



the big bad's
DARLING

ERIN HAVOC

BIG BAD'S DARLING

CURVES AND RUINS

BOOK SIX

ERIN HAVOC


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All characters are adults.

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NIA

A job is a job, no matter how much you love what you do. I love jewelry, and I find the glittering stones the most gorgeous thing in the world. The idea that they were once rough rocks, hewn and worked and dilapidated until they became this beautiful makes me smile. I adore the idea that through suffering, one can find beauty.

And then I chose to work in a jewelry store, and if there's anything worse than customers, it's rich customers.

"Mm, I don't know," mutters the man across the counter. He's been going back and forth over engagement rings, and at first, I thought he was too dazzled with the beauty and the diverse options. I was wrong. "A thousand bucks on a ring? That's too expensive. It's just a rock, and a tiny rock at that."

The muscles of my left eye twitch. It takes every ounce of effort to keep the smile on my face. "These are not any rocks, sir. They're diamonds, and a smith has worked them so they could look like this. It's meticulous work, and it takes long hours. Besides, your fiance is going to wear this ring for the rest of her life. If you take the price and divide it by the years you're spending together..."

He twists his lips into a scowl. "But it's a tiny rock."

He's the one who said his budget was under two thousand. I'm not sure why he said that if he'd complain about a ring half the price. The seller in me is well-trained, though—even though I'm twenty-one, I've been working at this shop for the past four years. Mrs. Cameron, my boss, has taught me well.

“Let’s check the bigger ones, then.” And I walk the customer to the other side of the counter, where the more expensive rings are.

We adjusted the lights so they hit the rings here just right. I pick up a case from within the display and place it over the glass counter, adjusting it so the rocks glimmer pink and blue under the artificial lights. Glancing at the client, I study his expression.

Still scowling. That’s not a good sign.

“These rocks are bigger, but they’re not the most expensive we have in store. More like a mid-budget.” And I pluck one out of the case to show him. “It’s a square cut, very classic, but there are also smaller diamonds in the band, see? This way, it will shine when it catches the light. Does your girlfriend enjoy some bling? I’m sure she’d love this one.”

“I guess?” He releases a sigh, then glances at his watch. I’m losing him. I should reel his attention back in.

“Why don’t you tell me what she likes? Maybe I can find something that fits her style.”

He shoves a hand through his dull blond hair, glancing out the windows. The guy can’t wait to leave. “I’m not sure I want to spend that much money on a ring, though. Two thousand is too much money.”

I clench my teeth together, glancing down at the ring in my hand. This one is thirteen thousand. I didn’t even mention it because I thought he’d see one of the pretty ones and feel that his girlfriend deserved it.

“But she’s your future wife,” I insist with a smile. “Doesn’t she deserve something she’s going to love and cherish for the rest of her life?” And I slip the ring onto my finger, moving my hand to show him the way it glints. “Look. Can’t you imagine her wearing it? It’s a symbol of your love. A symbol that you two belong together.”

A breeze wafts into the store when the door opens and closes. Steps bring a new client in, but I’m focused on the guy in front of me, pleading that he’ll see reason. I’m pitying his

girlfriend now. He thinks she doesn't deserve a nice ring for their engagement. What else does he think she doesn't deserve?

"Where are your watches?" a thick voice asks. It sends a shiver down my spine. I shake my head. Weird. It must be the air conditioning.

"Just one moment and I'll be with you, sir," I shoot back, moving my hand again under the light. "What do you think? Wouldn't she love it?" I try again with my current customer.

He glances at my hand, his mouth pinched. "Mm, I don't know... It's a lot of money. And I don't even know if it would come back to me if we divorce."

Oh, wow, he's already thinking about divorce. It's amazing, isn't it? How relationships aren't meant to last? People always have their ambitions, their interests, and love isn't always at the top of the list. Only fools let themselves fall blindly for someone when they could be stabbed in the back right around the corner.

Been there, done that. My parents didn't care much, either, about each other or about me. They abandoned the family while I was still a child. First, it was an emotional abandonment, where the only thing I heard was criticism and screams. Then, it was physical abandonment. They wouldn't come home for days—first one parent, then the other.

When I met Donald, my high school sweetheart, I thought he would be the one to save me from that pain. It didn't matter that he wasn't a generous listener—I had little to say, anyway. Donald wasn't always around, but he let me move in with him when his parents gave him an apartment. His aunt even gave me a job—this one, and it still keeps me fed.

I didn't expect him to abandon me, too. And at the one moment I needed him the most.

The customer still glances and tuts, holding his chin. He's at least thinking. That gives me hope of a sale. Not now, but maybe he'll come back later. A shadow grows to my left, and

both the customer and I turn to it. My eyes almost pop out of their sockets.

The man standing there throws all other thoughts out of the window. My mind goes blank. He's so tall I have to tilt my head back. Broad shoulders and a large chest encased in a black, silky suit that fits him so well it must be tailor-made. Sun-kissed skin with a healthy, golden glow looks like it shines from within. His angled features are so sharp I could cut myself in them—from his jaw to his nose, his cheekbones, and his gaze.

His blue gaze pins me to the spot. To say his eyes are blue is offensive. They're bright and deep, glittering like jewels as if they were iridescent and giving off a light of their own.

Damn diamonds. His eyes are the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

"Oh, shit," the client across from me mouths. It's the sound of his voice that breaks the spell. He's gaping at the newly arrived, too, but there's something like fear on his face.

Handsome Stranger shoves a hand through his silky black hair—just long enough for his fingers to slide past. He looks away, then back at me. Those sharp eyes of his make me shiver all over again.

"Watches," he says in that roar of a voice. "Where do you keep them?"

I blink twice, then glance at the other customer, still gaping. "Mm," I say, clearing my throat, hoping I'll sound more grounded than I feel. "I'll be with you in a moment," I say. But haven't I said this before? Yes, I think so. I think I've already asked him to wait.

His Adam's apple bobs, jaw clenched tight. "The watches," he repeats, arching a dark eyebrow.

First, I let myself gawk at how handsome he is for another second. The man must be some twenty years older than me, and I don't care one bit. He's glorious. Second, after the shock of his arrival has faded, I notice exactly what's happening.

He's giving me orders. He's trying to skip the line.

My brows shoot up to my hairline. Oh, no. That's not happening in this store. "If you wait a moment, sir, I will be with you shortly," I repeat, sharpening my voice and pulling my shoulders back. There's not much I can do to look bigger. Yeah, I'm a big girl, but not in what matters now. I have round hips and thick thighs, but my five-foot-four frame is nothing compared to this man.

Even so, I tilt my chin up in defiance. He's not shaming me because he has more money. After all the humiliation I've lived through, the one thing I can cling to is my dignity. After my parents left and Donald abandoned me, all I had left was this job, my dignity, and my son.

And I'm not going to back down because of some rich bully who is so desperate to see watches he can't wait two minutes.

Handsome Stranger takes a step closer. Even with the counter between us, he towers above me. The other client shrinks away, diminishing. I keep my ground, staring back at his ocean-blue eyes.

"Miss," he hisses, "my time is expensive."

"Then you should have called earlier to schedule, sir," I reply without missing a beat. "We offer that option. Now that you're here, please, wait in line."

His brows crease as he narrows his eyes. Though he leans forward, it doesn't feel like a threat. His gaze studies me as if I'm an interesting specimen. As if I'm the first person in a long time to tell him no. "You don't know who I am, do you?"

My eye twitches with how hard I avoid rolling them. Oh, wow, the old *you don't know who I am*. "No, sir. I apologize for my lack of knowledge about celebrities." Or whatever he is. I don't care. "But we pride ourselves in attending all equally." That's not exactly true, but I don't want to let it go just yet.

"I do," the client squeaks next to me.

The two of us snap our gazes toward him. His pale face has gone paler, and he's almost trembling, shoulders taut,

hands curled in fists. What's wrong with him? His eyes are wide as saucepans as he stares at Handsome Stranger. Should I be worried? Is he someone dangerous?

Narrowing my eyes, I glance at him again. Is he trying to rob us? I slide a hand beneath the counter and take a step closer to the alarm. We're a jewelry store. Of course we should be prepared for such occasions.

He turns to me again. "I'm not trying to rob you, Jesus," he hisses. "I just want to look at the damn watches!"

"You can take my spot, sir," says the previous client, now openly shaking. "I didn't want the ring this badly." And he dashes out of the store, stumbling once he passes a man stationed outside, dressed in all black.

Sucker. I can't believe he wasted my time like that. If we had ended the conversation on a high note, maybe he'd be back later, but no. This guy had to scare him off. I glare at Handsome Stranger even when the musky scent of his cologne makes my mouth water.

"Well, thanks for that," I tell him, saltier than I should ever talk to a client. "Now that I'm free, what can I help you with?"

