allow me to check on my friend.

After I'd double-checked that the feeds were working, I'd stopped by the coffee shop for my usual pick-me-up, as well as a little treat for Jos and Nishia.

Placing the cup of coffee on the fairy's desk as I passed, I gave her a wink when she mouthed "thank you," but since she was on the phone, I didn't pause. Knocking on Jos's door, I stepped inside with the small bag holding a chocolate-filled croissant.

Her eyes brightened when she saw me. Spotting the treat I was carrying, she licked her lips. "You spoil me!"

"Only because I love you," I told her honestly as I placed the pastry on her desk. "I've got a packed morning, so I will see you later."

"I love you too, Sammy," she called, blowing me a kiss.

In my office, I got straight to work, but I had my feed up for Abi's cameras. I'd placed one outside her dorm room, but so far, it had shown zero activity other than random students walking by. She must have been feeling rougher than she'd told me to skip her run, as well as her first class of the day.

By noon, I still hadn't seen her leave her room, and I was already adding things to a list of what to take her. It was a Friday, so she would have the weekend to rest up. Soup and over-the-counter meds would hopefully help, but I could call a doctor who did house calls. He worked for the MC, but he also had his own private practice, as well as was on the board at the local hospital.

A hospital my family donated millions to every year.

My day was going fairly well until I received an email from Berkeley. She'd changed her mind. Again. Even though she'd already approved the latest changes. I really didn't have time for her bullshit, but I also wasn't going to give her the satisfaction of quitting her project. She thought she could mess around, but she had no idea who she was dealing with.

As badly as I wanted to slit her throat, I'd come to the decision that it would be more satisfying to make her lose her shit instead. She wanted to play games with me, I would make her go bankrupt while rubbing it in her face that I had the man she was so desperate for attention from.

It wasn't quite as satisfying as it would have been if I had bathed in her blood, but I had different priorities at the moment. Plotting how I was going to kill her was secondary to ensuring my friend was safe.

My office door opened with such force that it slammed against the wall. Eyes wide, I glanced up from the blueprints I was working on to find Elias stomping into the room.

Stopping in front of my desk, he held out his phone, showing me the screen. One that mirrored my own.

Aw, he'd put an app on my phone to mirror my activities so he could spy on what I was doing.

A normal person would have been upset that their boyfriend had blatantly invaded their privacy. I wasn't normal, however. Seeing the proof that he stalked me as much as I still continued to do him gave me butterflies.

"Do you remember what I said about stalking this motherfucker?" he growled.

I leaned back in my chair. "I will never forget anything you tell me."

"Do you think this is a joke?" he seethed. "This guy could be dangerous. You might get hurt."

"I'm being careful," I said with a pout.

"No, you're being reckless. This guy has been able to stay off-grid for who the fuck knows how long for a reason. Do you think he won't check for cameras and listening devices?"

I shrugged, not worried about it. "He can check all he wants. He won't find where I placed them all."

"Goddamn it, Samara!" He slapped his hand down on my desk in frustration. "This is not a game. Whoever this guy is, he will figure it out and trace it back to you."

"No, he won't."

Angry eyes narrowed on me. "Take the cameras down, little girl."

"No."

"Samara!"

"Elias!" I mocked.

"Either you take them down, or I will do it for you. And believe me, you won't like what happens if I'm the one who has to."

I smirked up at him. His threats made my core clench. Despite worrying about Abi, I wanted to push his buttons. His constant concern for my well-being, mixed in with the jealousy I saw in his blue eyes because I was stalking another man, was enough to ignite my panties. He hadn't mentioned he was upset because of that, but I could read the

possessiveness that had his entire body strung tight. “You’re sexy as hell when you’re pissed off, Daddy.”

“Christ,” he muttered, rubbing a hand down his face in aggravation. “We’ll talk about this when we get home tonight. I suggest you start taking these offline before then.”

“I’ll think about it,” I snickered.

“Samara...” He trailed off when my stomach grumbled angrily. “Did you eat lunch?”

I glanced back at my drafting table. “I’ve been working on the corrections your girlfriend decided she wanted this morning.” My blood heated as the words left my mouth.

Maybe I would kill Berkeley after I completed the project. Double the satisfaction. I would show her I was the better woman and then hang her from the ceiling and slit her throat as I let her blood shower down on me *Hostel*-style.

“Why are you so determined to piss me off today, princess?” he growled, lowering his head until his breath was bathing my lips.

I tapped him on the tip of the nose with my index finger. “I like to live on the dangerous side.”

“Go to Aggie’s and get yourself some lunch.” He pulled his phone from his slacks. “I’m calling the diner now to order your food. If you don’t pick it up, Kingston will tell me.”

“You’re awfully grumpy today,” I observed. “Maybe you aren’t getting laid enough.”

“Seeing as I fall asleep every night balls deep inside you, I would say I’m getting laid plenty.” He kissed me hard before stepping back, his phone to his ear. “Hey, this is Elias. I need to place an order for pickup.”

He stomped to the door but stopped before opening it. Still connected, he pointed the phone at me. “You’re sitting on my face tonight. You hear me?”

Everything inside me clenched. “Yes, Daddy.”

With one last glare, he opened the door and slammed it behind him. Giggling, I grabbed my things and headed for the door. “It appears I’m not the only one who throws tantrums.”

Aggie’s was still fairly busy despite the lunch rush being over. College was in session for a little longer, but even when the students weren’t overpopulating the small town, the diner still saw a lot of business. It was a staple of the community.

“Hey, Samara,” Quinn Hannigan greeted me when I walked up to the counter. Kingston’s dad, Raider, had bought half the place for his wife when Kingston was a kid. Then when Aggie died, she left the other half to Quinn.

“Hi!” I pulled my wallet from my purse to pay for the bag that was already waiting on the counter, but she waved me away.

“Elias paid over the phone,” she said with a grin. She pushed the container toward me. “When did Ryan get to town? Are Nova and the kids with him?”

I paused with my hand on the bag. “They aren’t in town. As far as I know, Ryan is in New York.”

Her brow scrunched. “Really? Huh. Well, I guess everyone has a doppelgänger, because the guy I saw this morning looked exactly like him.”

Unease slithered through me. “Where did you see this guy?”

“Near campus this morning, probably around nine thirty. I figured he was on his way to Lyric’s shop since that is the only place he gets ink. Lyric does private sessions for certain clients sometimes.”

I nodded because that made perfect sense. Ryan only let Lyric Thornton work on his tattoos. Lyric was a hell of an artist; the portrait he’d done of Nova on my brother’s arm after we’d all thought she’d been killed was amazing.

A customer waved to Quinn from the other end of the counter, signaling they were ready to order. She gave me a kind smile. “See you later, Sammy.”

“Bye,” I muttered distractedly, my mind still stuck on how convinced she’d been that she’d seen Ryan.

It wasn’t like we kept up with each other’s travel plans. Although he probably wished I shared mine every once in a while. He was a controlling asshole like that. It wouldn’t be a total leap to think my dickheaded brother had flown out to make sure I was behaving.

But I also didn’t feel like arguing with him.

When I got back to the office, I pulled up the feed from the other cameras I’d placed around campus. There were two that went along the same path that led to Lyric’s shop and WomanLand.

Munching on a chicken tender drizzled with honey and hot sauce, I replayed the feed from the first of the two cameras. Nothing. As I played the second camera feed, I didn’t have much hope of finding anything, but it would bug me if I didn’t at least look.

I was twenty minutes into the feed when something caught my attention—an eerily familiar back. Professor Vaughn. I knew it was him from the way he walked and the set of his shoulders. Stuffing a few fries into my mouth, I wiped my fingers and hit rewind.

Before I could hit play again, my screen switched over to an incoming call. Seeing who it was, I gritted my back teeth, all thoughts of Victor Vaughn pushed to the back of my mind.

I was going to enjoy killing her.

Connecting, I placed the phone to my ear. “Samara Reid,” I answered and heard her gasp.

“Your last name is *not* Reid,” she snarled.

“Not yet,” I agreed, a satisfied grin on my lips. “I’m trying it out. Seeing if I like the sound of it.”

I fucking loved the sound of it. I had an entire journal hidden in my childhood bedroom that was full of nothing but doodles that read *Mrs. Elias Reid* and *Samara Reid*.

“There’s no way that will ever happen. You might be his new favorite toy, but that won’t last much longer.” She made a *hmphing* noise that caused me to roll my eyes. “He will get tired of your drama soon enough.”

She couldn’t have possibly known I was full of drama, but it still stung a little.

“I don’t have time for personal chats, so I’m assuming you called for a specific reason, Ms. Berkeley.”

“Yes, actually. I want to do something different with that addition over the garage. The longer I think about it, the more I hate the plans you showed me.”

“Of course.” *Fuck, I am going to enjoy killing her.* “What did you have in mind?”

“I’m not sure. All I do know is that I hate what you currently have. Change it up and get back to me by Monday.”

I picked up a pair of scissors and started stabbing at the air, but I kept a smile on my face. “Is there anything else you want changed?”

“Not at the moment.” Either she didn’t hear my sarcasm or was too stupid to understand it. My money was on the latter. She wasn’t my priority. I had more important clients who deserved my attention. And I wasn’t about to cut into my personal time for her or anyone else.

“Alrighty then, look for my email.” Disconnecting, I tossed my phone on the desk and reached for more fries. When I couldn’t feel any, I glanced into the container. “Aw, empty.”

Pouting, I stood. I needed a dose of Elias since I was all out of fried foods. Not bothering to knock, I walked into his office.

Only to find it empty.

Sticking my head out of the room, I frowned. “Elias?”

Jos came out of her office. “He left about ten minutes ago, honey. Reid had an issue on-site.”

“Oh,” I muttered. He hadn’t kissed me or told me bye, something he always did before he left.

His mom grinned. “He’s in a mood today, huh?”

“Apparently.” I closed his door as I stepped into the hall, my pout getting worse. Obviously, he was more pissed at me than I’d thought. I didn’t like that.

I wanted my kiss, damn it.

Hurt, I returned to my office. Only a minute before, I’d been so confident when I’d told Berkeley I was trying out Reid as my new last name. But suddenly, I wondered if maybe she was right and Elias was getting tired of me. I was a lot for people to handle sometimes.

“What’s up?” Jos asked, following me.

I took my seat behind the drafting table. I had so many things I could have unloaded on her, and I knew she would listen patiently. Jos and Elias were so much alike. She’d taught him patience, but then again, anyone married to Tanner Reid would need to possess that. Instead, I only told her about the newest headache on my list. “Lynn Berkeley decided she wants to change something else.”

“Her again,” she huffed. “Girl, you have more willpower than me to deal with that spoiled bitch. I know you’re being the bigger person and all, but I swear, if she keeps up this diva routine, I’m going to tell her to fuck off. She’s wasting your time.”

“It’s fine. I can deal with her.”

“You shouldn’t have to, though. Seriously. If she doesn’t accept a final plan soon, I’m cutting her loose.” Grumbling under her breath, she dropped into a chair in front of my desk. “Stupid cunt isn’t going to stress out my girl if I can help it. I’ll pull that bitch bald if she keeps this shit up.”

Warmth bloomed in my chest, and I blew her a kiss. “You’re one of my top five favorite people, Jos.”

Her eyes softened. “Same!”

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

samara

BY FIVE, I HAD WORKED MYSELF UP ENOUGH OVER ELIAS NOT saying bye to me. Berkeley's prediction that he would be tired of my drama soon burned. Wanting her out of my hair, I dived into the changes to her project, even though I had other work that needed to be done first.

Frustrated, I rolled my chair back and grabbed my empty coffee cup. "Ugh, I hate indecisive clients," I complained as I went straight for the coffee station behind the reception desk.

Seeing that the pot was full and smelled fresh, I felt my adoration for the fairy grow. "Nishia, you are legit an angel for keeping the coffee fresh all day. You're a lifesaver."

She smiled as she straightened up her workstation, closing down for the day, while also making sure everything was ready to go for Monday morning. "Did that Lynn woman change her mind again?"

I added cream to my coffee because I needed an extra treat, my annoyance at Elias's kink buddy bubbling higher. "Do you have experience burying a body?"

Nishia laughed, but I was completely serious. She and Jack were an official couple, so she needed to learn quickly about the darker side of his life. And because I cared about her, I wanted her to learn the right way.

"No?"

Her question-answer wasn't encouraging. I had a lot to teach her, apparently. "You asking or telling me, fairy?"

“Telling,” she said with a laugh. “Sorry, I’ve never buried a body before.”

“You’re a Hannigan now, so that will probably change sooner or later.”

Her smile didn’t fade, which was encouraging. Jack didn’t need someone who couldn’t handle the darkness of his world. “I’m kind of okay with that.”