The man's shoulders drop. He releases a sigh, pinching that spot between his brows. For a moment, I fear he's going to leave, too, but he shakes his head and meets my gaze. A new softness enters his face, something I didn't quite expect. His lips tilt up in the corners, but it's only an inch.

"Watches. My brother collects watches, and his birthday is coming up. I'm looking for a watch to gift him."

"Very well," I reply, keeping my shoulders pulled back and my brows arched. "This way, please."

I take him to the display where we keep the watches and pull out the case with the most expensive ones. He looks like someone who can afford them. He also pissed me off with how arrogant he acted.

I show him the best watches, let him handle them, and through every part of it, I keep that air about me. The slight impatience. I half-expect him to leave without buying

anything, and then I'll be free to curse him and tell him to fuck off.

But he doesn't. He chooses the most expensive watch in the store, then pulls out his wallet to pay for it. I type the amount in the card machine, then turn it to him.

"Who are you, anyway?" I ask once my curiosity wins. Since it's a high charge, I won't manipulate the card, so I can't read his name. "Some A-list celebrity?"

He makes a deep sound in his throat, like an amused chuckle. "I thought you didn't care about that."

"I don't. But I'm curious. You literally made a man run out of the store."

He clicks on the machine and inserts his card. Blue eyes meet mine, something shining in them. "Guess."

I don't like to guess. I don't like surprises. Every surprise I've ever had was a bad one. I shake my head. "No need. I don't mean to bother."

"Come on," he says, leaning forward over the counter. Close enough for his musky fragrance to waft to my nose. I breathe it in, gazing into his face. My heartbeat picks up, and I can't stop staring at him. His gaze softens, studying my face, fastening on my lips. "Try it," he insists.

"An MMA fighter?" It would explain why the guy rushed off.

He chuckles, his warm breath touching my tongue. "No."

"Actor?"

"No."

I grunt. "That's useless. There are a million things you could be."

His gaze is still pinned to my lips. Is something wrong? Is my lipstick smudged? Sticking my tongue out, I lick at the corner of my mouth. His gaze follows, and he makes a strange, deep noise again. His jaw clenches, a muscle fluttering there.

Then the card machine beeps. Handsome Stranger pulls back, slowly, as if he's fighting himself. Something sharp touches the side of my hand and I look down to find a card tucked near it. His fingers brush close to mine, but he doesn't touch me.

My skin buzzes. I want him to touch me. A need burns inside me, something I've never felt. What's happening? This is the first time I've ever reacted to someone like this, and I'm not sure I like it.

"What's your name?" he asks, his voice almost a murmur.

"Nia Bloom," I blurt, my body quivering with the electricity coming off of his.

"Nia Bloom," he repeats, and my name never sounded so good. "I'll be back." He taps the card next to my hand. "If you don't want me to, let me know. You won't ever see me again if you don't want to." His words caress my lips before he pulls back, grabbing the watch case.

I'm supposed to ask him if he'd like me to wrap it. Put it in a box, or a bag. But my lips part and words fail me, my brain whirling around his words, his smell, and his eyes. He turns away from me, strides to the door, and walks out of the door. With one last look over his shoulder, he disappears down the sidewalk with the man in all black.

My heart hammers in my chest for a solid minute. His presence was like a hurricane, and I'm still shaking from the aftershocks. Reaching for the card machine, I rip the receipt out and stumble to the drawer to put it away. It's only then that my eyes land on the tip he left me.

My stomach lurches. Oh, no. Was that a mistake? He left me more than my wage's worth on a single tip! It has to be a mistake. My ears pop. What's going on? Should I run after him?

Why do I feel like this was his intention? That it was no accident?

Reaching for the business card he left behind, I flip it, searching for his name. *Lucien Giordano*, it says, followed by

a phone number. Nothing else. No job, no business, no company. I dig into my back pocket for my phone to look him up. He has to be some sort of celebrity, and, if he is, why did it look like he was interested in me?

Google loads, then brings me the results I least expected. There are no paparazzi shots, no interviews, no IMDB listing. Lucien Giordano doesn't exist. Some members of the Giordano family are involved in money laundering and gun trafficking. Almost like the mafia. But there's no way he's part of it.

He lives rent-free in my head for the rest of the day. After picking Simon up from daycare and having dinner, I lie down and replay the morning in my head. And the more I think of it, the more certain I am.

There's no way a man like Lucien would want a girl like me. This has to be some sort of mistake. Either I misunderstood him, or he misunderstood me. It doesn't matter. I'm not letting myself trust again. Not when I've been burned before. Not when my son depends entirely on me.

LUCIEN

Forty-three years. Forty-three years I've lived on this god-forsaken earth, dealing with the worst kind of people, suffering through games of power and egomaniacal pricks, and I had no idea something like this feeling existed.

I didn't pay attention at first. My brother's birthday was two days away—and though he's also the boss of our *famiglia*, he's the one blood relation I still have left. He's been my confidant ever since we could talk. I hear him, I pay attention to the surroundings, and I move the pieces. There's a reason I've always been the quiet one. Stefan was born to be the face of the *famiglia*, with his authority and his fierce manners. I'm his *consigliere*, his advisor. His right-hand man.

I've seen shit. Blood and pain and death. But I've seen nothing like *her*.

She shook me back to reality, her big brown eyes pinning me to the spot. The sight of her took my breath away. My body locked in a flight or fight reaction for a moment as I tried to see through the haze taking over my mind.

The girl glaring back at me was mind-blowingly gorgeous. Not in that pampered, fake way that's so common nowadays. No, her brown hair was silk as it fell around her shoulders in soft waves, and the only makeup she wore was to further enhance her best features. Nude lipstick made her plump lips juicy and glossy, and the mascara made her eyes look even bigger.

She had a killing body, too. Full curves, round hips, and tits large enough to wrap my hands around. She was flawless in that innocent but fierce expression. My mind went straight to the gutter, and it's been living there for the past few days.

Nia Bloom. The first woman to ever leave me speechless.

I sit inside my car, the tinted windows blotting out the world. With the partition with my driver rolled up, I'm left in absolute peace. The silence allows me to focus on the task at hand—watching her like a fucking perv.

Because Nia Bloom did something to me. She bewitched me with that fierce glance. I'm a man obsessed with a girl twenty years younger, someone too pure for me to bring into the world in which I live. And yet...

And yet I can't stop thinking of her.

She bustles around the store, putting cases away, and locking displays. I've been here for half an hour, and she's been attending to clients by herself. In a jewelry store? That's dangerous as fuck. I noticed the alarm button, but the minutes it would take for the cops to get here could mean her death. So, I pick up my phone and send a message to one of my soldiers. From today on, there's always going to be someone watching her.

And if it's not me, it better be someone I trust.

My brother's name pops up on the screen. I pick the call up without missing a beat. "Hey."

"Honestly, Lucien, don't tell me you're back at the jewelry store?" he asks in a mock insulted voice, but I hear the humor beneath it. He's probably alone in his office, preparing for the meeting. My brother only puts his walls down when we're by ourselves.

I shoot another glance at the partition between the driver and me to make sure I'm by myself. "Don't judge a desperate man."

"Oh, I do judge. You could have any woman you want. Anyone, Lucien. And you're stalking a twenty-one-year-old outside a jewelry store."

“I know you have a GPS for every driver, but did you have to check mine?”

“I’m worried, Lucienello. You have a crush on a girl who isn’t in our world, and she’s twenty years younger.”

“It’s not a crush, and don’t call me that.” Lucien is a good enough name, he doesn’t need to use a diminutive.

But my brother never cared for that. He chuckles. “Well, you better not fall in love this fast. You know what love brings when you’re in the *famiglia*. The only love that matters is in the blood.”

This was never a problem. My *famiglia* has always been the one thing that mattered. Until I met her.

Releasing a sigh, I search for her in the store again. “I won’t take long,” I tell him. “Promise I’ll be in the meeting.”

“I know you will.” And he hangs up.

What am I doing? Stalking a girl who never even gave me the time of her day? She was mad at me, and she glared at me as if she could set fire to my skin. And fuck, she did just that. She started a fire inside me I can’t put out.

Glancing out the window again, I find her with her back to me, cleaning the displays. The sight of her round backside sends me into a frenzy all over again. My blood boils in my veins, shooting south to tighten my pants. I can’t take my eyes off her. Off her fine ass, the way she moves with her scrubbing, her dark hair falling down her back.

And fuck, how I wish I could walk in, shove her skirt over her hips, and fuck her from behind. I’d stuff her full, bend her over the counter, and feel that tight pussy clamping around my cock. Reaching out, I grip at my length, squeezing the hardness over my pants. It’s painful now, and every time I think of her, it gets me going again.

I can’t leave without talking to her, but I can’t walk into the store with wood like this. So, I unzip my pants, shove my boxers out of the way, and fist my member. With my eyes on her backside, I imagine her on all fours. I imagine her hair roped around my knuckles as I pound into her heat. Lust

flushes through my veins. My fist flies up and down as I keep my gaze fixed on her.