“If you want to survive in that family, you have to be okay with a lot of shit really quick,” I warned.

“Yeah,” she agreed. “I’ve figured that out.”

While I finished doctoring my coffee, she picked up her phone. But I noticed how her brow furrowed as she read something on the screen.

“How hard is it to tend bar?” she asked.

“Dunno,” I answered honestly. “I’ve never done it. Jack and his uncles make it look fairly easy, though. I mean, if you can handle the craziness here at the office, it shouldn’t be an issue for you to pop the tops off a few beers and fill a few pitchers with draft. But you’d be on your feet a lot, and you seem pretty beat, considering you’ve been doing physical therapy as well as working here. Jack won’t like that, fairy.”

“Do you need anything?”

I frowned at her quick change of subject. “You’re not going home?”

“Jack said he’s going to be at least an hour since he has to help his dad.” She shrugged. “He’ll be upset if I walk home.”

So would I. The fairy was too precious to let her just wander around. What if she got hurt on the way? I’d have to hunt down anyone who even thought about harming her, not only for Jack’s sake, but mine as well.

Placing my mug beside the coffeepot, I blew out a heavy breath. “He needs to teach you how to drive.”

“I don’t really have a desire to learn,” she argued. “I could take the subway when I lived in New York, and Jack or his dad

always drives me now. It makes him happy, and I like to keep him happy.”

Fuck, she was too sweet. Her father should have been slowly tortured before being bled out for all the shit he'd put her through. Only a truly evil motherfucker would set up their own daughter to be abused like Nishia's had done. Jack and the rest of the MC were a bit twitchy about Clint Morgan still breathing.

“Oh, I have no doubt how happy you like to keep him,” I teased with a laugh. “Give me a few minutes to grab my stuff, and I'll drop you off. I can finish the new plans for that heifer at home.”

In my office, I packed up everything I would need for the weekend and then reached for my phone. Elias still hadn't texted me. If he was on-site, then he would be busy. I knew that. But he should have at least texted me.

I considered checking one of my apps to see exactly what he was doing, but his lack of communication hurt too much. Picking up my phone, I glared into the camera on the off chance that he might be watching.

“You want to give me the silent treatment? Fine! Sleep in your own bed tonight. Asshole.” I blinked against the sting of tears. “How could you not kiss me?”

Smothering my angry growl behind my teeth, I tossed my phone into my bag and threw the strap over my shoulder. I paused outside Jos's office. “We're heading out, Jos. If Jack stops by, let him know I took Nishia home.”

She looked up from her computer, giving me a tired smile. “Okay, honey. See you both on Monday.”

“You don't have to do this,” Nishia said when I joined her in the lobby. “It's only an hour, and you were busy. I could have found something to keep myself occupied until he was able to pick me up.”

“I need a change of scenery anyway,” I dismissed. “Besides, if Elias can leave early on a Friday, so can I.”

I was already thinking about where I could be other than home when he got back. Perhaps I would stop in and check on Abi...

Which reminded me about the elusive Professor Vaughn. I definitely needed to recheck the feed from the second camera. Berkeley's call had messed up my entire afternoon. Fuck!

"He went to help with an issue at Reid's site," Nishia defended. I kind of liked that she was protective of him. But at the same time, I kind of wanted to shank her. In the ear. With a rusty ice pick. If I didn't know how much she loved Jack, I might have.

"Meh," I muttered as we walked toward my car. "He still left the office. Fucker didn't even tell me he was leaving."

"What are you two arguing about now?"

"I don't argue." I tried not to whine, but I didn't pull it off. With Nishia, though, I knew she wouldn't judge. "Besides, arguing with brainless buffoons like Elias Reid will only give a person a headache."

"You must keep the headache-relief pharmaceutical companies in business, then," she said with dry amusement.

She was so adorable, I burst into giggles. "Smartass. Text your man to let him know you're going home."

"I'll do it after you drop me off. Otherwise, he'll get all grumpy and leave to come check on me. I didn't want to distract him while he's busy."

"You're not saying you don't like to distract him any other time."

Her cheeks filled with a pretty shade of pink. "No comment."

Laughing, I reversed from my parking spot. Everyone except for Jos had already left for the day. Before I shifted into drive, my gaze lingered on where Elias's truck should have been.

Asshole.

Trying not to think about him, I focused on my friend. “I love how much you and Jack have grown since I first met you, Nishia. I’ve known Jack my entire life. He’s always been so distant. Honestly, I didn’t even think his facial muscles worked correctly until you came around because I can’t remember him truly smiling until he found you.”

Her face softened, heart emojis practically blazing out of her eyes as she thought about her man. With her dark hair and blue eyes behind her cute-as-fuck glasses, she could have been my pocket-sized little sister, only she was a hundred times more beautiful. Nova was the closest I’d ever come to a sister before, but when I looked at Nishia, I could pretend. My brother sure as hell didn’t look anything like me. He was basically a clone of our dad.

And I actually liked Nishia, as opposed to Ryan’s surly ass.

Traffic was nonexistent on this side of town on Fridays, so I was able to pull out of the parking lot right away. As I did, I squeezed my fantasy sister’s arm lovingly. “I’m thankful you make him happy. It’s not hard to see how much you love each other. But I have to warn you. My sister-in-law will kick my ass if I don’t tell you that no one will ever find your body if you hurt him.”

“I would never—”

My eyes were on the road as she spoke, and I was already adjusting when a piece-of-shit truck suddenly pulled out in front of me, causing her to scream. But it happened so quickly that I didn’t have time to stop the car from colliding with the American-built rust bucket.

Metal crunching like an accordion barely registered as the airbag was deployed. Pain exploded through my face even as my head was slammed back into the seat. Stars flashed, and then a dark void swallowed me like a savage monster attempting to steal what was left of my soul.

“Elias,” I whimpered, trying to fight to stay conscious, but it was a battle I couldn’t win.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

elias

MY KNUCKLES WERE WHITE AS I CLENCHED THEM AROUND THE steering wheel while I kept my foot glued to the gas pedal. Like snapshots, the day replayed in my mind on repeat.

Finding the camera feeds Samara installed to watch out for Abi—and, in turn, the prick professor. I'd known it was coming, but I hadn't prepared myself for the red haze of jealousy that descended over my vision when it became a reality. She could protect her friend all she wanted; I wouldn't stop her. But fuck no, she wasn't going to stalk another man. I was the only guy she was allowed to stalk. Ever.

Getting the call from Reid that he had an issue on his current site. Still so pissed, I'd taken off without letting Samara know. It was childish and I'd regretted it as soon as I'd left, but when I got to the site, we were so busy I didn't have time to call her.

Finding her crashed car and losing my mind. I lost a part of my soul when I saw the blood on the airbags, no sign of my baby girl. Her phone was still in her tote in the back seat. My only way to track her had been left behind.

Jack arriving and making a call to his IT genie. But she'd gotten nowhere because Nishia's phone was on the floor of the car right beside her broken glasses.

He'd called Nova immediately after, but I'd barely heard what he told her other than for her to hurry. The next thing I knew, my phone was ringing and Anya was screaming at me.

All I could do was take the abuse she spewed at me because I deserved it.

It was my fault. Samara could be anywhere. Hurt. Alone. Scared.

“I know I fucked up!” I’d shouted into the phone, cutting her off. “Just help me find her. Please. I’ll do anything.”

That shut her up. For about two seconds, at least. “I have her location from the tracker in her arm. Get her, and keep her safe until I arrive.” And then she was giving me an address to a private cabin that was listed under some hedge fund, but it was easily linked back to Clint Morgan, Nishia’s father.

My hands shook as I punched it into my GPS, and Jack struggled to fasten his seat belt in my passenger seat.

Burning rubber, I took off, leaving Ben and all my MC brothers behind. Jack must have texted them, or maybe Nova called one of them. I wasn’t sure and didn’t care, but at some point, I saw a few motorcycles in my rearview and caught the sound of Ben’s siren.

Sweat dripped down my forehead as I floored it, my heartbeat pulsing in my ears as I sent up one prayer after another.

Please, let her be okay. Don’t take her from me. Just let me get to her, kiss her one more time, tell her I love her, and then you can take me in her place. Just take me. I’ll give my last breath for her. Please, please, please.

I tore up grass as I came to a screaming stop outside an old, single-story cabin. The paint was peeling, weeds up to my waist. Screams reached me before I could open my door. I didn’t even bother to turn off the engine as I jumped out of the truck and took off running.

Finding the front door locked, I stepped back and kicked it in. More screams filled my ears as I took in everything at once. A guy I didn’t recognize was lying in a pool of blood, his hands clutching at his throat where something was sticking out, a look of terror on his face. His eyes were still open.

Across the room, another man was on the floor. He was missing his face, the back of his head nothing but mush because his brains had been blown out. I didn't need two guesses to know whose handiwork both dead men were.

At least Clint Morgan wouldn't ever bother Nishia again.

Samara stood over Nishia protectively as the other woman continued to scream. My baby girl looked like a cornered momma bear, ready to tear the throat out of anyone who threatened to harm her cub. Nishia pressed her back to the wall as she attempted to make herself smaller. Blood trickled from a gash on Samara's forehead, the area around her left eye already swollen and discolored.

"Sammy!" I staggered forward, tears blurring my vision. "Baby girl. Thank God. Ah fuck, thank God."

She squinted at me, as if she was having trouble focusing. "Elias?" Her body seemed to deflate as the fight left her. "D-Daddy."

Crossing the distance, I swung her up. She wrapped her legs around my waist. "I'm here, baby girl," I assured her, fighting a sob so I didn't scare her. "Never letting you go. Fucking never."

I barely noticed when Jack stumbled in behind me. Sirens wailed outside as I carried Samara out of the cabin, her arms clinging to my neck. "You didn't kiss me!"

I pressed my lips to her right temple, being careful not to cause her more pain. "What?"

Leaning back, she glared at me, but I was caught off guard by how mismatched her pupils were. "We need a medic over here!" I yelled, finally taking notice of everyone else and our surroundings.

Ben was there, along with two uniformed EMTs. At least a dozen MC brothers had arrived, including my dad, Max, Reid, and Chance, with more coming down the road.

She winced at the loudness of my voice. "I have a headache."

“I don’t doubt that, baby.” I walked toward the ambulance, where one of the EMTs waved me over.

She blinked a few times. “You didn’t kiss me.”

I lightly brushed my lips over hers. “Better?”

“No!” She frowned. “Well, a little. But that’s not what I meant. You just left. Without kissing me!”

Understanding finally hit me, and I felt like I’d been sucker-punched. “I’m sorry, baby girl. I was mad and...”

And what if I hadn’t gotten to kiss her ever again? My knees nearly buckled when that realization hit me. But before I could tell her how sorry I was, the EMT came up beside us and started prodding the gash on her forehead.

Samara startled and swung her right arm out. Even with her slower-than-normal reflexes, the paramedic just barely missed being clocked in the face.

“Easy, baby,” I soothed, adjusting my hold on her. “He’s a friend who is going to help you.”

She frowned at me in confusion. “My head hurts.”

“I know, Sammy. That’s why he’s here.”

“Oh,” she muttered, blinking rapidly. “I guess that’s okay. But you won’t leave me...right?”

“Never.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

elias

A WOMAN IN BLUE SCRUBS AND A WHITE LAB COAT STOOD AT the foot of Samara's bed. At some point while the EMT had been assessing her, my baby girl had started to get a little more lucid, which had only tempted her to argue with me about going to the hospital.

If Nishia hadn't needed to be checked over, Samara probably would have thrown a tantrum.

Not two minutes after we got to the hospital, Samara started throwing up, and they rushed her into a CT. I'd been holding my breath ever since.

"We didn't see any bleeding," the doctor said with a grimace, and I was able to inhale fully.

"Did she just smile at him?" Samara muttered from the bed.

"No, darlin'," Dad told her from the plastic chair where he sat close to her. "She's not smiling at anyone."

Dr. Hollis pressed her lips together, fighting the smile Samara was worried about. "That's a hell of a concussion your sister has, though. I would feel better if she stayed overnight for observation."

"Sister?" Samara repeated, her voice turning icy. "Who said I was his *sister*?"

"Umm..." Dr. Hollis glanced from me, to Dad, to Samara, then back to me.

“I told them you were my daughter, Sammy,” Dad explained. He rolled his eyes at the doctor. “She’s my daughter-in-law, actually.”

Tears filled Samara’s eyes. “Really?”

Dad patted her arm, but he looked a little panicked at the sight of her tears. “Really, Sammy. Don’t cry, girl. Elias will kick my ass. Worse, Jos will help him. You just close your eyes and rest now. That headache must be agony.”