She turns, fanning herself after cleaning up. With two fingers, she pulls her shirt away from her body and blows into her cleavage. I imagine sweat glistening over her tits, a drop running down between the swells before I catch it with my tongue. I imagine myself tracing a path down her stomach to her cunt, and I slam my eyes shut as I let the daydream take over.

It's my imagination, so I picture myself tonguing her little clit and fucking her at the same time. It doesn't need to make sense. The one thing that matters is the pleasure barreling down my spine, and I imagine her coming apart in my mouth and around me, and when I blow, I imagine it's inside her.

Fuck, I want to fill her up. To put a kid inside her, then another. I've never had these thoughts before, never thought I'd want someone this bad... But here we are.

Catching my breath, I stare at the proof of my pleasure in my fingers. This isn't the first time it happens, so I reach for the Kleenex in the compartment under the seat, with the extra guns. The past few days have been a whirlwind of thinking about her, seeing her, and beating my cock raw while I stare at her. Either the pictures on my phone, or the real deal, working at the jewelry store.

Merda. My brother is right. I'm knee-deep in trouble.

But I can't walk away. After cleaning up, I take deep breaths and get out of the car. I need to see her before I leave, and *need* is the right word. There's no other way I can function as a normal human being before that happens.

Nia Bloom has become my personal drug, and I have no wish to work myself out of this addiction. The more I see her, the more I desire her. Even if I can't ever have her.

NIA

Who doesn't take wire transfers in the modern world? I can't believe the daycare doesn't take it. They have a very strict payment option, and since I got held up and couldn't pay them on the due date, I'm screwed. There's not even a second chance.

I wasn't trying to swindle them or anything, and something tells me they would have been receptive to anyone else. From day one, I could tell they didn't like me for being a twenty-one-year-old single mother. They asked about Simon's dad several times, as if they couldn't believe he had abandoned us. As if a father abandoning their child was the most ludicrous, unheard thing that ever happened.

My heart squeezes in my chest. I hate it, too. Donald wasn't a knight in shining armor, and he didn't make butterflies set flight inside me, but he was comfortable, and he made me feel understood. We lived together. Sure, he never talked about marriage or kids, but I never thought he'd leave me with his baby inside my stomach like that.

Life is full of surprises, I guess. Not all of them are good.

My mind drifts to the events of yesterday afternoon as I go through the motions in the store, cleaning the displays before it's time to leave. I shoot a glance at the clock over the entrance. An hour to go. It feels like forever. And the strangest part is the pulsing anxiety inside me.

Lucien Giordano has been here every day for the past few days. He usually arrives at the store's opening, but he hasn't

shown up today. And I shouldn't be missing the sight of him—not when he's clearly someone out of my league, too handsome, too well-built, and obviously rich. But I miss seeing him, and I miss his eyes on me, and the way it looks like he sees through me.

It's a silly thing to hang on to those moments, but I can't help it. Lucien says little, but he's always watching, those blue eyes following me everywhere I go. His gaze sinks into my skin, and his words caress me every time he compliments me. My clothes, my hands, my hair. He's been subtle, as if he's not sure what he's doing, and I like it way more.

But Lucien doesn't know me, and if he knew I have my baby in the back, he would back off. Men don't like women with children that are not theirs. It might be nature, or because they don't want the responsibility (Donald didn't want it, and the baby was his). The one thing I know is that, whatever it is I'm having with Lucien, it would turn to dust if he learned about Simon.

After wiping off the counter, I put the cloth away and make sure everything is locked. There's still an hour to go, and I don't think Lucien's showing up today, and the second the clock hits five, I'm leaving.

Mrs. Cameron, my boss and Donald's aunt, has been nice enough to keep me around, but she doesn't like that I brought baby Simon with me. A part of me fears they think I tried to nail a shotgun wedding with Donald because everyone treats me weird for having a child. Mrs. Cameron curled her nose when I asked to bring Simon with me—since the daycare kicked me out—, and she let him stay, but made me promise it wouldn't happen again.

Thank God tomorrow's a Saturday. We don't open on weekends, and I'll have the day to figure out what to do with my son. I don't have money to pay for nannies, and daycares are hard to find.

Another glance at the clock. Fifty-five minutes to go. God, why doesn't time pass?

Simon's cries break the silence in the store. It pours adrenaline into my veins every time. Turning on my heels, I rush into the back of the store, where I left him napping in his stroller. The moment I put my eyes on him, the door to Mrs. Cameron's office shuts with a loud bang. She clearly doesn't enjoy crying children.

I pick my son up, bouncing him on my arm. "There, there," I chant, moving him from side to side. "Are you hungry?" I lie him down, popping the first button of my shirt open, but he moves away from my breast. "Not hungry? What is it, then? Are you bored?" And I pick up one of his toys.

He pauses his cries for less than a second. I bounce him, then walk him up and down the small staff room. His cries pierce my ears, making my heart stammer. What if a client walks in? I can't leave my baby alone and hope the client won't mind. Mrs. Cameron would be so pissed if a client walked off because of my baby crying. She'd definitely fire me.

And because nothing is too bad it can't get worse, the front door opens with a ding. A client. Of course.

I bounce Simon faster. "Please, please," I hush at him, kissing his head. "I'll be with you in a moment!" I cry out at the client, hoping they won't leave. The client will have a minute to waste, looking around the displays. I'm sure they won't mind. "Come on, baby. Come on."

Heavy steps announce someone's approach. My eyebrows shoot up, and the bad sort of adrenaline rushes into my veins now. Did the client pass the counter? Why are they here? Oh, God, are they going to rob us? My stomach plummets, and I whirl around to run back into the store, to face this person, to stop them... Somehow.

Lucien walks into the staff room. He stops, freezing a foot away from me. His blue eyes go round with surprise.

That's it. That's the reaction I expected. I have been attracted to him from the second our eyes met, but he's been giving me his time and showing up often to chat with me. He

looked like he was interested, no matter how weird that sounds.

Not anymore. I'm sure of it.

I wait for him to excuse himself, to leave, and never show up again, but he doesn't. Lucien stands there, gaping at me and the baby in my arms. His broad shoulders pull back, and his hands curl into fists. There's a fight inside him, and I have no idea why.

"I'm sorry," I blurt out, remembering my manners. "He wasn't supposed to be here, but the daycare..." Oh, wait, he's not interested in that. I clear my throat. "I'll be with you in a second."

He doesn't leave. He doesn't move. Lucien blinks slowly, those blue eyes burning into me. What does he want? Why isn't he leaving?

Lucien raises his arms, offering his hands. "May I?"

I gape at him as if he had grown a second head. "What?"

"May I try?"

He wants to hold Simon? Why? I open my mouth, and no sound comes. I'm too shocked to manage words. With a curt nod, I let him pick my son up. Lucien folds those meaty arms around the tiny form of my baby, and he sways him from side to side. He hums under his breath, his eyes softening when he looks at my son.

And it's like magic. Simon stops crying, either comforted or shocked by the newcomer. He's so tiny in Lucien's hold. Lucien keeps humming a song, and Simon reaches out to play with the collar of his suit.

My jaw drops. "You're good at this," I tell him. And I expect him to say he has younger brothers or children of his own, and my stomach squeezes in anticipation.

Lucien looks up, his eyes drilling into me. "Is he yours?" he asks in a deep voice.

I nod. "His name is Simon." And I offer my baby his toy once more. This time, he picks it up, bringing it to his mouth.

Lucien's gaze snaps to my hand. Searching for a ring? "Where's the father?" he asks.

My mouth goes desert-dry. I shake my head, staring at my son because I can't bear the disappointed glare Lucien will give me. "He left us."

"Dead, I hope?"

I snap my gaze back up. "Dead?"

"A man has to be dead to abandon their family."

His words are like a heavy blanket wrapped around me. My knees even buckle at the weight of them. "No. He's just not interested in raising his child."

Lucien's jaw clenches. Hard. A muscle flutters there, thrumming with his heartbeat. His eyes burn a brighter blue, as if there's a fire inside his skull. He's angry. At me? It wasn't my fault. I was on birth control, but it's not foolproof, and Donald hated wearing condoms. I was a fool, yes, but I can see I was also desperate. Desperate for love, for his affection, and I'd do anything to have someone by my side then.

I learned my lesson. No point trusting people like this again.

Lucien takes a step closer. His arm brushes against mine, and I have to tilt my head back to maintain eye contact. His nostrils flare, and his shoulders are so taut they're squared now.

"He abandoned you?" he asks in a whisper. "Pregnant with his child?"

His gaze is so intense that I can't form words, so I just nod. And then I get it. He's not mad at me. He's furious at Donald. Lucien's so furious his entire body trembles with rage, but he's careful not to squeeze or hurt Simon. He takes in deep, shaky breaths, leaning closer.

"What's his name?" he asks in that same whisper.

"Donald Cameron," I answer, arching an eyebrow. "Why?"

He doesn't answer me. He looks down at Simon. "You shouldn't have to raise him by yourself. You said something about the daycare?"

"They kicked me out because I was late with the payment..." I shake my head. "Why? Why are you asking these questions?"

He looks at me again. "You shouldn't have to raise him by yourself," he repeats. "No woman should."

"Oh." So, it's about family. It's about being pissed at abandoned children and negligent fathers. I see. Maybe someone abandoned him, too, and now he can't bear the sight of it. It's not about me, but about the injustice in society. "Okay."

Lucien touches my hair. I snap my gaze up at him. He grasps a strand between his two fingers, his gaze fixed on me. His features have softened, his jaw not so hard anymore. I lean into his touch, unable to escape his gravity. He curls his fingers around my cheek, and at that moment, there are only the three of us in the entire world.

I've never felt this connection with anyone else. Lucien holds me and my child as if the two of us belonged to him. As if we're the most precious people in the universe.

His thumb brushes against my cheek, his breath scattering across my lips. I tilt my chin up, keeping our gazes locked. My heart is a hummingbird in my chest, and Lucien's touch both grounds me and makes me soar.

"This man is a fucking fool," he says in that low voice, an edge of wrath to it. "He's a fucking idiot if he had you and abandoned you. A fucking idiot if he put a baby in you and let you go like this. No sane man would ever do that. No sane man would have you just to let you go." He shakes his head once, hard. "And I promise you, Nia. No one is ever going to hurt you again."

I stare at him, at the blue eyes, the sharp jaw, and the way his lips call for me. My knees tremble as I wait, as I hope for a kiss, but Lucien puts the baby back in my arms and steps back.

I'm still gaping at him when he walks out of the store. Confusion is a hurricane in my head, but his words settle inside me with two certainties.

One, that I'm not alone. Whatever this is between us, Lucien won't let me face the world alone.

Two, that he would kill Donald if I ever asked him. And I might be crazy, but that makes me swoon even harder.

LUCIEN

Moving my hand from side to side, I study the bruises and cuts on my knuckles. They're unfit for a *consigliere*, a man who gives advice instead of falling into the physical violence reserved for soldiers. Rubbing my thumb over the bruises, I peer out of the window.

Oh, how I hope the bruises were from killing that bastard. Donald Cameron. It was easy to figure out Nia's background, and it was even easier to find the fucker. He's twenty-one, like Nia, but he has not a drop of responsibility. His family has some money, and he takes advantage of that to waste his days playing video games online. From the arrogant tone he takes on his social media, it's obvious he has quite the opinion of himself, too.

A boy. Dropped out of college in favor of playing games, and though I don't judge hustlers, he's been doing that for the past two years with no amount of success. And while he's having fun, living in a small apartment with a visiting maid his mother pays for, Nia and their son go through hard times.

Because of his negligence, Nia's forced to work long hours, suffer humiliation, and fear for the life she can give her child. I close my hand in a tighter fist. Fuck, how I wish I could beat him to a pulp, leave him for dead, watch the light go out of his eyes as I savor the end of his existence...

On the one hand, he didn't even register the child. The baby is called Simon Bloom, like Nia, with no father on the birth certificate. On the other hand, I'm not quite sure how Nia would react to his untimely death. His aunt employs her—

would the woman kick her out? It would be hell for her to find another job being a single mother without me getting involved.

My phone rings and my brother's name appears on the screen. *Merda*. He's been onto me this week. I can't pretend anymore.

"Hey," I say after letting the phone ring for a while.

"Thought you wouldn't pick up."

"I considered it." But I wouldn't ignore him. I'm his *consigliere* for a reason, and I have to be within reach at every given moment. "What do you need?"

He takes a deep breath. "I need you to lay claim to this girl already, and get your head back in the game."

My spine stiffens. I tighten my fist. "You know it's not that simple."

"I know, but you've got to choose, Lucien. While you're sitting outside her workplace, longing for her, our enemies might be watching. People might notice. And if they do and she's not claimed, she'll be in danger. You know that. Either you let her go, or you bring her in."

She doesn't even know about the *famiglia*. She has no idea I'm in the mafia, or about the fucked up things I do for a living. We haven't had time to talk, to get to know each other. And I'm obsessed. I can't stop thinking of her, and it shows. She occupies my thoughts at all hours of the day and night. Her body, her voice, her beauty. She intoxicates me.

I want her. I want to fuck her, and I want to fill her up with another child, but I want more. Fuck, I want so much more. I want to raise her kid as my own, and I want to make her happy. A possessiveness I've never known grows inside me and festers like a disease, and there's nothing I can do about it.

Massaging my temple, I look out the car window at the shop again. She's attending to a client, a soft smile on her pretty lips. I check my watch. Ten minutes for her to leave. It feels like an eternity.

“I can’t let her go,” I admit to him. There’s no way I could do that. Ever. It brings me pain just to think of it.

“I know,” he replies. “I know because you’re sitting outside her workplace again, and I know you put someone on her ex, and you put someone out of her apartment to make sure she’s safe. You got it bad, Lucien. Just claim her already.”

A painful chuckle escapes me. “We’re fucking mafia, Stefan,” I hiss into the phone, glancing at my driver through the closed partition. “I’d be dooming her to living within the *famiglia*.”

“No, Lucien. You’d be making her yours, forever. Isn’t that what you want?”

Yes. More than anything.

The client leaves the jewelry store with a small package, and I glance at Nia, who is locking the doors. That’s it. She’s closing it. My heart skips a beat at the thought of seeing her. I haven’t been to the store today, because I want more. I need to see her closer, to touch her.

“She’s coming, isn’t she?” my brother asks. “I’ve lost you, so I know she’s coming.” He laughs. The fucker. He has no idea what this feels like. “Just claim her, Lucien. Stop wasting my time. You’ll be here in thirty, right?”

“I will.” And I hang up, drumming my fingers on my thigh as I wait for her to walk into the causeway. She picks her things up from the staff room and makes her way to the door, unlocking it and leaving. After a couple of alarms and the locking of the door, she turns to the street.

Her big hazel eyes find me inside the car, even when the glass is tinted. She gets it. She knows I’m here. I push the button to roll the windows down and meet her gaze.

“Would you like a ride?” I ask her as she shifts her weight between her feet.

She takes a beat to think about it, looking up and down the street. I take the moment to look at her. She’s fucking glorious in this pencil skirt, with a slit running up her knee. Creamy skin, thick thighs, and her chocolate hair dancing around her

shoulders as she steps down the pavement to walk in my direction. I'm guessing that's a yes.

Exiting the car, I move away and hold the door open for her. Nia sits and slides to the other side of the back seat. I follow her in, close the door, then push the button to speak to the driver.

"To Ms. Bloom's house," I tell him, no need to add anything else. He drives off a moment later.

Nia lets me fasten her seatbelt while her gaze is fixed on my face. "How does he know where I live?"

I brush my fingertips down her cheek, pushing her hair away. "I know many things."

She hums, turning to face me. An eyebrow of hers arches in that fierce look of hers. "Do you know why a daycare contacted me on Saturday morning?"

"To offer Simon a spot, I hope."

"Yes. But isn't it strange? They don't even work on Saturdays." She tilts her chin up in defiance.

I can't help smiling at that. This woman. She's driving me mad. "You want me to admit I'm the one who talked to them?"

She cocks her head, her hair spilling down her shoulder. "Yes. I don't know who you are. You showed up at the store that day, and every day since. You worry about me, and you leave fat tips you don't have to. Then you found a daycare nearby when I couldn't. Why? Why are you doing this?"

I don't remember the last time someone defied me like this, and I adore the sight of it. Nia is fierce, a fire permanently burning inside her. She doesn't trust me, and someone hurt her before. The way that Donald fucker wounded her made her doubt everything, and she still leans closer and looks at me like this.

She feels the attraction, even when she doesn't want to. We gravitate toward one another even when we're afraid to crash.

Burying my fingers in her hair, I press my body against hers. I inhale her sweet scent and massage her scalp, and I

gape into her hazel eyes, studying the places where brown and green mix with gold. She's beautiful, so beautiful it hurts, and she's here. With me.

"I can't get you out of my head," I whisper against her lips, tightening my grip on her hair. She whimpers softly, her hands reaching up to my chest and gripping at my suit. "I'm a fucking fiend, Nia. What did you do to me?"

She whimpers again, her eyelids fluttering closed. "Oh, God." And she clamps her thighs together. Fuck, I can't spend another second away from her.

I crash our lips together. Nia moans against the harshness of my kiss, and I hold her with both hands, keeping her against my body. I lick at the seam of her lips, and she gives me passage immediately. Her tongue comes out in shy motions, seeking mine. I devour her, exploring, tasting every inch of her mouth. She's fucking delicious, and if I was addicted before, I had no idea what was waiting for me now.