“I won’t let them hurt you,” she promised with a snuffle. “I always wanted to be your daughter-in-law. I love your family so much. I’d take a bullet for any of you. Please, can I be your daughter-in-law for real?”

Dad’s eyes misted, and he leaned closer to her. “Of course you can, Sammy. Always knew it would happen one day.”

Hope lit her face when she looked at me, making it difficult for me to swallow around the lump of emotion trying to choke me. “Really? Can we?”

Carefully picking up her hand that had an IV in the back of it, I bent until I could kiss her knuckles. I was ready to call a minister and say our vows then and there, but I wanted her to be completely clearheaded when I made her my wife. “We’ll talk about it as soon as we get out of here, baby girl.”

“But Daddy, I wanna—”

Dr. Hollis cleared her throat loudly. I straightened to give her my attention, but I kept a gentle hold on Samara’s hand. “As I was saying, I would like to keep Sammy overnight for observation. Concussions are tricky, and one this extreme needs to be monitored.”

“I don’t want to stay here,” Samara complained, glaring at the doctor. “I don’t like hospitals. Or strangers touching me. And she keeps looking at you like she’s thirsty, Daddy. If she licks her lips one more time, I’m going to stab her in the eye with a scalpel.”

With her vision all blurry, I didn’t think Samara saw more than a silhouette of the doctor, so how she could see the other

woman licking her lips, I wasn't sure. I hadn't noticed her doing it until Samara mentioned it.

Heat filled the doctor's face, but she powered through her embarrassment. "She should stay a minimum of twenty-four hours. Then we will reassess. She will also need to take things easy for a while. Plenty of rest."

I nodded my understanding. "I'll make sure she stays off her feet."

"But I have projects to finish," Samara argued. "And I need to check on Abi. Wait, where is my phone? I saw Professor Vaughn on one of the cameras, and I—"

I shot her a look that had her mouth snapping shut. "I will send someone over to check on Abi with a pint of soup tomorrow. Right now, you are my only priority."

"But Abi—"

Dad shook his head at her. "I wouldn't try to provoke him right now if I were you, Sammy. He's got that look in his eyes his momma gets when she goes all feral on me."

The door flew open, and Mom came in, her face pale, her eyes full of tears and fear and rage. "Why didn't anyone tell me what was going on?" she demanded, brushing past the doctor to get to Samara on Dad's side of the bed.

Sitting on the edge of the small mattress, she grabbed Samara's hand, her damp eyes scanning over Sammy's face. "How are you feeling?"

"I see two of you, Jos," she said with a tiny tilt of her lips. "But Tanner called me his daughter-in-law, so I'm having the best day ever."

Mom tucked a few strands of hair behind Samara's ear, being careful with the knot on her head and the gash that had butterfly stitches holding it together. "Your pupils are all wonky." She spared the doctor a glance. "What do we know?"

"Severe concussion," Dr. Hollis supplied. "I recommend overnight observation and lots of rest."

"Have you given her anything for the pain?"

“I don’t need anything,” Samara said, leaning into Mom’s hand that was still lingering on her cheek. “Elias is here, so I’m not hurting. Your hands are cold. They feel good.”

“I’ll have the nurse bring her an injection for the pain,” Dr. Hollis offered. “And an ice pack.”

Samara’s lashes lifted, disgust scrunching her face when she looked at the doctor. “Didn’t I just say I don’t need anything for pain? My vision might be a little off, but my memory is just fine. If you or anyone else attempts to give me an injection, I’ll stab you in the—”

“She won’t be needing anything for the discomfort,” Mom interrupted, causing Dad to hide his laugh with a cough.

Dr. Hollis didn’t appear to take Samara’s unfinished threat seriously, and if she did, there was no obvious fear in her demeanor. “We should have a room ready for her soon. Unfortunately, visiting hours are already over. Once she’s moved upstairs, none of you will be able to go with her.”

“Yeah, that’s not happening,” Samara grouched. “I’m definitely not staying if Elias can’t be with me.”

“You are staying as long as the doctors say you need to,” I told her patiently. Her bottom lip pouted out. With a groan, I bent to kiss her. “I’m not going anywhere, baby girl.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Reid, but we have a strict policy.”

“OMFG,” Samara grunted. “She’s annoying the hell out of me. Make her shut up already.”

“Raven is in the waiting room with everyone else,” Mom told her. “She can speak to the administrator.”

“If she can’t, just put a bullet in someone,” Samara suggested, and Dad choked on another laugh. “Preferably that blond bitch who is thirsty for Elias. God, go eye-fuck someone else already. His brother is right outside the door. Or his cousin... Wait, not Max, though. I can’t let you near Delaney’s husband. The treasure will get upset.”

“Okay, time for you to stop talking,” I told her. “Take a nap.”

She glowered in my direction. “Can’t. Not with her—” she pointed an unsteady finger toward the doctor “—in here.”

“She’s leaving.” I tucked her hand under the blanket before pulling it up to her shoulders. “Now close your eyes and rest.”

“Fine,” she huffed, lowering her lashes. “So bossy.”

Mom stood, her eyes dispassionately brushing over the doctor. “I’ll go speak to Raven and get everything sorted while Sammy rests. Perhaps you can alert your administration team that we need a quick meeting.”

“Our administrator has already left for the day and is supposed to be taking a long weekend in Tahoe with his family.”

Giving her a cool smile, Mom motioned a hand toward the door. “Then I suggest they speak to us on the phone. Otherwise, their plans will be ruined. After you.”

“Ma’am, that’s not possible—” Dr. Hollis protested when Mom grasped her elbow, leading her from the private exam room.

“Thank fuck for that,” Dad said, leaning back in his chair. “Never known a doctor to linger like her. They usually get in and get out as fast as they can.”

“She’s lucky I can barely walk,” Samara commented, keeping her eyes closed. “I was thinking about using those defibrillator paddles on her.”

“Kind of sad you didn’t,” Dad teased.

She gave him a lopsided grin. “Me too.”

“Sleep, baby girl,” I urged, kissing her again. “If you’re a good girl, I’ll give you a present when we get home.”

Her lashes fluttered up in excitement. “Another kitten so Daisy isn’t lonely?”

“I think one cat is enough. At least for now.”

“I guess.” She sighed in disappointment. It was hard to believe she’d been so hesitant when I first found Daisy. Now

our little fur baby was one of her top priorities. “Then what is it?”

“If I told you, it wouldn’t be a surprise.”

“I’m not a fan of surprises. If you tell me what it is, I’m more likely to be good.” She yawned, then winced.

“I tell you when you wake up,” I promised, tenderly brushing another kiss over her lips. “Now, sleep.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

elias

IT WAS JUST AFTER TWO IN THE MORNING WHEN ANYA stormed into the hospital room. I'd been expecting it. She and Ryan had both blown up my phone as soon as their plane landed, and it hadn't stopped since.

Samara whimpered in her sleep when her mom first barged in, but I kissed her lips and tucked the blanket around her a little more. Straightening, I put my finger to my lips to tell Anya to be quiet then pointed at the door.

Her eyes lingered on her daughter for a moment before nodding. She turned and stomped out of the room, leaving me to follow. Internally groaning, I stepped into the corridor, leaving the door slightly cracked.

"Well?" she snarled.

"I already told you everything the doctor said earlier," I reminded her. "Nothing has changed in the thirty minutes since I gave you the last update."

"Watch your tone," she warned, her voice rising.

"Keep it down," I snapped. "Loud noises cause her pain. And hearing you out here will only upset her."

Eyes the same blue hue as Samara's turned to slits, but she pressed her lips together. I leaned back against the wall outside the door, exhaustion bearing down on me. As soon as my baby girl was cleared for travel, I was taking her on a vacation. With any luck, it would also be our honeymoon.

We were both quiet for a long moment before Anya spoke again. "I'm taking her back to New York."

Smirking, I crossed my arms over my chest. She was crazy if she thought for even a single moment Samara would roll over and take that kind of bullshit. Or that I would ever allow it. "Good luck with that."

"You think I'm joking?"

I shrugged, unconcerned. "We both know that Samara isn't going anywhere unless she wants to." And I'd make sure she never wanted to leave me. As soon as I got her home, I was going to put my ring on her finger. Then I knew she'd never go anywhere without me again.

Movement to my right drew my attention. Ryan. I ignored him, keeping my attention on my future mother-in-law. "Did Cristiano come with you?"

She muttered something in Russian under her breath, but the fight was already fading from her. She was a smart woman and knew when she didn't have a leg to stand on. In a battle of wills, Samara would win, hands down. "No," she said quietly. "The trip would have been too much for him."

I nodded my understanding. Samara had told me about her dad's dementia after she'd come back from New York, which I'd already known about since I'd been watching her for the last three years. But other than that, we didn't talk about him or his health. She tried to pretend he was okay, but every time he called or texted her, she couldn't hide how shattered she was over his illness.

"Does he know she was in an accident?"

"No," she said with a heavy exhale. "And we can't tell him. It will probably trigger an episode, and that will only distress Cristiano and her."

"How is she?" Ryan asked when he reached us.

"She's resting right now." I pushed off from the wall and reached out to close the door completely. They both wanted to see her for themselves, but she was sleeping too peacefully for me to let them into her room just yet. Their presence would

only agitate her because she wouldn't be able to fully relax with her mother and brother hovering. "Let's let her sleep while we grab some coffee in the cafeteria."

Before we reached the elevators, I paused at the nurses station. "Getting some coffee," I let the older woman behind the desk know.

"No problem." She gave all three of us a quick smile. "Next round for vitals is in an hour."

"We will be back before then." I couldn't leave Samara for that long, regardless of her family being there. My chest felt uncomfortable before I could push the button for the lobby where the cafeteria was located.

Ryan spared me a glance as the elevator descended. "You look like shit."

"You sweet-talking me now, Vitucci?" I batted my lashes at him. "Want to leave Nova and run away with me?"

The bottom half of his face never changed, but his eyes filled with wary amusement. "My sister would dismember me if I tried."

"Probably." I snorted. "She threatened to stab the doctor with a scalpel earlier. The doc didn't take her seriously, but I made sure there weren't any sharp objects in the room after she fell asleep."

"Smart," he commended.

"Where is Nova anyway?"

"She's in Colombia visiting her parents. I was supposed to fly down to join her and the kids tomorrow." The elevator doors opened, and we stepped off into the lobby. Only the lights over the vending machines were on when we entered the cafeteria, but there was a self-serve coffee station at the end of the row.

"Are you sure Cristiano is okay?" I grabbed a paper cup and offered it to Anya.

"He has his nurse, Walter. And since both his sisters and my brother are now aware of his condition, I asked Victoria

and Adrian to check in tomorrow.” She opened up three sugar packets and emptied them into what was supposed to be dark roast, according to the sign, but looked like brown water.

“Sammy mentioned Walter.” I doctored my own cup. It wasn’t likely I was going to get the jolt of caffeine I needed, but at least I’d get a sugar high. “Has Cristiano been doing okay?”

“He hasn’t had any more major mental breaks.” Ryan didn’t even bother pouring himself a cup of coffee, but he eyeballed his mom’s cup curiously. “He still gets anxious around me, though. Keeps saying shit about an impostor and calls me...”

Anya touched his arm when he trailed off. “It’s okay, *l’venok*. I’m not going to break if you mention your brother.”

“Christian,” he muttered, thrusting his hands into his slack pockets. “He’s called me Christian at least a dozen times this week.”

I took a big swallow of my coffee then reached for another packet of sugar. “Sammy hasn’t mentioned it, but she gets upset every time she talks to her dad. Whether he calls or texts, she gets really quiet afterward.”

“It’s been hard on her,” Anya said with a sad shake of her head. “When he gets tired, he forgets that she’s grown now and he thinks she’s snuck out of the house. But if he sees her, he thinks she’s me, and he gets severely agitated.”

I drained my paper cup and tossed the trash into the recycling bin. “Let’s go back up. I don’t like being away from her.”

As we stepped back into the elevator, an alert went off on my phone. Frowning at the sudden noise, I pulled it out and swiped my thumb over the alert message. It wasn’t one I’d set up, but because I’d mirrored Samara’s phone, the camera feeds she’d placed to watch over Abi were linked to my cell too.

“What is that?” Anya asked, trying to peek at my phone screen.

“It’s nothing.” I flicked through each location, trying to figure out where the alert was coming from.

“That sounds like the alert I have on Nova’s cameras,” Ryan told his mom.

“You have cameras on Samara?” Anya laughed. “What is it with you boys? Don’t you understand the value of personal space?”

“No...” I couldn’t find anything on the feed that stuck out. Pocketing my phone, I shrugged. “I do have cameras on Sammy. And an app on my phone that mirrors hers. As well as one that lets me see anything on her phone’s camera. But that was from something else.”