Nia grabs my hair, pulling on it as she kisses me back, gaining confidence little by little. Her hands explore my shoulders, and I sink my fingers into the soft flesh of her hips. I pull her harder against me, her chest heaving as I break the kiss. I let her take a breath, then kiss her again. Again. Again, until her lips are swollen, abused, her nude lipstick staining her cheeks.

This. I won't ever forget this moment, the way she tastes, the way she smells, and how her eyes burn when she looks at me. My heart thunders in my chest, and I want more. I want everything with this woman.

"Lucien," she whispers as I brush my thumb across her cheeks, cleaning the lipstick off.

My chest swells with a roar. "Fuck, I love the way you say my name." She's lust incarnate, and she has no idea.

Nia licks her lips as the car stops. In front of her house. Wow, I lost track of time. I had no idea we were here already.

She glances outside, then back at me as she unfastens her belt. "Lucien, I... Thank you for finding the daycare, but you

don't have to do this.”

“No, I don't. But I want to.”

“It's not your responsibility.” And she looks away. She looks away because she doesn't want to be hurt again. She doesn't want to trust me only to have that trust broken.

I fist her hair once more, this time cupping her jaw in my hand. “Nia. Listen to me. This motherfucker who hurt you. He won't ever hurt you again. I won't let him. If you want me, I'll kill this motherfucker with my bare hands. He'll disappear, and you'll never hear of him again. We'll find something else for you to do. I'll keep you safe. I'll protect you and Simon. I —” And the words die out on my lips. This feeling, what is it? Why does it fill me like this, why is it the only thing I can think of?

She looks back at me, her eyes round with confusion. Nia pulls back slightly, her hand covering mine. Then she notices my busted knuckles, and she turns my hand to look at them. Her face goes pale. “What's this?” she whispers, and this time, there's honest fear in her voice.

Does she think I've already beaten Donald up to a pulp? “Not Donald,” I tell her. “Though I wish. I will if you want me to. Just say the word.”

And she stares at me as if I were... As if I were a monster, out of the shadows to get her. She lets my hand drop, shaking her head in horror. *Merda*, I shouldn't have said that. I shouldn't have told her this. She doesn't need to know I punched a sandbag for hours on the weekend, imagining Donald's traitorous face.

It sinks in me. The fear on her face is proof. It's proof I shouldn't bring her into my world.

Nia pulls away. Her shoulders bunch as she reaches for the door. I don't move, afraid she'll wince. Fuck, I couldn't bear the sight of her wincing at me. She grabs the knob.

“I'd never hurt you, *cara mia*,” I declare, leaning back so she knows I'm not a threat. “Never. I would kill myself before that happened.”

Her chest heaves as she opens the door. “I... I don’t know, Lucien,” she murmurs, stepping out onto the street. “I don’t know what I should do.”

“It’s okay. Take your time. I won’t force you. I won’t hurt you. Never.”

She nods once, then leaves. I watch her walk away, my fist closing around my phone. She reaches her front door and slips inside, glancing once toward me. My heart shatters in my chest. I fucked this up. I fucked this up, and she won’t ever want to see me again.

My phone buzzes. To my surprise, I see her name there. She finally texted the number on the card. I open the message with bated breath.

Why are you doing this?

I press the button for the driver. “Drive,” I tell him, then go back to my phone as he sets off. Emotions are a hurricane inside me, and this is the first time I’ve had to deal with so many of them. The fear of losing her before I have her, the possessiveness, the wanting... And there’s more. There’s something I can’t quite name.

Because I want you more than I can explain, cara. You’ve taken over my thoughts. I can’t think of anything else.

But why?

And it dawns on me. My brows shoot up, and I chuckle. That’s a first, and something tells me it’ll be the last time I feel like this. It’s obvious now. So painfully obvious.

I type it, but I can’t send it. Not now. Not this soon.

Is there a reason people fall in love?

NIA

Every time I glance out of the windows, expecting to see Lucien's car parked near the curb, my stomach somersaults. Lucien's not even here yet, and I'm already suffering from anxiety.

What am I going to say? Should I do this? Should I invest in someone when my heart's still aching from my last breakup?

I'm attracted to Lucien like a moth to a flame, and though the adrenaline burns through my veins every time I see him, I'm afraid I'm the one who's going to break at the end of this. He says things that make my knees quiver—including calling me *cara mia*, the Italian for *darling*—, and no one has ever looked at me the way he does.

Lucien makes me feel wanted. Special. And I want to hang on to that feeling for as long as possible.

I brush my fingertips over my lower lips for the hundredth time today, and I swear it still tingles from his kiss. Even when I know it makes little sense.

A customer walks in, distracting me from these thoughts. They want a pair of earrings for a girlfriend, so I show them around, and as the silence grows, my thoughts go back to Lucien, again and again.

He's already done more for Simon and me than Donald ever did by finding the daycare—and, I believe, convincing them to take me. Lucien has been giving me fat tips, too, the money I save for rainy days. And the way he swayed my son

in his arms like Simon was his own blood? *Swoon*. That memory keeps me going almost as much as the kiss.

Mrs. Cameron leaves the office, her heels clicking against the floors as she moves into the main area of the store. She stands by, checking her cell phone, as I guide the customer to another set of earrings. I ignore her as I focus on the customer, putting a smile on my face as I ask him questions to figure out what his girlfriend would like best.

“That’s a great choice,” I tell him as I close the package. “She’s going to love it, I’m sure. And they’ll look great with her green eyes.”

He thanks me and leaves, and I turn to Mrs. Cameron. She’s standing by the windows now, her face scrunched in worry.

My heart skips a beat. We’re, after all, a jewelry store. We’ve had a couple of attempted robberies through the years, and the memory still makes my blood fizzle with fear. Now I have a child to raise, and no one but myself to count on. What would happen to Simon if I got shot in a robbery?

Rushing to the back of the counter, I grab the receiver end of the phone. “Should I call the cops?” I ask her.

“Mm, no,” she replies, but she doesn’t sound that sure. “Not yet, anyway.”

What is that supposed to mean? I lean over the counter to search for whatever she’s looking at, and then I see it. The black, slick car, with the tinted windows. The car that’s been visiting for the past week. Lucien’s car.

My heart lurches to my throat. He’s here. He’s here, he’s finally here. What am I going to say? I still have an hour before I can leave, and I still don’t know what to tell him. The truth? Should I tell him I can’t stop thinking about him, and that he’s more than I ever thought I deserved?

Should I tell him I’m falling in love so fast it makes me dizzy? That I go to sleep picturing what kind of family we could be? That I touch myself to the memory of his lips when I’m lying in bed alone at night?

No, maybe I should leave that last part out.

“I know him,” I blurt out, and Mrs. Cameron whirls around to face me, her brows pressed together. “He’s not going to rob us.”

“Not in the ways you think, at least,” she replies under her breath. I blink in confusion. What’s that supposed to mean? Mrs. Cameron walks closer, lowering her voice. “You be careful, girl. Don’t mess with things you don’t understand.”

That makes me gasp. Mrs. Cameron had never given me such cryptic life advice before. “What do you mean?” She’s been dealing with me as an employee all this time, ignoring my history with her nephew, and the baby he abandoned, all for the sake of the job. Why is she doing this now?

She juts a thumb over her shoulder. “That man out there. He’s dangerous. Stay out of his way.” Without another word, she walks into her office, heels clacking. She shuts the door with a loud thud, putting an end to this conversation.

I stand there, gaping at the space she left behind. Lucien’s dangerous? How? I’ve noticed he knows more than the common people, and he’s definitely rich, but that doesn’t make him dangerous. Does it? I glance outside again, and the thought of sitting next to him and feeling his hands on me again... It throws everything else out of the window.

My body aches for him. It aches so much that I don’t even care if he’s as dangerous as Mrs. Cameron warned me about.

Five o’clock comes, and I lock everything up. Mrs. Cameron stays in the office and leaves through the back door, locking it on her way out. I force her ominous words to the back of my head as I cross the street to Lucien’s car.

He hops out, holding the door open for me. Today, he wears a suit so fine it looks like silk, the blue fabric shaping his strong biceps and broad chest. The color goes perfectly with his blue eyes. His black hair is combed back, and I’m dying to mess it up with my fingers.

Lucien pauses, holding the door open as he gives me a once-over. After a beat of silence, he offers a hand. I take it,

sliding into the car and letting him close the door. He walks around to the other door and sits next to me.

It's perfectly silent in here. With the thick windows and the partition between us and the driver, we're utterly alone. Concealed from the world.

"I was too much yesterday, wasn't I?" he asks, turning to face me.

I chew on the inside of my cheek. "You were, yes. But..." And I go through the memory of him asking me if he should kill Donald. It didn't sound like a joke. He meant it. And I might be an awful person because I didn't mind the thought that much. I wouldn't want Donald dead, but it didn't scare me away. What scared me was the fact that I didn't mind it. "I don't mind, Lucien. Honestly, I don't. I ran off because that surprised me. Killing people is bad, but when I thought about everything Donald did to me... I didn't mind. Not that I want him dead. But it made me realize how rotten I am on the inside."