“What apps do you have?” Ryan asked with interest as the elevator doors opened. “Do you only see from the rear camera or the front?”

“I can switch between both.”

“Damn, I need to look into that,” he muttered to himself as we walked down the corridor to Samara’s room.

I didn’t tell him it was his wife who had helped me put that app on Samara’s phone. Or that she’d installed all the cameras I still had access to of Samara’s bedroom and many of the places she frequented in New York. I wouldn’t have doubted that Nova already had the same app on Ryan’s phone and he wasn’t aware of it. She was as crazy possessive of him as he was of her. Just as Samara and I were with each other.

Anya opened the door, and I followed her in with Ryan right behind me. But as soon as I stepped inside, I felt the energy around us shift. Dread slithered up my spine, and a hollow sensation took root in my chest. My gaze went straight to Samara.

Or where she was supposed to be.

With all the lights off except for one by the window to cast a soft glow, I could easily see that the bed was empty.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

samara

HEAD POUNDING, I REACHED OUT IN SEARCH OF ELIAS. ALL I needed was for him to touch me, and I would feel better. Just his hand in mine and all the pain would go away.

Not immediately feeling him, I cautiously lifted one eyelid. A lamp was on across the room, but even that felt too harsh for my aching head. Moaning, I pulled the blanket up over my face. “Elias?”

No answer.

Make it stop.

Make it stop.

Make the pain fucking stop.

“Elias, I need you,” I mumbled.

Only you can make the noise and the pain and the crazy ease.

Moaning, I started to lift up when a voice stopped me. “You should try to sleep.”

I froze, unable to figure out if I didn’t recognize the voice because of my pounding headache or because I simply had never heard it before.

“Who’s there?” I whispered.

“You don’t know your own brother’s voice?”

Relief had me relaxing into the pillow, but only momentarily. I would know Ryan’s voice anywhere. It was as

distinct to me as Elias's or Mom's or Papa's. And the one I'd just heard did not belong to my brother.

Carefully, I lowered my blanket and tried to open my eyes again. But all I saw was a silhouette a few feet away. Blinking, I attempted to get my vision to focus. With my distorted eyesight, it did look like Ryan was standing there. But...no. Even when we argued, I didn't feel the kind of malice that was saturating this room.

No, it wasn't so much hostility as...rage.

"Ryan?" I breathed hesitantly, wondering if maybe I was having a bad dream.

The shadowed figure stepped forward, and still, it looked like Ryan to me. But every instinct inside me screamed danger. I might dislike my brother the majority of the time, but I'd never been uneasy around him.

"What's going on?" I asked, needing to hear his voice again.

"There isn't much time. We need to go."

There! I heard it, the slightest hint of an accent. Ryan spoke perfect Russian and Italian, just as I did, but neither one of us had an accent when we spoke English. Whoever was pretending to be my brother definitely was not Ryan.

I rubbed at my eyes with my thumb and forefinger, willing them to focus. "Who are you?"

"Your brother," he repeated. "We have to go. Now."

He moved closer, and I reached out for a weapon, knowing I couldn't take him without one. Not in my current condition. But I found nothing. Not even a water pitcher. I shrank back into the mattress. "Stay away from me. I don't know you!"

I heard his exasperated sigh. "I guess we're going with Option B."

Fake Ryan leaned over me, and I struck out, my fists flying, my nails raking over his cheeks. He was close enough that I could see his face. He looked so much like Ryan it was scary, but I could make out differences too. Ryan looked like a

clone of Papa, and this man was almost a replica as well. But even with my vision impaired, I noticed the subtle variations in the shape of his eyes. His nose wasn't quite as perfect.

Ryan could have been his twin, but not an identical one. This man was slightly older, harder, his eyes so haunting, I wanted to ask what had happened to him.

“Who are you?” I repeated.

“Your brother.”

A sting in my neck was my only warning that he'd stabbed me with a needle. I slapped at it, but my reflexes were too slow to stop the burn of whatever he'd injected me with. Within seconds, the world faded into nothing but darkness.

Pressure and a pounding in my skull roused me. Groaning, I clutched at my head. “Turn the lights off,” I commanded. “And stop breathing so loud.”

“Easy,” a deep voice instructed. “You will pull the IV out of your hand if you aren't careful.”

Every muscle in my body tightened in reaction as memories pelted my foggy mind. Gingerly, I opened my eyes, trying to adjust to the lighting a little at a time. Slowly, my surroundings came into view. The roar of a jet engine. The bright lights filling the cabin. The way my chair was reclined. The IV that was still in the back of my hand with warmed fluids slowly flowing through it. The metal cuff around my other wrist that was attached to my chair. The scent of food in the air. The loud breathing of the man across from me.

The...

Fucking metal cuff on my wrist?

I tugged on it once, twice. “Sonofabitch!”

“Now, is that any way to speak about our mother?”

Jerking my head in the direction of the voice, I blinked him into focus. First his silhouette and then his profile. Short, dark hair. Beautiful, masculine bone structure, with a slightly imperfect nose that made his handsome face that much more alluring. His smooth skin that looked like he'd never smiled or

frowned a day in his life. Brown eyes that had a soft honey glow to them but lacked any emotion. Just a cold, empty shell.

He looked so much like Ryan, I almost reached out to touch him, to see if he was real. But he wasn't Ryan. He was a little older, maybe, but not by much, the subtle differences in his face reminding me of...me.

Of Mom.

“Who the fuck are you?” I whispered.

You know who he is.

I ignored the crazy trying to break through the wall of pain. Fuck.

“I've already answered that question several times, little sister.” It took me an entire two seconds to realize he was speaking in Russian and not English. “Perhaps that concussion caused some brain damage.”

“Maybe it did,” I agreed in English. “And maybe I'm hallucinating all of this.”

Shifting, I glanced around the private plane's cabin. I doubted my ability to stand without falling on my face, given how badly my head pounded and the continued in-and-out blurriness of my vision. With the light shining through all the windows, my eyes began to water, my head pulsing in time to my erratic heartbeat, but I still tried to take stock of every detail. I needed an exit strategy for when the pilot landed.

“Where are we going?” I asked when the silence became too much. Not even the jet engines could drown out the crazy once it got started, and I didn't want it to start. Not when I was in a confined space, thirty thousand feet in the air, with a stranger I had zero intel on.

“Don't worry about it.” He picked up a tablet and began typing.

I licked my dry lips. Despite the IV that was keeping me hydrated, I was desperate for a drink of water. “What's your name?”

My captor didn't look up from his device. “I have several.”

“I don’t doubt that.” Annoyed, I glared at him. My head hurt too badly for games. I just wanted to get off the plane and find Elias.

Pain radiated through my entire body. I needed to be back with him. I didn’t know how long it had been since the last time I saw him, but from the noise in my head, I realized it was far too long.

Calm your crazy. Stay sane. Figure this shit out so you can get back to him.

“What’s the name you prefer?”

“Vaughn.”

I twisted my fingers around the blanket that covered the bottom half of my body. Even the crazy was suddenly eerily quiet. “Professor Vaughn?”

He lifted his head long enough to meet my gaze for a brief moment. “We both know I’m not a professor, Samara. I took on the role after I saw Abi.”

Fuck.

Abi.

I jerked against my restraint. “Stay away from her!”

For the first time, emotions flickered in his brown eyes. “Never.”

“If you touch her, I will kill you,” I vowed. “If you hurt her, I’ll make you beg me to end you.”

“Did our mother teach you how to torture people as well as being an assassin, little sister?”

“Mom taught me everything,” I hissed, but confusion rushed in. “*Our* mother?”

He was a lunatic, even crazier than me.

His smile was humorless as he studied me for a long moment. “Yours and mine. As in, she gave birth to me, and then over a decade later, you were pushed from her body. Unlike Ryan, we share the same mother. Biologically.”

I scoffed. “What drugs are you on? My mother doesn’t have any other children. She had a miscarriage like thirty-four years ago, and then she struggled to get pregnant with me. Whoever you are, you should make sure to get your facts straight before spinning the kind of fairy tale you’re weaving.”

Vaughn carelessly lifted a shoulder. “Are you sure, little sister?”

“Of course I am.” But a sliver of doubt nagged at the back of my mind. He looked too much like Ryan and Papa, with just a hint of Mom. My nose wrinkled up at my own idiocy, and I pushed the thought away. “Whoever your plastic surgeon was, you should have found someone better to work on your nose.”

“Ouch. Burn,” he taunted. “That’s a rather sore spot for me. I broke my nose when I was fourteen. Got into a fight with a bunch of street thugs in a back alley. Just a few blocks from the Parliament Building in Budapest.”

A ghost twinge pulsed in my thigh at the mention of Budapest. “It’s a dangerous city,” I ground out.

He smirked coolly at me, knowing he’d hit a sore spot. I tried to erase all emotion from my face, my mind, and tune him out. But it was useless. My head hurt too badly, my emotions too raw. “Isn’t it, though? You never know who is hiding in dark corners. Or random windows with a sniper rifle.”

I jerked so hard against the cuff, I felt it cut into my wrist. “Bastard.”

Vaughn inclined his head. “That’s a given.”

“You shot me!” I seethed.

“But did you die?” He turned his attention back to his tablet. “Trust me, little sister. If I’d wanted to kill you, I would have already taken you out.”

A laugh bubbled out of me, sounding half manic. “That was your mistake right there, Vaughn. You didn’t kill me.”

Brown eyes clashed with mine. For a long moment, we had a stare-off. Hate and rage simmered within me. As soon as

I was free, I was going to put a bullet in his thigh. Maybe three. And then I was going to—

A door sliding open had his head lifting, his eyes rapt. Christ. I knew that expression on his face all too well. I'd seen it on Ryan's face every time he looked at Nova. Felt it myself with Elias. It was an overwhelming sense of rightness that only one person could bring out.

Obsessive love. Sickness. A side of the crazy that was a little lighter, but so much fucking scarier if left to fester. It gave me pause, made me wonder if what he'd said was true.

Could he possibly be my brother?

I was witnessing a fraction of our family's mental illness right before my eyes. One my brother and I both suffered from.

Shit.

Maybe *both* my brothers?

Dread rolled through my stomach, and I knew who he was looking at before I even turned. But I prayed it was someone—any-fucking-one—other than the person I knew would be there. Slowly, I shifted my gaze to follow and felt the world turn upside down.

“Abi.”

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

samara

AS SOON AS SHE SAW ME, RELIEF FILLED ABI'S FACE. "THANK goodness you're awake. I was so worried about you."

She crossed to me. Abi was dressed in jeans, a simple tank top, and with her red hair damp around her shoulders, I realized she must have showered. Like my family's many private jets, this one had a bedroom and a full bathroom. I could smell the scent of Abi's body wash and hair products coming from the still-open door.

Her arms were gentle as she bent to wrap me in a hug. With the arm that wasn't restrained, I hugged her back, the tape around the IV in the back of my hand pulling slightly. "What are you doing here?" I whispered.

Pulling back so she could see my face, she scanned her eyes over me. "Vaughn told me you were in an accident. That he needed to take you back to New York so your dad wouldn't worry. I know everything, Sammy. You don't have to hide anything from me now."

"What do you mean by 'everything,' Abs?" I glanced over at Vaughn, but his eyes were primarily on Abi. Reverently, he watched every move she made.

Sympathy filled her eyes as she took the seat beside me. "I had no idea your dad was sick. I wish you would have said something about his dementia. My grandma Alicia suffered from it before she passed a few years ago. It was a side effect of her second fight against brain cancer. It was really rough on Dad and Aunt Kassa. But Uncle Gray took it the hardest. He

looked so much like his own father that Alicia kept thinking he was his dad. She alternated between trying to fight him and being terrified of him.”

Taking my hand, she entwined our fingers, attempting to give me a sense of solidarity. “I completely understand why your dad shouldn’t travel. Vaughn was so worried when he found out you were in the accident.” She gave me a mock glare. “But you should have told me he was your brother. I never would have told you about my...”

Heat suffused her entire face, and she abruptly cut herself off. “Why didn’t you tell me you were his sister?”

“What the actual fuck?” I snapped, shooting Vaughn a glare.

“I only told her the truth,” he said in Russian.

“You’re fucked in the head,” I spat in the same language so as not to upset Abi. “Have you been spying on us? On my papa...?”

My blood turned to ice. *Papa*. His severe episode that had sent him straight into Kovak’s domain, thinking I’d been taken. Mom had thought something was off. And even Ryan had said Papa kept saying he was an impostor. That Ryan wasn’t the right son.

Realization filled me, and I jerked against my restraints. “I’m going to kill you!”

Abi gently pressed me back into my chair, blocking my view of the monster who claimed to be my brother. “Easy, Sammy. Don’t hurt yourself.”

Breathing hard, I shrugged off her hands.

“Look, I understand if you two aren’t close. I mean...I’m trying to, at least. My family and I have never been at odds. They’re annoying at times, but I couldn’t imagine my life without them in it.” Abi tucked my hair behind my ear, her blue eyes glazing over with tears when she focused on the bruise that was on my forehead and around my eye. “But I know not every family is like mine. Everyone has their own dynamic. For whatever reason, you and your brother are at

odds. He's trying to rectify that, though. All he wants is to protect you. Show you how much he cares."

He cared so much, he shot me?

Tried to start a war with one of my family's enemies and nearly got Papa killed in the process?

I couldn't say any of that to her. It would scare the hell out of her. Whatever the sociopath had told her, it made her think that Vaughn simply wanted to reconnect with his estranged family. She was so innocent. So pure. I didn't want our world to touch her.

And yet, he'd dragged her into the middle of whatever this was. His vendetta against my family and me.

I lifted my cuffed wrist. "I'm chained to a chair, Abi. How many brothers do that to their sisters?"

"It was for your own protection. You kept trying to tear the IV out in your sleep," she explained. "You need to stay hydrated because of your concussion."

"Well, I'm awake now," I said with a tense smile. "Maybe you can uncuff me."

"When we land," Vaughn offered in English. "We will be there soon."

"Where exactly are we going?" Abi had said New York, but I wasn't sure I believed that.

"New York, silly," she told me with a soft laugh. "We're taking you home to visit your dad since he couldn't travel to check on you."

I squeezed the bridge of my nose, much like Elias did when he was frustrated. My heart clenched. He was probably going out of his mind worrying about me.

If I wanted to get back to him, I had to figure this shit out. Preferably before we saw Papa. Fuck, I could barely think straight, but I needed to find a way to protect him from whatever the hell Vaughn had planned.

Rubbing at my aching forehead, I lifted my gaze to the man across from me. “Is she your collateral?” I demanded, switching to Russian again so Abi wouldn’t understand.

“No,” he growled.

“Then why make her a part of this sick game?”

“She is the only reason the rules have changed in this game, as you call it,” he clipped. “If not for her, and witnessing how wrong about you I was, the puppet masters who have been pulling the strings for three decades would have already gotten their wish and everyone you love would already be dead.”

“Don’t argue,” Abi chastised. “I may not speak the language, but I can tell from your tone that you two are not having a friendly conversation.”

Vaughn turned his head, his eyes caressing lovingly over her face. “I don’t mean to upset you, wildfire.”

Pleasure made her glow. “I want the two of you to get along. She’s one of my best friends. If this is going to work...”

“I will make it work,” he rushed to assure her. “But it may take a little time. My sister doesn’t trust me. Yet.”

“Fuck,” I muttered under my breath. Even with my vision still somewhat distorted, I could see Abi had moved miles past having a crush on her professor.

Christ.

“We have about thirty minutes before we land. Why don’t you two try to talk it out?” she suggested.

“We will need longer than that to sort through all of our issues, wildfire.”

Standing, she moved over to sit beside him on the sofa. Taking his hand, she entwined their fingers and gave him an encouraging smile. As I watched her, even I would have given her whatever she wanted if she would continue to bathe us in that beauty.

With his free hand, he cupped her cheek, lovingly brushing his thumb over her bottom lip. “Thank you for being here, *zhizn moya*.”

She leaned into his touch. “Where you go, I go.”

Christ, she had caught whatever sickness Vaughn had.

Like Nova caught Ryan’s.

Like Elias caught mine.

Closing his eyes, Vaughn seemed to savor her words. Then with a heavy sigh, he turned his head to look straight at me. “Anya didn’t have a miscarriage,” he announced, going back to Russian. “She threw me away.”

My rage flared again. “Liar!”

He lifted his free hand, the other still holding on to Abi’s. “Calm yourself. I know that. Now. But it was the lie I was fed my entire life. From the time I could talk, they told me over and over again the story of how my mother abandoned me.”

“She was five months pregnant.” My heart still ached for the pain that my mother had felt when she’d lost her first child. A piece of her had died when he did. “That baby was the only thing she felt she still had, because Papa married Ryan’s mother. When she lost him, she nearly died too because she lost the will to live.”

“She wasn’t five months along,” Vaughn clarified. “She was seven and a half.”

Angrily, I rolled my eyes. “Sure. Whatever you say. My mother wouldn’t lie about that.”

“She didn’t lie. She simply did not know.” He leaned forward. “It was only very recently that I looked into what happened. None of what I had been told my entire life made sense after I began watching you after Budapest. I believed their lies, because I had no reason not to.”

“Then what’s the truth?” I demanded skeptically.

“When Anya found out she was pregnant, she was already being watched. They killed the doctor’s wife in front of him

and then threatened to do the same to his daughter if he didn't cooperate. He had no choice but to lie. When Anya found out she was pregnant, she was much further along than she was led to believe."

I tapped my fingers impatiently on the armrest, but his story wasn't completely implausible. "Go on."

"When Anya was around seven and a half months pregnant, they drugged her. Made her think the baby stopped moving." That much, I did know. Mom had gone to the hospital, desperate to find out what was wrong, terrified she was losing her child. It was a miracle she was even pregnant to begin with. When she'd "graduated" from the academy she had been pulled into as a kid, they'd sterilized all the girls to ensure they never risked the liability of children.

Mom hadn't known she was pregnant when Papa ended their relationship to fulfill his own mother's wish that he marry her childhood friend's daughter, Sheena. But when Papa had found Ryan's biological mother abusing him, he'd killed her on the spot. It wasn't until my brother was four that my parents had gotten back together. They'd tried for years to conceive again and had nearly given up when Mom became pregnant with me.

"The doctor was the same man who had been taking care of Anya throughout her pregnancy. As soon as the baby was born, they rushed him out of the delivery room and told her that I was dead." Vaughn's face had grown tight, his eyes darkened with an emotion I couldn't identify. "I spent three months in a NICU."

If what he said was true, then my mother had spent over three decades suffering unnecessarily, agonizing over the child she'd lost. I wanted to make whoever had done that to her bleed. "Do you have proof of any of this?"

"Look at me, Samara. Tell me you don't think I am their son." He slapped a hand against his cheek.

Abi made a sound of distress. Taking his hand, she pressed it to her lips. "Please don't do that."

Gently, he brushed his finger over her cheek. His tone softened when he spoke to me again, still in Russian. “I have the DNA results. I’ll show them to you if you wish.”

“Let’s say I believe you.” I inwardly groaned, already calling myself a fool. “What does it matter, though?”

He tore his gaze from Abi, his brown eyes tortured. “Three months ago, it wouldn’t have. But my life changed the moment I saw Abi. You know what that’s like, don’t you, little sister? Ryan understands it just as much as we do. Your Elias. His Nova. My Abi.”

“It’s a sickness,” I muttered. “A twisted obsession that turns everything upside down.”

“No,” he denied vehemently. “No, it turns it right side up. Everything else in the world can crash and burn. I’ll light the match to set it all on fire. And I’m going to. For her.”

“By destroying Papa?” I twisted my wrist, tugging at the cuff harder. “Please don’t hurt him. Or Mom. They don’t deserve that.”

“Will you stop trying to break your fucking hand?” he suddenly thundered.

Abi flinched, making him groan in pain. Releasing her hand, he put his arm around her shoulders, pulling her head to his chest. “I’m sorry, wildfire. I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

“Why are you so angry?” she mumbled against his shirt. “Whatever you two are discussing, can’t you just put the past behind you? Start fresh.”

“For you, I will do anything,” he vowed.

I wanted to get my friend as far away from him as possible. My skin prickled with the need to protect her. But seeing the way he held on to her, how tenderly he brushed his lips over her brow, I wasn’t so sure Abi would thank me if I tried.

He breathed in deeply, and he reluctantly turned his head to face me once again. “Their plan was to always destroy Anya. Make her sweat. Slowly pick away at her psyche. The

key was you. And then I found out about Cristiano's illness. She was starting to break a little more every day. When I shot you—”

I bared my teeth at him. He would pay for that, I promised myself. No matter what else happened, I would make him regret shooting me.

“—she lost her mind. It was beautiful the way she drained that bastard of blood. I used to visit Cristiano all the time. It was easy to make him think that Ryan was an impostor. He wanted to believe that Christian survived. He needed to believe it.”

Remembering how Papa had cried on his knees, begging for me—for Mom—to forgive him for not being there when their son died, I believed Vaughn. I was surprised to realize I believed him about everything. My gut told me he was speaking the truth.

“But I didn't rile him up about Kovak. That was...them.”

My hands balled into fists. “Then who did?”

“You don't know them,” he brushed off. “And they won't matter when I'm through.”

“No,” I snapped. “You want me to trust anything you say, you will tell me who, Vaughn.”

How he glared at me reminded me so much of Ryan I nearly laughed. “Fine, I'll give you the condensed version. They were at the academy with Anya when they were girls. Polina and Daria. The three of them were...friends.”

Ugh. The academy. I couldn't keep from making a face. That fucking place had warped my mom. Given her skills no one would ever suspect the small, beautiful woman capable of. And she had then passed those skills on to me. To Nova. And, I suspected, to Wren.

It would end there, however. I wouldn't risk having children of my own—especially a daughter—becoming part of that toxic cycle. Because I knew in my gut that if I did have a daughter, I would be tempted to teach her all of those same

things. I wouldn't be able to stop myself because I knew the dangers and the evils of the world.

“Or pretended to be friends,” Vaughn went on. “Polina was always a little in love with Anya, and Daria hated her for it, because she was in love with Polina. She was, and still is, insane with jealousy. Polina took a bullet to the spine when she was in Bolivia with Anya not long after they were first out of the academy. She will never walk again. Daria took care of her afterward. And then she twisted the story, manipulated the narrative to make Polina think that it was Anya's fault. It wasn't, but I didn't know that until recently.”

“So, what?” I predicted. “Polina and Daria found out about Mom's pregnancy and put all of this in motion?”

He shrugged. “Yes. They raised me to hate Anya as much as they do. Twisted me until all I could see was the end goal of making Anya suffer.”

“But what does any of that have to do with why you kidnapped me from the hospital?” I griped.

“They know I've defected from their plan,” he explained solemnly. “Now, they're coming for everyone I care about. Abi. You. Cristiano. I have to get the three of you somewhere safe.”

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

samara

A LAUGH BURST OUT OF ME.

My newfound brother cared about me.

It was probably more than I would ever get out of Ryan. He only ever told Nova and their kids he loved them. Sometimes Mom. Ciana had been bestowed a few. On a couple rare occasions, I'd gotten one, but it always seemed forced. I understood, though. His biological mother had fucked with his head. He was only a real person when Nova was around.

Vaughn didn't seem reluctant about admitting he cared, though. I'd known him all of twenty minutes. He'd shot me. Drugged me. Kidnapped me. Cuffed me to a fucking airplane seat.

But he *cared* about me.

Enough that he felt the need to protect me, Papa, and, above all else, Abi. Really, as long as she was safe and Papa was out of danger, then nothing else mattered.

But couldn't he have done this shit when I didn't have the headache from hell and I didn't see two of everything every other time I blinked?

"She's laughing," Abi whispered beside Vaughn. "That's a good sign, right?"

He kissed the top of her head. "I would call it a win, wildfire."

The side-eye he gave me, however, said he didn't believe that for a moment.

"What's the plan?" I asked, sticking to Russian as I switched off everything inside me so I could focus on what needed to be done.

"We pick up Cristiano, and I get the three of you somewhere safe. You'll stay there for a few days until I take care of Polina and Daria. It shouldn't be more than a week, two tops."

"Your plan sucks." I followed the IV line in the back of my hand up to the nearly empty bag of saline. "First, we need to switch that out. I'll need at least a few more. You're going to leave Papa alone. He's safe where he is. And I don't want to trigger him."

"They will come for him," Vaughn argued.

"Of course they will. But we can use that to our advantage." Breaking the nail on the pinkie finger of my free hand between the edge of the cupholder and my chair, I used the sharp point to unlock the cuff. As soon as I was free, Vaughn cursed, but I just rubbed at my raw skin.

"I expect a manicure when we're done," I told him, mourning my broken nail. I'd just gotten them done, damn it. "You're going to throw in a pedicure as well. I expect to be pampered afterward."

"How did she do that?" Abi wondered aloud, her face full of fascination.

"Our mother, I suspect," Vaughn told her, easily switching to English when he spoke directly to her. I didn't miss the hint of amusement in his voice. "Anything else you expect, princess?"

My heart contracted painfully. Princess. God, I missed Elias so much.