Lucien's brows shoot up his forehead. "You're not rotten, Nia. You're within your rights to hate a man like that. A coward. Someone who leaves their family when they need him the most."

I take a deep breath, then release it. "Still, I didn't know I was such a bad person."

Lucien moves fast, his hands closing around my hips, and he pulls me to his lap. My pencil skirt slides against the silky fabric of his trousers, and I reach up to hold on to his shoulders. He pulls me against his chest, and my heart goes crazy. I flare my nostrils, inhaling all I can of his woody scent. His eyes are burning blue from up close, and I can't stop staring.

"You're not a bad person," he insists in a low, grave voice. "You're beautiful, and you're good, and you're a hard worker. Just because you hate someone who betrayed you, it doesn't make you evil, Nia. It just makes you human."

His words hit me straight in the chest. My eyes go wet as I look at him, at this man who wants me so badly. At this man who stops by every day to make sure I'm okay, who pays attention, and who cares. I can't believe it's happened this fast, but there's no running from it. I'm in love with Lucien and everything he makes me feel.

I lean in and kiss him. He kisses me back with a sigh, as if he's been waiting for this his whole life. His fingers curl tighter around my hips, and he parts my mouth with his tongue. The kiss is intoxicating, as every other kiss we've shared. It leaves me buzzing *everywhere*, as if I had become an endless stream of stripped wires.

Lucien kisses me as if his life depended on it. As if he's been drowning and I'm his first gulp of air. I kiss him back, I give him everything I have, burying my fingers in his soft hair and holding onto him for dear life.

The sweeps of his tongue make me warm all over. Wetness covers my panties, and I circle my hips against his. He moves me on his lap, landing my ass over his hardness. And I can't help but gasp at it. At the long, hard *thing* right under my bottom.

"Is that you?" I ask, my voice muffled with lust. Warmth spreads across my cheeks and down my neck as our eyes lock. His blue orbs glow with desire, his pupils dilated.

"And it's all because of you," he replies in a voice that's so rough it gives me shivers. Lucien grabs my exposed knee, his fingers scalding the inside of my thigh. "You drive me mad, Nia. I can't get you out of my head."

"I can't get you out of mine either," I reply in a weak voice, my body trembling with desire.

Lucien bites my lower lip, then pops it free. "Fuck, you keep saying these things, and I won't keep my hands to myself."

I purr against him, parting my knees as wide as I can. Which is not much because I'm in a pencil skirt. "Don't," I plead. "Don't keep your hands to yourself. Touch me. *Please.*"

And I think it's the pleading that sets him off. Lucien changes. He roars, deep in his chest, then grabs me around the hips to manhandle me on his lap. He shoves my skirt up over my thighs, revealing my plain panties, then makes me straddle him on the back seat. My covered pussy lands on his zipper, and I whimper at the hard touch to my sensitive parts.

Lucien grabs my ass cheek with one hand while opening his pants and revealing his black boxers with the other. I tighten my hold around his shoulders, gasping. Is he going to take me like this? Right now? I don't think I'm that ready.

He kisses my face. "Don't worry," he murmurs, his breath skittering across my collarbones. "I'm not fucking you like this. In the back of a car? Hell no. I'll need time and space to make you feel so good you'll never even remember you had another man before me."

A shiver runs down my spine, and Lucien fits me perfectly against him. My covered pussy against his covered cock, and my clit lands on his twitching hardness. I cry out, then look over my shoulder at the partition to the driver.

"He can't hear us," Lucien reassures me. "I would never allow anyone to hear you. Anyone but me."

That's the possessive Lucien again, and I adore him. I want to tell him that, but his kisses trail down my neck, and he sucks on my pulse, and I'm covered in goosebumps. My nipples harden against my bra, and Lucien finds them through the blouse, thumbing both until I'm gasping and moving my hips against his.

The pressure of his cock against my clit is perfection. It's the friction and how sensitive I am, and Lucien grabs my hips and moves me up and down his length. Moans spill out of my mouth, louder than I've ever sounded. Pleasure takes over the forefront of my brain. It muddles my mind and makes my vision hazy. I see nothing and feel nothing but him, and him against me.

"Oh, Lucien."

“That’s it,” he roars back, his gaze shooting between my face and my wet panties. “I want to make you feel good, *cara*. Tell me you feel good.”

“It feels so good.”

“Are you wet for me, *cara*?”

“So wet.”

“I can see that,” he replies, his fingers digging painfully into my sides. “I can see you’re so slick, you’re gliding right over my cock.”

Warmth blooms on my face, but I don’t care. All I care about is that Lucien makes me feel good like no one else has before. He makes me feel sexy, with his gaze fastened on me, his hands adoring my curves, and his mouth eating up my moans. Every circle of my hips shoots electricity straight to my center as I climb that pleasure.

“Lucien, I will— I think I will—”

“Come for me, *cara mia*. Come all over me.”

And I do. I obey him as if my body was made for this. As if my body was ready to come at his command, as if he knew how to set me off. My climax shakes me to my core, and I grab onto his hair as I shake through the last of it. Lucien hisses, kissing me hard as his body locks and his hips pump against mine. He holds me to his chest as he shudders, and I look down to find the proof of his pleasure seeping through his boxers.

And that’s so hot.

I tremble as I come down from that high, and Lucien caresses me and kisses me through every second of it. Once I’m down and the position gets uncomfortable, he helps me back to the seat and fastens the belt around me.

Lucien kisses my face. “Let’s pick Simon up and go out for dinner,” he says, and I can only smile like a fool in love. He puts down all of my barriers, and I’ll let him. I’ll let him have all of me.

NIA

The smile still hasn't left my face. Last night was the epitome of perfection—such that I can't even begin to describe it. Everything's slotted in the back of my memory, and I keep going over it as I make my way to the store and unlock the front door.

Isn't it amazing how everything looks prettier when you're in love? The sky is bluer, and you can smell the flowers, and there's a hop in your step when you think of that one person.

Lucien is everything I've ever dreamed of. He's handsome and strong, but gentle. There was a jealous clench to his jaw when I told him about my ex, but he touches me as if he fears I might break. And the way he held my baby in his arms?

Last night, he waited for me to pick up Simon, and he drove us to his penthouse. The building is one of those so tall you have to tilt your head all the way back to see the top. Located right in the business district, there were guards everywhere as we drove into the underground garage. Whoever Lucien is, he's important, and he has many men keeping him safe.

He showed me around the penthouse, and though I care little for the expensive furniture, the skyline out of the windows made me gawk. Lucien asked me about the decor, taking notes on my opinion as if nothing else mattered in the world. I can almost see it. Moving in, a room for Simon, Lucien and I buying new furniture together.

It's the foolishness of people in love, I know. But I don't care. For the first time in my life, this feels right. It feels like I'm where I'm supposed to be. With him.

Lucien had a chef in the kitchen making us dinner, and a nanny ready to take care of Simon as we dined. We chatted, and he touched my hand, and he drove us home, leaving me with a kiss.

He's perfect. He's perfect, and it's impossible not to fall for him.

I enter the store and lock the door behind me again. Every moment I spend away from Lucien is too much. The day has barely begun, and I'm already dying for it to end. I'm counting the minutes until I see him at five, when he promised to pick me up. With some luck, he might miss me too much and visit before lunch.

The store is quiet when I walk in. As I reach for the alarm, there's nothing out of the ordinary. My heart skips a beat. I blink twice. Wait. Why is the alarm off? My mind goes hazy as I glance around me. The jewels are all in their cases, and nothing obvious is missing. My heart races as I sink my teeth into my bottom lip. Did I forget to set the alarms yesterday? If that's the case and Mrs. Cameron finds out, I'm one hundred percent screwed. I'll be fired. There's no way around it.

Mrs. Cameron was still here, but she always takes the back exit. Why would she put the alarms down anyway? And would she believe me if I told her I set them yesterday? Or would she blame me if something was stolen?

My heart soars when I hear a footfall. Calm down, Nia. Maybe Mrs. Cameron is here, and she's the one who deactivated the alarms. Maybe you're going down that spiral for nothing.

A man steps out of the staff room, and adrenaline washes through my veins. For a moment, I'm certain I'm dead. He'll put a gun to my head, and tell me to open the cases. Then I recognize his face.

And my stomach sinks.

“Donald?” I ask, my voice tiny.

My ex opens his mouth with an odd smile, his gaze darting out the windows. “Are you alone?”

“Y-yeah. What’s going on? Was it you who disabled the alarm?”

He waves me off as if that question didn’t matter. My ex closes the space between us in two strides, fingers curling around my arm. He drags me closer to him and away from the windows, toward the staff room. “Long time, no see, Nia,” he starts, but his voice is strained.