"Daddy is going to be so angry when I get home," I mused, but I quickly had to shift gears. I couldn't think about Elias or anything else. If I did, I wouldn't be able to focus, and

it was already going to be a challenge with my head pounding and my vision still off.

“What kind of artillery do you have access to?”

* * *

“Why did you pretend not to know Vaughn when I told you he was my professor?” Abi asked quietly as we sat in the back of the SUV that had been waiting for us on the private tarmac in New Jersey.

Vaughn was speaking to the pilot and copilot a few yards away, but I kept my eyes on him. I might have believed him about being my long-lost brother, but I would have been stupid to completely trust him. Fuck, I didn't completely trust Ryan or even my mom. Elias was the only person I fully put my faith in.

Shifting my gaze to my friend, I shrugged. “I didn't realize my brother was your Professor Vaughn. He and I haven't kept in touch. I didn't even know he became a college professor.”

That he was only pretending to be a professor in order to get close to Abi was an entirely different story. But whatever. I wasn't going to stick my nose in their business. Yet. Not when I already had so many other things on my plate, along with the headache I was still experiencing.

“He was really worried when he found out about your accident.” She touched my hand that still had the IV in it, a fresh bag of saline hanging from the pole above my head. “How are you really feeling?”

My lips lifted in a tired smile. “Like I've been hit by a truck. But I'll be back to normal in a few days. This isn't my first concussion.”

“I'm so nervous,” Abi confessed after a moment of silence while we both watched Vaughn continue to converse with the pilots. “Do you think your dad will like me? I've never had a boyfriend before... Not that Vaughn is my boyfriend. Or a

boy. Or even a friend.” She groaned. “Tell me to shut up already, Sammy.”

“What are the two of you, then?” I couldn’t stop from asking.

Her eyes flickered to the man outside the SUV then quickly back to me. “I don’t know. Everything has moved super-fast this past week. One minute, I was trying to figure out how to get into his summer class—the next, we were kissing. And now I’m on my way to meet his dad. I know fuck all about him. And my parents are going to freak out when they find out I’m into a much older guy. But I really like him. I mean, like-like him.”

If I hadn’t already known she had no knowledge of what was truly going on, her lack of fear about the current situation would have quickly clued me in. Abi only thought she was going with me to see my sick papa so he wouldn’t worry after my accident. She had no idea who we were or the danger she was in.

Guilt tried to eat at me, but I pushed it aside. It was better, at least for the moment, that my friend remained ignorant. Once Polina and Daria were dealt with, and Abi was safe, then I could figure out how to handle whatever was going on with her and my brother.

It was bizarre to even think that I had another brother. I could barely tolerate the one I’d grown up with. Meeting Vaughn changed so much. Mom was going to lose her shit. All the pain she’d suffered thinking she’d lost her baby, and he’d been alive all along. My heart ached for her and Papa. They’d missed so much of his life. My parents had been robbed of their child.

How different would my life have been if Vaughn had been raised as a Vitucci? Would Ryan have existed?

Would I?

Without Ryan, and his fascination with Nova when they were children, I didn’t think I would have grown up with the MC being such an integral part of my life. There probably

wouldn't have been regular trips to Creswell Springs. Which meant Elias never would have been mine. I might never have even met him.

I didn't want to contemplate any of that.

It hurt that Vaughn had been denied our family, but it hurt worse to think of never loving Elias.

Everything happened as it was supposed to for a reason. I was meant to be with Elias. As Ryan was meant for Nova. And... Reluctantly, I had to admit that perhaps Vaughn was meant for Abi.

Maybe.

She needed to know the truth first. About who we were. Why he'd dropped into her life so abruptly. I wasn't clear about that myself, but there wasn't time to ask him about it. And I wasn't sure he would tell me the truth even if I did ask.

What I did know was that I'd seen his feelings for her clearly written on his face. How he'd touched her like he needed physical contact with her to be able to breathe. I understood it all too well. It was how I felt about Elias.

That didn't mean I had to like it, though. Abi was the closest thing I had to a best friend. And I knew almost nothing about my new brother. Protecting Abi was more important to me than keeping Vaughn happy.

"Do you have your phone?" Abi asked, pulling me out of my thoughts.

"I haven't seen it since the accident." Elias hadn't mentioned it, and my head had hurt too much for me to think about it.

She groaned. "Ugh. Mine is back in my dorm. I completely forgot it when Vaughn picked me up. If I don't check in with Hayat, she's going to alert our parents. Aunt Lucy will call Lyric to come check on me, and when he finds me gone, I'm going to be in so much trouble."

"Well, I'm right there with you. I bet Elias is freaking out right now."

Her eyes widened. “Wait. He doesn’t know you’re with us?”

“I have no idea what he knows at this point,” I told her honestly. “Vaughn was impulsive in snatching me from the hospital. My mom and brother Ryan were on their way to see me. That’s the last thing I was told before I fell asleep.”

“He hasn’t mentioned your mom.”

Vaughn said something to the two pilots and turned to walk toward us. “We both have a complicated relationship with her,” I hedged. Not a lie. But definitely not the full truth that she deserved to hear, especially where Vaughn and Mom were concerned.

Fuck, I wasn’t sure how to explain it to myself.

Opening the driver’s door, Vaughn slid behind the wheel. “Are you two comfortable? It’s a bit of a drive from here.”

“I need to check in with Hayat. And Sammy should text Elias to let him know how she’s feeling.” She held out her hand. “Can we borrow your phone?”

“Give me Hayat’s number, and I’ll text her for you,” he offered. My vision had cleared up somewhat, so I saw the way his pupils changed.

Ah, shit. He was jealous. Of her best friend. For me, it was understandable. I wanted all of Elias’s attention. But Vaughn was going to have to learn to share Abi’s time and attention if he wanted to be in her life *and* keep her happy.

“She needs to hear my voice, or she gets worried. It’s a rule we have. If we don’t speak every day, we have to alert our parents. And I really don’t want to tell my mom I left school right before finals.” When he didn’t hand over his phone, her eyes narrowed. I tried to warn him with a look, but he was too focused on her. “Come on, I’m not going to snoop through your phone or anything. I just need to call my friend.”

He continued to hesitate. I made a light noise, trying to alert him that he was fucking up, but still, he only had eyes for her.

“If you want me to be here with you, the least you can do is lend me your phone for two minutes. Otherwise, you can let me out, and I’ll grab the first flight back to California.”

“You’re not going anywhere,” he growled, a flash of what might have been panic in his brown eyes.

“What, do you not want me to see your conversation with your girlfriend?” she taunted, but I still heard the jealousy in her voice. “I promised not to snoop through your cell.”

Groaning, he pulled his phone from his pocket, unlocked the screen, and handed it to her. “Look at whatever you want, wildfire.”

Abi stared down at the device like it might contain a transmittable disease.

“Awkward,” I mumbled to myself.

“Here. You can text Elias first,” she offered.

I held up both my hands. If I texted or heard Elias’s voice, it would all be over. I’d want to go straight home to him and say fuck it to Vaughn and his problem with Polina and Daria. And since I couldn’t do that because I wouldn’t risk Papa or Abi, I had to wait to speak to Elias. “Nah, I’m good. You go ahead.”

Nose scrunching, she plugged in the number and hit connect. She listened for a while and sighed. “Damn it, Hayat.” A moment passed, and the voice mail must have switched over. “Hey, babe! It’s Abi. I’m calling from a friend’s phone. Mine is...broken. I dropped it on my run this morning. But I didn’t want you to worry or send Lyric over to make sure I was still breathing. I’ll call you as soon as I pick up the new phone. But I’m so busy studying for finals that it might be a day or so. Love you!”

Hanging up, she practically threw the phone back at Vaughn with a grouched, “Thanks.”

“You don’t lie well,” I told her. “First time telling a fib?” I asked, attempting to distract her as Vaughn started driving.

“With Hayat, yes. We don’t keep secrets.” She settled back against the seat, turning her gaze out the side window. “I don’t know why I lied to her just now. I already regret it.”

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

samara

FROM THE MOMENT WE CROSSED OVER INTO NEW YORK STATE, I felt a change in Vaughn. He kept checking the mirrors, and each time his eyes shifted, my own tension began to mount.

“How many?” I asked in Russian.

“Two that I can see,” he replied in the same language.

“Hmm?” Abi blinked a few times, clearing away whatever she was thinking about at the sound of our voices after a lengthy silence. “Is something wrong?”

A muscle ticked in Vaughn’s jaw as he changed lanes. I didn’t try to turn to see which vehicles were following us. “Everything is fine. We’ll be at my parents’ place soon.”

“No,” Vaughn bit out in Russian. “We can’t go there. Let’s stick to the plan and go to the cabin upstate.”

“Even with this thing bulletproof, Abi will freak if they start shooting at us,” I reasoned. “Do you want her to be scared? Because I, for one, do not.”

He ground his teeth together so hard he risked cracking a tooth. I took his silence as agreement. “It’s better to go to the compound. The place is a fortress. And we can put Abi and Papa in one of the panic rooms. I redesigned them all three years ago. A bomb could go off and kill everything in a five-mile radius, but the panic room will still stand. When Papa first started having memory loss issues, we changed all the codes. Once they’re in, only I can get them out.”

His hand hit the steering wheel. “You will go in with them.”

“You need my help.”

“I need you safe!”

“You shot me a few months ago!”

“To keep you safe. If I’d wanted you dead, I would have killed you.”

“Will you two speak English?” Abi snapped. “Just because you’re conversing in a different language doesn’t mean I can’t tell something’s wrong. News flash, tone of voice is a big giveaway. And FYI, it’s rude as fuck.”

“Sorry,” I mumbled, chastened.

Vaughn released a pent-up breath. “My apologies, wildfire.”

“Why are you arguing?”

“We’re making a stop sooner than expected,” I explained. “My brother and I were disagreeing on which exit he should take to get there quicker.”

“Well, do it in English.” She shrank down in her seat a little. “I should have taken Russian instead of Spanish in high school.”

“They offered it at your high school?” I asked to distract her while Vaughn continued to watch his mirrors. At least he took the exit that was a quicker route to the compound.

“Spanish, Italian, Russian, and Japanese were offered. As well as ASL. I already knew Spanish, so I went with that for an easy A.”

“How about I teach you some basics?” I offered. “No is *nyet*. Yes, *dah*. Bye is *paka*. Hi is *privet*.”

She repeated each one. I beamed my pride and waved her over to whisper, “Now, look at Vaughn and say, *ya ves’ tvoy*.”

“*Ya ves’ tvoy*,” she said quietly, keeping her eyes on the front passenger seat.

His fingers bleached white around the steering wheel. I nudged Abi with my elbow. “A little louder.”

“*Ya ves’ tvoj,*” she said with more confidence.

I am yours.

“*I ya vseгда tvoj,*” he choked out, looking at her in the rearview mirror.

And I am yours always.

Abi’s breath hitched at the emotion in his voice. “What did he say?” Her brow scrunched. “Wait, what did *I* say?”

“You told him to chill out,” I lied. “And he promised he would. Right, Vaughn?”

“I promise to try.”

“Good.” She gave a cute little huff. “Teach me more, Sammy.”

* * *

“Keep your window up and let me talk,” I instructed Vaughn when he pulled up outside the compound. “You don’t talk. You don’t even breathe threateningly. Am I clear?”

“More Russian,” Abi muttered to herself. “But seriously, you live here?” Her eyes were huge as she took in the twenty-foot-high wall that surrounded the property, the steel gate that was reinforced, and the twin guard shacks on each side.

“I grew up here.” I shrugged.

“Jesus,” she breathed.

Powering down my window when two guards, both of them dressed in suits, came out of their sheds, I gave them a bored once-over. “Open the gate. I’m tired and hungry.”

“Miss Vitucci.” The guard on the right stood up a little straighter. “We weren’t expecting you.”

“Obviously,” I sneered. “Open the gate.”

He nervously licked his lips. “Your brother has given strict orders not to allow anyone through until he returns home.”

“Including me?” I reached through the window and grabbed his tie. Jerking him toward me, I was rewarded with the satisfying sound of his head connecting with metal. “Open the gate, or I will do it myself. And then I will tell my mother how you refused to allow me into my own home.”

He gulped. “But—”

“Last time I was here, Number Two was...fired after the way he treated me.” I smirked when I heard his choked inhale. Number Two, the previous head of security, was now swimming in the Hudson with all the other liquefied bodies my family disposed of. Something the guard would know all too well. “Open the fucking gate, or you’ll be joining him.”

Sweat beading on his brow, he motioned to the guard still in the shack to open the gate. I released his tie with a bright smile. “Now, that wasn’t so hard, was it?”

His Adam’s apple bobbed before he shook his head.