“Mm, what’s happening?” I ask once more, hating the way he’s acting. His shoulders are taut, and he keeps glancing outside as if someone was chasing him. As if he feared something. “Donald, where is your aunt?”

He stops just inside the staff room, but he doesn’t let my arm go. His hold tightens, cutting my blood flow. “She knows I’m here. She called me yesterday.” His eyes pivot toward me. “She told me something interesting, Nia. She told me you have a new boyfriend.”

My brows shoot up, warmth spreading over my cheeks. Did my boss call her nephew, my ex, to tell him about my love life? I yank my arm from his grip. “And what if I do?” I’m not sure if Lucien’s my boyfriend or not, but I am in love with him. And from the way he treats me, I think he might want to take things seriously. Staring at Donald, I narrow my eyes. “You were never jealous when we were together. Are you going to start now that you’ve abandoned both your son and me?”

He clicks his tongue. “Are you fucking dumb?” He cuts himself off, forcing that smile back on his face. “It’s just like you said, Nia. The brat is mine, isn’t it? But you don’t want to raise him with me, right? You want this new, rich man you have now.”

I glare harder at him. “What are you talking about?”

“My aunt told me you brought the kid here, and this man is all but obsessed with you two. And, you know, I will not stop

you from having a new family. I won't stop you from being happy. And you know what? I'd go as far as to allow him to register the brat as his."

My jaw clenches as my heartbeat picks up further. "That's not up to you. You never put your name on the birth certificate to begin with."

"And it's a good thing, isn't it?" he insists, his eyes wide and glinting with something too close to madness. "Now, it's an empty line, ready to take Giordano's name."

Alarm bells ring in my ears. There's something very wrong about this. "How do you know his name?"

He cackles—a peal of mad laughter that makes me wince. "Anyone who looked at him would recognize him, Nia. Anyone, but you, because you're too self-absorbed, and you've always been that way. My aunt put her eyes on him, and she knew who he was on the spot."

Typical Donald, taking every chance to insult me. "Just because I don't recognize celebrities, it doesn't mean..."

"And you never looked him up?" he keeps going, laughing.

"I was too busy raising our son by myself."

He ignores me as if I had said nothing. "Lucien Giordano is in the fucking mafia, Nia. He's the *consigliere* to the Giordano family, and he might be the richest fucker to ever step foot in this store. And you have him, hook, line, and sinker." That insane smile stretches across his face.

The memory dawns in the back of my mind. I read about that. About the Giordano family, and I even thought about them being the mafia. But Lucien is part of that? Is he really one of them?

"And it's going to be so simple," Donald hisses. "I already contacted a lawyer. The court will think you tried to hide my son from me. One DNA test, and the child is mine. Unless..."

And he pauses, allowing the words to sink in. Horror makes me gag. Fear tastes bitter on my tongue. I can't believe

after all this time, he's going to rob me of my child. He's going to use his money and his tools to have it his way. "Unless what?"

"Unless your mafia man pays me off." And he imitates a zipper across his lips. "I won't say a word if he keeps the money coming. With the right amount, I'll forever pretend that never happened. He can put his name on the certificate and everything. For a couple of millions, of course."

I shake my head, stepping away from Donald. He reaches out, grabbing at my arms, and I struggle out of his hold. "No!" I cry out, baring my teeth at him. "No, you can't do that. No one will believe you."

His fingers dig into my arms, his nails biting into my skin. "You're willing to fight with me, Nia?" He cackles. "Oh, come on. It would be so simple to hit you and blame it on your mafia boyfriend. They'd eat that right up. The cops aren't going to charge the mafia with assaulting a woman."

"Lucien's not in the mafia," I insist, though I have no idea what the truth is.

"Oh, but he is."

"Aren't you afraid, then? Aren't you afraid of what he'd do to you?"

"Honestly," he says, shaking his head, "I'm more afraid he'll just walk out, and I'll have to cancel the DNA test request. I paid the lawyer, you know? And Lucien might think you're not worth the trouble. I wouldn't blame him. You really aren't."

Tears sting the back of my eyes. A mix of rage and deep-rooted sadness washes over me. My hands tremble as I fight for freedom, as I struggle against Donald's hold. He's right. He has covered all the possibilities, and the bigger chance is that Lucien won't want to get involved.

Do I believe he likes me? Sure. But would he go this far for someone he barely knows? This is a make-it-or-break-it moment, and if Lucien refused, my heart would shatter.

Donald would walk away clean, I'd be left alone with my child, and I would know my love is not worth it for Lucien.

The fear of finding it out is worse than everything else.

A tear slides down my cheek. "Get off me!" I beg, sinking to my knees. And it's always been like this. Begging for Donald to stay, to stop, to help. I never wanted to be in this situation again, but he has me wrapped around his finger. And I can't fight him off alone.

He grabs my hair and yanks my face up. There's this grin, that twisted smirk that never goes away. "Not this fast, Nia. You're finally worth some trouble, and I'm not letting this chance go."

Glass shatters, raining down behind me. A scream lodges itself in my throat. I slam my eyes shut and all hell breaks loose.

LUCIEN

There's nothing but red. The world is red as I halt outside the jewelry store and search the inside. I was looking for Nia. I did not expect to find her fighting off a man, his hand yanking her hair back, abject fear on her face.

My blood fizzles and boils in my veins. I'm pure rage when I pull my gun, my fingers curling around it, tightening as I unlock it and aim. Steps hurry behind me—my soldiers, noticing the shift in my mood. They ask, they search. And they see it. The moment they see what that motherfucker is doing to my woman, they know what's coming.

I fire twice at the door. The glass shatters, raining down in front of me. I step over the shards, my heart thundering in my ears. My gaze locks with that fucking Donald Cameron, and he sees the anger on my face, and he goes pale.

He's fucking dead.

I raise the gun, aiming straight at his face. Oh, yes, I can already imagine it. Closed-casket, because no one will want to see what I'm about to do to him. How fucking dares he? After putting a child in her and abandoning her, *this* is how he treats her. Who the fuck does he think he is?

Every muscle in my body tightens as the gun shakes in my grasp. No. I can't shoot him. I can't kill him this easily. That would be too simple, no punishment, no pain. No. No, it can't be this easy for him. One shot and he's free of punishment.

That won't be enough. It won't be enough for all the pain he brought to Nia.

The bastard lets her go, his hands flying off her body in a surrendering pose. Nia falls to her knees, palms hitting the ground as she swivels her attention to me. The fear written on her face is a punch to the gut. I hate it. I fucking hate to see so much fear on her face.

“Step away,” I hiss at him, the gun shaking in my hand. I’ve never felt this much wrath inside me. This poison running through my veins, filling every inch of my body. Steps behind me announce the arrival of my soldiers, people I had stationed around the store in case someone ever robbed it.

“I didn’t do a thing, Mr. Giordano,” he whimpers like the fucking coward he is. With the weaponless girl who gave birth to his child, he mans up pretty fast. But with me? He’s a fucking pussy. The fucker shakes from the tips of his fingers down to his feet as he backs off, his legs hitting the counter. “Please, Mr. Giordano. I wouldn’t hurt her. I wouldn’t hurt a fly. Tell him, Nia.”

Nia trembles from where she still kneels, her eyes wide, tears running down the sides of her face. The sight shatters my heart.

“Restrain him,” I shoot over my shoulder to the soldiers, and they hurry closer to grab Donald. I lock and lower my weapon, then kneel next to Nia. “Are you alright?” I whisper at her, touching her face, making sure she’s unharmed.

Nia releases a shaky breath, then nods. “Yeah.”

“He didn’t hurt you?”

“No.”

I brush my thumb down her cheek and put a strand of hair behind her ear. Nia closes her hands in fists, taking deep breaths to calm herself. “What did he want?” I ask her in a murmur.

She glances up at the men surrounding me, dragging Donald away. “What are they going to do with him?”

I capture her chin, looking into her eyes. “Nia. What did he want?”

She presses her lips together. “Money. He wanted me to ask you for money.”

The fucker. He never contacted her, never helped her, and now he was going to use her. Rage simmers in my stomach. Folding an arm around her waist, I pull her against me, touching my nose to her hair. The one thing that’s stopping me from killing him right now is her. Her smell, her presence. I take deep breaths of her scent, and let it wash over me.

Nia relaxes in my hold, her hands coming up to grip my shirt. Her shaking stops after a moment. I pull back to stare at her, holding her chin.

“Nia,” I murmur against her lips. “Do you want me to kill him?”

“No,” she replies.

“No one will know, Nia. I will cover the tracks, I have the means.”

Her jaw locks. “So, it’s the truth? You’re part of the mafia?”

“Does that scare you?”

She takes a beat, looking away in thought. As she does, I grab her elbow and pull her up. She lets go of my shirt, but she doesn’t step away. “No,” she replies. “However, I don’t want you to murder him. He’s still my child’s father.”

I shake my head. “Nia. He’s the sperm donor. He’s not the father.”