“Thanks for being cooperative.” Giving him a finger wave, I powered the window back up.

“You were kind of rude to him,” Abi said with a frown as the gates opened and Vaughn drove through.

“That wasn’t rude. It was merely me showing them they can’t treat me like shit. I refuse to roll over and take whatever rules my brother left in place. Just because he’s in charge of the business doesn’t mean he can dictate what I do.”

“You can win them over more with a smile than a glare,” she suggested.

“Not in this world, sweetness.”

Vaughn guided the SUV to the front of the mansion, and Abi gasped when she finally looked up at the house I’d been raised in. Trees hid the wall that went around the entire property—and thankfully the men with guns who walked the perimeter.

“The gate and the wall and the guards should have prepared me for this,” she mused. “This place is insane.”

“Meh. It always felt more like a museum than a home. But it did have its perks for playing hide-and-seek.”

“I bet,” she laughed.

Stepping out of the vehicle, Vaughn opened my door. He held my hand while Abi attempted to keep me steady from behind until my feet were on the ground. My bag of IV fluids had already finished, and I’d taken the line out before we’d gotten to the gate. All that was left was a small bandage over the site. Which was a good thing because as black-and-blue as my face was, I figured I was going to scare Papa enough.

Keeping one arm around me, Vaughn offered Abi his hand to assist her down as well. “Don’t be nervous,” I told her with a smile as my brother walked with us up the front steps.

Two guards with earpieces stood on either side of the double doors, their jackets hiding the guns in their holsters. Abi eyed them suspiciously, but their eyes were hidden behind their sunglasses.

“Papa might be having a bad day, so whatever he says, go along with it,” I said to pull her attention to me. “He’s usually more clearheaded in the mornings, so we can start fresh tomorrow if he’s having a bad day.”

“Grandma Alicia would get sundown syndrome, so I completely understand...” Her voice faded into nothing as gunfire sounded in the distance. “Wh-what was that?”

CHAPTER FIFTY

samara

BOTH GUARDS ALREADY HAD THEIR GUNS DRAWN. “GET inside,” the one to my left commanded as they ran down the steps.

Vaughn bent over Abi, using his body to cover her as we ran into the mansion. “Everything is okay, wildfire,” he soothed. “You’re safe.”

“But there’s gunfire,” she gasped. Once we were inside, Vaughn shut the doors. “What is happening?”

“It’s New York,” I excused. “Drive-bys happen every day.”

“I’m not stupid,” she snapped, slapping her hands on her hips. “All those guards. This house. You’re not just rich, you’re insane-rich.”

I spotted Walter jogging from the back of the house, but Papa wasn’t with him.

“Are you part of the mafia?” Abi hissed.

Giggling, I stepped away from the door. “You are so damn adorable. Yes. I guess you could say we are.”

“Oh my God,” she whispered. She looked at Vaughn. “But you’re a college professor.” She pointed at me. “And you’re an intern at an architecture firm.”

“A firm that is run by members of the Angel’s Halo MC,” I reminded her. “News flash, sweetie. Everyone’s a little dirty in life. It’s up to you how messy you want to get.”

Head still aching, I stumbled a little as I rushed forward to intercept Walter. “Where is Papa?”

“I just locked him in the panic room in the library.”

“You should have stayed with him!” I shouted.

“Boss?” He glanced over my shoulder at Vaughn.

“Ah, fucking motherfucker,” I seethed. I grabbed the collar of his scrubs. “You work for him?”

“Can we argue about who he works for later?” Abi yelled. “There are people outside shooting at us right now.”

Vaughn wrapped his fingers around her wrist. “Where is the panic room?”

“Oh, you mean you don’t know already?” I scoffed.

“Samara, you can bitch at me later, but right now, Abi needs to be in that fucking room!” His voice boomed off the walls.

Abi’s safety was the only thing that kept me from ripping out Walter’s throat. Pushing him out of my way, I ran down the hall, expecting my brother to follow. Outside, the gunfire was getting louder, closer. I couldn’t tell how many people were shooting, but from all the firepower, I knew it wasn’t just two old women out for a joyriding drive-by in hopes of offing their rival—aka my mother.

In the library, I went straight to the far wall and started punching in the code. Once someone was inside, only I knew the code to unlock the doors again. Not even Mom or Ryan knew it. If something were to happen while I was away, they would have to call me, or whoever was inside would be stuck. It was a fail-safe so that no one could provide that information even if they were tortured.

Hearing the snick of the doors releasing, I stepped back.

Papa swung his right arm, and I barely moved in time to miss having my throat sliced.

“Fuck’s sake, Anya!” he roared. “I could have killed you.”

I threw my arms around his neck. “I’m so glad you’re okay.”

“Samara,” Vaughn gritted.

Hugging Papa one more time, I took the knife from him. “I need this more than you,” I reasoned as I pushed him back into the panic room.

“Let me go, woman. I need to get out there and help the men.” He glared at Vaughn. “Tell your mother to release me.”

“Sorry, Pop.” Shoving Papa back more forcefully, Vaughn tugged Abi forward. “Mom is going to help me. But I have something important I need you to handle.”

“Who the hell is this, Christian?” he demanded when he saw the redhead.

“This is Abigail, the girl I love,” Vaughn introduced. “Wildfire, meet my father. You two get to know each other.”

“Vaughn—”

“Pop, please keep her safe. If anything happens to her...” He stopped and cleared his throat. “Just protect her for me. Okay?”

I didn’t give anyone time to react. Pressing the code to lock the doors again, I grabbed my brother. From all the shouting outside, things were getting messy. “We need to get to the artillery room.”

* * *

We had enough guns and other weapons to start our own war, and it was all stored just off the kitchen. What looked like an extra door to the pantry was yet another panic room, but this one was only for our stock. Every member of my family knew about it, but the staff was clueless, and only the highest ranking in the family knew the code to get in.

Mom had given me the code when I was ten, but a few years later, when Bain came for Ciana, I hadn’t been able to get to the stock. Jet had made me go into one of the panic

rooms with Felicity, Nova's mom. Maybe if I'd had the chance to get to a gun, I could have saved some of our men's lives that day.

Shaking that thought away, I started grabbing my favorite guns. "Take whatever you want," I instructed Vaughn as I put in an earpiece and switched it on. Instantly, I heard gunfire, groans, and cursing in three different languages. Within a matter of seconds, I knew where the majority of the enemy was coming over the wall. My uncle Adrian's men were helping the Vitucci soldiers, but Daria and Polina had the greater numbers.

Vaughn and Walter were already grabbing guns and ammunition, white communication sets hanging from their own ears. I loaded up and then reached for the sniper rifle. "I'm going high," I called as I raced from the room.

"Are you fucking insane?" Vaughn bellowed, rushing after me.

Laughing, I kept running. "That's always questionable. Most days, it's iffy."

"Goddamn it, Samara." He grabbed my arm and jerked me around to face him. "You can barely see. How are you going to snipe?"

"When you see double, always aim for the middle." Giving him a wink, I jerked out of his hold and took off running again. Up the stairs, down a hall, through a secret door, and up to the roof.

Walking crouched over, I found a good position and started counting off my kills.

"It's such a pretty day." I got comfortable on my belly and began adjusting the scope. "I love it when the wind cooperates."

"Are you talking to yourself?" Vaughn complained.

Grinning, I watched through the scope as he joined our soldiers with Walter behind him. "Doesn't everyone?"

"No," he said simply.

“Huh. I guess I’m just more fun than you.” Bullets whizzed past him. Adjusting the scope, I found the three men who were aiming right for him and pulled the trigger.

One.

Two.

Three.

Direct headshots each time.

“I told you all I had to do was aim for the middle.” My vision wasn’t as bad as it had been when I’d first woken up after the accident, but it wasn’t at one hundred percent. The precision of the scope helped a lot and I had to do a little extra math on the angles, but I got the job done.

Anyone who shot at Vaughn went down. I didn’t discriminate. Friend or foe, no one was going to kill my newfound brother. I wouldn’t have let anyone shoot at Ryan either. My brothers were huge pains in the ass, but they were mine.

And no one touched what was mine.

Ever.

“You’re humming.” Vaughn was breathing hard.

“And you need to get in better shape,” I admonished. “If your old ass wants to keep up with Abi, then you need to add a little cardio to your routine.”

“Funny.” He coughed, and my smile disappeared.

“Where are you hit?”

“Chest. But I have a vest on.” He coughed again, and this time, it sounded wet. “Just hurts like a motherfucker.”

Teeth grinding together, I adjusted so I could take out the ones who had finally breached the gate. “How many men do those bitches have?”

“Daria has an army of mercenaries at her disposal.”

Groaning, I took out two more men. “And none of them followed you when you came over to the gray side?”

“Don’t you mean dark?” He grunted and shot two bullets into a guy who yelled something to him in a language I couldn’t immediately identify.

“No, I totally meant gray. I am neither on the light side nor completely dark. I like to stay solely in the morally gray zone.” I popped another bullet into the chest of a guy who was definitely not a Vitucci soldier. “On your right!”

My bullet hit one of the men who was almost on top of Vaughn, and at my warning, he was able to take out the other.

“Boss.” Walter’s voice flooded into my headset. “Five cars are coming from the east.”

Even though I knew he wasn’t talking to me, I adjusted the scope to see what he was talking about. As soon as I spotted the vehicles, my heart jumped into my throat. “No, no, no!”

“What?” Vaughn shouted.

“Mom’s here. And Elias is with her!”

I couldn’t do this. Not when he was about to be dropped into a bloodbath. If anything happened to Elias...

Nope, don’t go there. Rein in the crazy.

Closing my eyes, I zoned out all the noise. Everything good in my life was in that car. I would not survive without him. I couldn’t. It wasn’t possible. My heart beat in his chest.

Snapping my eyes open, I took a breath and pressed the trigger over and over and over. Until there was nothing left. And then I was on my feet, running as hard and as fast as I could—just like Mom always said to do—toward the only person who mattered.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

elias

RETURNING TO SAMARA'S HOSPITAL ROOM TO FIND HER GONE had been scary. Getting alert after alert on the cameras for Abi, only to have Anya recognize someone on the feed as an "old friend from back in the day," bone-chilling.

But pulling up to the Vitucci compound to bullets flying and knowing Samara was somewhere in there was one of the most terrifying moments of my life. It was right up there with finding her car crashed on the side of the road the day before.

"How many men does Daria have?" Anya demanded, putting the barrel of the gun to the middle of Polina's skull. "How fucking many?"

Ryan and I had found the woman in a powered wheelchair near Abi's dorm. It had been too easy, though, like she'd wanted to be caught. Nothing about the beating Anya had given her on the flight to New York had been easy, however. Anya didn't hold back just because Polina had no mobility in her legs.

But other than telling us that Daria was after Samara, she hadn't given up any other information.

"She asked you a question!" Ryan roared.

Like every other time she'd looked at him, Polina's eyes misted over. She gave him a bloody smile. Her front teeth were broken off, and I was fairly sure her right eye socket was fractured. "You look just like my Vaughn."

"Vaughn?" I grated out.

Anya's gaze snapped to mine. "Professor Vaughn."

I nodded and rechecked the clip in my gun as the driver floored the gas. The gate to the compound was already open, dead bodies littering the ground.

"Those aren't our men," Ryan announced. "Or Adrian's."

Anya did a quick appraisal outside around the car. "Ryan, out the side. Go north. Find your sister and then your father. In that order. Knowing Samara, she already locked him in one of the panic rooms if she was able to get free. Elias, cover me." She grabbed Polina by her short gray hair. "Time for a little reunion with our dear Daria."

Kicking open the door, Anya shoved the other woman's head out first. "Human shields are more effective if the enemy is emotionally attached to the shield. How invested do you think Daria is in you, Polina?"

Her reply was something explicit in Russian, but I got the gist of it. Anya's manic laugh reminded me of Samara, which had my lips twitching even as my heart felt like lead in my chest while I looked for any signs of my baby girl through the windows.

"Call out to her," Anya commanded, twisting her fingers in Polina's hair, pulling chunks free. "Let Daria know I'm here for the chat she seems so excited to have with me."

"Daria," she said weakly.

Anya pulled a knife, stabbing it into Polina's shoulder, causing her to scream in pain. "Louder!"

"Daria!" she screamed.

Some of the gunfire paused.

"Again," Anya snarled, twisting the blade. "Beg her to help you."

"Daria! Please. I need you."

Kicking Polina's legs out of the car, Anya stayed crouched as she followed. "Daria darling," she singsonged. "Polina is in distress again. Won't you come rescue her?"

Once she was out, I had my gun up as I checked for any immediate threats.

“Elias,” Anya hissed without looking back at me. “No matter what happens, you get my daughter the fuck out of here. Alive.”

“Anya,” I growled back, putting two bullets in a guy dressed in military fatigues. “That was my only goal to begin with.”

She huffed a laugh. “I knew there was a reason I liked you.”

“So sweet,” Polina sneered. “And pathetic.”

Jerking her head back so hard Polina’s neck popped, Anya pressed her nose to her cheek. “Don’t be jealous, Polina. Just because you’ll never know the joys of having your own child doesn’t mean you should shit all over my happiness.”

Polina snorted. “I may not have birthed Vaughn, but I raised him. He was mine. Daria gave him to me.” She turned her head, a twisted smirk on her bloody and bruised face. “Like you took my legs from me, we took your son from you.”

“I must have broken something important in your brain. You aren’t making sense.” Pressing the gun barrel to the back of Polina’s head, Anya sighed. “Oh well, you’ll be dead soon, so it won’t matter for much longer.”

“Anya, pet.” I turned, my gun already aimed in the direction of the heavily accented female voice. A woman with short, short hair that was a mixture of gray and black walked out of a group of trees. She was at least six feet tall, with the combat boots she wore giving her a few extra inches.

She had Ryan in a headlock with a semiautomatic pressed to his temple. “Look at us. One big, happy family reunion. I was telling Polina just the other week that we should have a little get-together with everyone we graduated from the academy with. You know, the ones still alive and all.”

“And look at us now,” Anya gushed.

I couldn't tell by her voice how pissed she was, but Ryan was her world. If anything happened to him, no one would walk away from this. Not Daria or Polina. Not even Samara. The Vitucci compound would be nothing but a crater when she was done.

But she didn't give away so much as a hint of emotion. "The three of us are having a lovely little party. You've gone all out, decorating my lawn and blowing shit up. Aw, you shouldn't have, Daria."

"Daria, let Vaughn go," Polina cried. "Please. He's a good boy."

"Darling, this isn't Vaughn. It's Anya's boy wonder. Ryan." She tightened her hold around his neck. "And we talked about this. Vaughn made his choice. He picked his little college tart and that half-baked sister of his."

"He didn't mean it!" Polina screamed, spit and blood flying from her mouth. "The girl just confused him. Once we take care of her, he will fall in line again. Everything...will be...fine. After I kill her. Just wait. You'll see. I'll kill her, and he will be ours again."

I shifted my gun to Polina's head. "Touch Samara, and you will pray for the angel of death."

"Sam...?" Confusion flickered over Polina's face. "No, not her. That's the sister," she said, seemingly to herself. "The other one. The redhead."

"Now look at what you've done," Daria complained. "You went and broke Polina. Again."

"I didn't break her the first time," Anya argued. "But you didn't tell her that, did you? That you were working for the other team in Bolivia, and it was you who shot her?"

"Liar!" Polina shouted. "It was you!"

Anya rolled her eyes. "How have you survived this long when you are so stupid, Polina? I was running in front of you. In front. So how could I have possibly shot you in the back?"

As realization started to flicker in Polina's eyes, Daria eased her hold on Ryan a little. "She's lying to you, Polina. Don't listen to her!"

"Oh my God," Polina whispered. "Oh my..." She switched to Russian, and I couldn't understand anything she said. Daria screamed something back in the same language, but all I could do was shift my gaze back and forth between the two women, while still trying to watch for other threats.

Anya stumbled beside me, but I didn't understand why. Their screaming at each other in a language I knew almost zero vocabulary for was distracting as fuck. I didn't see Daria shift her gun until it was almost too late. But when her hand moved, I shoved Anya to the ground.

Not one, but three gunshots echoed around me. A burning sensation exploded in my shoulder, but I was too worried about Anya. "Are you okay?" I demanded as I rolled her over, checking her for damage. "Anya, are you hurt?"

"Shit!" she groaned. "You could have just pushed me. I'm old, Elias. Are you trying to break my hip?"

Scoffing, I climbed off her and offered my hand. She took it, but her eyes were on my shoulder. "Well, she's going to throw a tantrum over that."

Ignoring her, I glanced around, taking stock of everyone else. Daria was dead on the ground where I'd last seen her. A bullet right between her eyes. Another through her chest, as blood bloomed across her shirt and dripped onto the ground.

Polina was on her stomach where she'd ended up after I'd pushed Anya out of the way, still screaming in Russian. Ryan, now free, had picked up Daria's gun and had it aimed at Polina as many of the Vitucci soldiers came forward.

"I got the headshot!" Samara cheered as she walked around the side of the mansion with a rifle in one hand and an AR in the other.

"No, I got the headshot. You missed and got her in the chest."

Unable to process what I was seeing, I shifted my gaze back to Ryan. If he was there, then who the fuck was that with Samara?

“Bullshit. I’m counting the headshot as mine,” Samara argued, shoving the Ryan look-alike in the shoulder. “She was dead before she hit the ground. That’s my kill!”

“You’re keeping count now?” he teased.

“I always keep count.”

“Sammy!” I called in relief, and her head jerked in my direction.

A smile started to tease at her lips, but just as quickly, it disappeared. I didn’t like that. She should always smile when she saw me. “Baby girl, you’re in so much trouble.”

“Elias.” My name came out on a sob. “No. *No!*”

I took a step forward, wanting nothing more than to hold her, but the world shifted. Everything went dark around the edges, and suddenly, the ground was rushing up to meet me.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

elias

SAMARA'S SCREAMS PULLED ME OUT OF THE DARKNESS.
"Please be okay. Elias, please!"

"Samara, he's fine!" Anya yelled as she tapped me on the cheek. I blinked up at her, and she gave me a tight smile. "Welcome back."

"Where is she?" I muttered, trying to sit up.

White-hot pain exploded through my shoulder, and she pushed me back. It took me a moment to realize I was on the ground, my shoulder was throbbing because I'd been shot, and Samara was still screaming.

"Whatever you want, you can have. Just don't let him die!"

"Baby girl!" I called out.

Samara gasped and then there was a commotion, but Anya pushed me back down before I could see what was going on. Moments later, Samara was on her knees beside me. Tears streamed down her face, but her eyes were full of relief. "Oh God, I was so scared. I nearly lost you!"

"Never," I vowed. "I won't ever leave you."

Anya did something to my arm that made me curse. "Sorry." She didn't look particularly apologetic as she did it again. "It goes without saying that I'm thankful you pushed me out of the way. But you should not have risked yourself to save me. That was reckless and unnecessary."

"You're welcome," I laughed.

She smirked down at me. “Your shoulder is definitely the choice I would have made over the bullet piercing my brain. It’s still lodged in there, though. It missed anything vital, but you need to go to the hospital to have the bullet removed.”

“Just a typical day at the in-laws’.”

“This is not funny!” Samara grumbled.

“It’s a little bit funny,” I soothed. “Let’s spend Christmas in Creswell Springs, though. Your parents’ place is kind of a dump.”

She glanced around, taking in the chaos around us, and a smile ghosted over her lips. “I’m not cleaning this up.”

Sniffing, she wiped her hands over her damp cheek, smearing dirt and some of my blood over her skin. Reaching up with my left hand, I traced my thumb over the blood. “I love you.”

Blue gems dropped to mine, and she inhaled sharply. Discreetly, Anya moved away. I vaguely heard her giving commands to some of the Vitucci soldiers.

“I love you, Samara,” I repeated. “I’ve needed to say those words for so long that it physically hurt to hold them back. Maybe you’re not ready to hear them yet, but I couldn’t go another minute without telling you. You own my heart, baby girl. It beats only for you. My soul was yours the moment I saw you in that club.”

Fresh tears spilled down her face. “I love you too. So much. I can’t live without you, Elias. I won’t. Do you understand me? If you ever try to leave me, you won’t get far.”

“Ah, princess.” I cupped the back of her head, pulling her down to meet my lips. “You won’t ever have to. No matter what happens, I’ll be waiting for you. Do you understand me?”

“I stalk you.”

I snorted. “I thought we already covered this. I stalk you too.”

Panic lit her eyes. “I don’t want kids.”

“Baby girl, your tantrums are enough for me to handle.” I brushed my nose over hers. “Kids haven’t ever been on my priority list, Sammy.”

“But Jos wants grandkids,” she whispered.

“Reid can give them to her. It’s not my job to make anyone happy except you.”

“I love you.”

Crunching gravel had our heads turning. I blinked, then blinked again. “Do I have a concussion? Because I see two of Ryan.”

“About that...” She sighed.

“Give me the code to unlock the panic room,” the Ryan on the left commanded. When he stepped closer, I saw him more clearly and realized he wasn’t Ryan at all.

“Elias, this is my brother Vaughn. Vaughn, Elias.”

I instantly recognized the name. “Wait. Professor Vaughn, that Vaughn?” Samara shrugged. “As in Abi’s Professor Vaughn?”

“Yes,” the Ryan look-alike confirmed, pointing at Samara. “And she is the only one who has the code to get Abi out of the panic room. Give it to me. Now.”

“Okay. Fine.” She rolled away from me, and I thought for a minute she was going to get up and whisper the code to him.

Instead, she grabbed a gun off the ground and fired two into Vaughn’s thigh. I jerked and grabbed her. Tucking her against me, I rolled, using my body for cover as all around us guns were drawn and aimed in our direction. On the ground, at Ryan’s feet, Vaughn shouted in pain and rolled too, holding on to his right thigh.

“What the fuck just happened?” Anya yelled.

Samara started laughing. Groaning, because my shoulder had its own pulse but my little psychopath was happy, I tucked her closer against me.

“Why did you shoot your brother?” Anya demanded, sounding fed up.

“He shot me first!”

epilogue

SAMARA

FIVE YEARS LATER...

I TOOK A LONG PULL FROM MY BEER BEFORE SETTING THE bottle on the corner of the table and bending. My shot already lined up, I had the order I was going to sink the balls planned out.

The college boys watching and snickering on the other side of the table made me smile. Sometimes it was too easy to take their money. I should have felt bad, but I didn't. Not when my father-in-law was sitting in his favorite seat, watching. Waiting to empty the frat boys' pockets when I schooled their douchebag friend.

The first two balls went exactly where I had expected, but when I bent for the third shot, my crazy got triggered.

I heard a giggle.

She was standing with her friends at the next table. Pool stick in hand. Pretending like she didn't know which end she was supposed to use to hit the white ball. Maybe she didn't know. But that wasn't what bothered me.

It was the way she was eyeballing my daddy as he sat drinking his beer, laughing with his brother and his cousin. His eyes were on them. Not her. So she giggled again.

None of the three men even glanced her way. But she wasn't giving up. I could see the determination glittering in her eyes. Her friends nudged her, psyching her up.

Unknowingly signing her death warrant.

She was pretty. Brown hair, eyes just a few shades lighter. Great body. I could understand why she was so confident. But there had been many before her just as sure of themselves.

Wanting a hookup. Sometimes I saw the glimmer in their eyes and knew they foresaw something more. Something lasting.

The ones who were only after a hookup got it easier than the other ones.

Like Berkeley.

I hummed to myself and sank the third shot. Memories of Berkeley's screams continued to send delicious shivers down my spine. Her family still didn't know where she was.

And they never would.

Watching the pretty brunette, I could tell she would be a screamer too.

Her friends urged her on, and she took a step, her heels conveniently twisting just enough that she started to trip forward...

Elias's hands snaked around my waist, making me squeal with surprised delight as he lifted me off my feet. "Sorry, old man," he called to Tanner as he tossed me over his shoulder. "I gotta take this one home before she throws a tantrum."

"Was getting bored with these pussies anyway," Tanner told him. "Night, Sammy."

"Night!" I waved. Catching the cold glare of the brunette and her friend, I sent them all a finger wave, making sure they caught sight of my engagement and wedding rings before I flipped them off.

Elias's hand swatted across my ass, and I squealed again. "Be good, baby girl."

"Ah, Daddy, you're no fun," I whined as he carried me out of the bar.

His truck was parked at the back of the parking lot. Only a few people were coming and going. By the time we got to the truck, I was already soaked and squirming.

With another sharp slap across my ass, he unlocked the back door and opened it. I landed with a breathless huff, my hands going straight to his belt as his mouth attacked mine.

“Ten more seconds and I would have had to bury a body,” he grumbled, unzipping my jeans.

I pouted. “I never make you bury the bodies, Daddy.”

Muttering a curse, he lifted me up enough so he could push my jeans and panties down. “I love you, my beautiful little psychopath,” he husked as he slammed into me.

“I love you too, Daddy,” I cried loud enough for the brunette to hear as she and her friends made their way to their car. My release hit me, and I screamed for more as they drove off.

Luckily for them, I didn’t see which direction they turned.

Curious about Vaughn and Abi?

Their book is coming soon!