She blinks, her eyes going huge as she stares at me. “Well, yeah, but...”

One of my soldiers walks closer. I half-turn to him. “Keep him locked up. I’ll think about what to do later,” I tell him, then circle a finger to motion for the store. “Get some people here to fix this.”

The soldier nods and leaves. I put my gun away and fold my other arm around Nia’s waist, urging her out of the store, careful to kick the shards out of the way before she passes them. My driver’s already waiting outside, holding the door

open for us. Several of my soldiers stand guard down the block, watching. I don't see Donald anymore.

Nia takes her spot on the backseat, and I sit next to her. We're locked in our bubble, perfectly quiet, once the door is shut. I hit the comm. "Drive," I tell the driver, and he obeys without a hitch.

Nia watches the jewelry store diminish in the distance, then she turns to me. "How did you know?" she asks.

I squeeze her fingers. "There's always a soldier watching the store. To make sure you're safe. He warned me a man fitting Donald's description had arrived earlier. I came to make sure he wouldn't hurt you."

Nia's knee brushes mine, her brows lowering in doubt. "A soldier watching the store? You mean, someone from the mafia?"

"One of the men under me in the *famiglia*, yes. And I get that you're worried, Nia. But I promise no one will ever hurt you or Simon." And I bring her hand up to my face, kissing her knuckles, her palm. "You've changed everything for me, Nia. You bring a light into my life that I had no idea existed."

Her lips drop open. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying I'm in love with you, Nia. There's no one like you in the world, and I'm one lucky bastard to have found you. I love you, and I would burn the world down to make you happy. Including killing that fucking bastard who dared to touch you."

Nia swallows, her eyes glinting. "Lucien, I'm in love with you, too. I am, and I want you, but I don't want you to kill Donald. He's still Simon's father."

"No, he isn't. He has half his genes, but he isn't the father, Nia." And I squeeze her hand to my chest, leaning closer to her. "I will be Simon's father. I will raise him, and I'll love him as if he were my own. All I need is one word from you, Nia. One word, and I'll put my name on the birth certificate, and I'll have that fucking sperm donor in a ditch before lunch."

Nia's eyes go round, and for a moment, I'm sure I screwed up. I let my mouth run, and I said too much, and I scared her off. But her shoulders relax, and she leans closer to me. Finally, her lips tilt up in the corners.

"No need to kill anyone," she says. "But I want the rest. I want everything with you."

Relief washes over me, and I kiss her. Her lips part for my tongue, and I hold her close as I feast on her pretty mouth. Our bodies grow hot with the contact, but the car slows down, and I'm forced to look up.

Nia does too, blinking the haze away. "Oh. Why are we here?"

We parked in front of Simon's daycare. I squeeze her waist, pointing at a man reading the newspaper on the bench opposite the gates. "See that man?"

She chuckles under her breath. "Let me guess. Your soldier."

"You guessed right, *cara*." And I point to another one up the street, cutting down tree branches. "That one, too. They'll make sure no one touches Simon but us."

Nia presses her face to the crook of my neck. "You're so good to me, Lucien. I'm glad you thought of all this."

"You're my family now, and you deserve this." I meet her eyes again. "Shall we go home? Simon will be safe."

Nia smiles, then nods. "Yeah. I'd like that."

I tell my driver to take us home and then turn back to Nia. Her curves call to me, and I feel her up, touch her skin, and rope my fingers through her hair. Those delicious lips never leave mine for long. She gasps for air, then we dive into one another again.

Nia is fucking perfection, her thick curves against my hard body, her small whimpers against my lips. My pants tighten, and I can't wait to have her. Every part of her.

We park in my underground garage, and I leave the car to open the door for her. Intertwining our fingers together, I guide

her to my apartment, then to my bedroom. Her hold on my hand grows tense. I pause and turn to face her.

“Nia,” I murmur, bracing my body against hers. “This is not a one-night stand. I want you. I love you.”

She chuckles nervously, her gaze darting away from my face. “I know, I’m just a bit rusty.”

But there’s more to it. She’s afraid I’ll fuck her and abandon her, the way it happened before. And this is the moment I have to come clean. I have to tell her everything.

Digging into my trousers’ pocket, I grab the velvet box and drop on one knee. Nia follows my motions with a confused gaze. It’s only when I open the box and show it to her that her mouth drops.

“I’ve had this since the first day,” I tell her. “The moment I saw you, I knew it, Nia. I knew you were going to change my life. So, I sent a soldier to the store, and he bought this.”

Her eyes glaze over. “It’s the ring I was trying on.”

“It is. And the moment I saw it on your finger, I knew I wanted to be the one to put it there.” A beat passes, my heart thundering with nerves. “Will you marry me, Nia? Will you make me the happiest man alive? Will you let me keep you safe, and love you the way you deserve, forever?”

Tears brim on her lower lashes, but her smile is blinding when she nods. “Yes! Yes, I will. I do want it. I love you.” And she flings her arms around my neck and kisses me.

I squeeze her to my chest, getting to my feet, and bring her with me. Nia giggles, and I let her go for a moment to slide the ring onto her finger. She grins at me, and I cup her face and kiss the tears away.

She’s glorious. And she’s mine.

Nia shoots to the tips of her toes and kisses me again. Her lips set my body on fire, and I fist her hair and kiss her back, letting her know how much I fucking need her. She grabs my shirt, clinging to me as I move my hips against hers, teasing

my erection. Nia gasps, then goes for the first button of my shirt, undoing it.

I let her undress me, and I let her gape at my chest and run her hands down my torso. Pride flares in my veins, and I promise myself I'm working out harder every day so she will have that look on her face every time she sees me.

But then it's my turn, and I'm *starved*.

Manhandling her to the bed, I lay her down and grab the collar of her shirt. I yank it open, sending the buttons flying off and scattering across the black onyx floors. Nia gasps, but her eyes burn with lust as I gape down at her chest. Her tits bounce with the harsh motions as I pull the shirt off, and my mouth waters for a taste of her.

"Fuck," I hiss, staring at the white lace bra. I fist my erection over my pants, precome seeping onto my boxers. "You're so fucking beautiful it hurts." My balls are dying for relief, and I'll be amazed if I don't blow too early.

Nia bites her lower lip, pressing her arms to the sides of her tits. "You like them?"

I roar, kissing her hard. "So fucking much." And I curl my fingers around a breast, massaging it, feeling the hard knot against my palm. She squirms beneath me, arching her back off the bed until I shove the bra away and pinch a nipple. "And I fucking love the sounds you make."

She moans back, so I close my lips around her other nipple and suck hard. Nia digs her nails into my shoulders, and I have a field day on her amazing tits. Flicking her nipples with my tongue, I soak in the sounds she makes until I'm sure she'll be drenched for me.

A man has only so much patience. I grab her waistband and yank down at the zipper, busting it. Once that's done, I pull the pencil skirt down her legs. Her panties come along, white cotton things I'd rip to shreds. I slide off the bed to rid the both of us of our shoes, then kneel on the mattress again.

Nia stops me with a foot to my cock. She opens her mouth with a teasing smile. "Pants, too," she says, and the way lust

colors her voice is my undoing.

Every restraint I had flies out of the window. I need this woman, right now.

Busting my zipper, I let the pants drop, then yank my boxers free. Grabbing her knees, I spread them to take one good look at her pussy. Glistening with arousal, deliciously beckoning. I drop to my elbows and close my mouth around her core.

Nia leaps from the mattress, her hands flying to my hair. She cries out as I devour her cunt, lapping, lashing, and flicking my tongue over her clit. Her juices taste like ambrosia, sweet and addictive, and I devour her until she's bucking off the bed. Until goosebumps cover her legs.

Until she screams my name as she comes apart.

Nia's still gasping for air when I find my spot between her legs. Fisting my aching cock, I angle it with her entrance, grabbing her knees to keep them spread. She meets my eyes for a moment, fire burning in her pupils, then I enter her. She throws her head back, taking me in inch by inch.

"Fuck," I hiss, her muscles clamping down around me. "You're so fucking tight."

She says something, but the words are jumbled as her hips move against mine. Nia meets my gaze. "You're so big," she moans, her lips parted in the most erotic sight I've ever seen.

My cock twitches inside her, pleasure flaring in every nerve ending. I sheathe myself inside her, and a wicked part of me loves the fact she didn't ask for a condom. Fuck yes, I adore seeing myself inside her cunt, nothing between us. I'll fill her up, put another baby inside her, and I'll show her what loving a real man means.

Gripping her closer, I go feral. I pound into her heat, my gaze fastened on her face, studying every tiny expression. Nia moans, fingers grabbing at the bedsheets, her hair a mess, her cheeks red from exertion. Her brows shoot up on her forehead as she approaches another climax, her walls tightening around me, and I pick up my pace further to shove her off the ledge.

She comes undone again, her muscles milking me. I kiss her hard as pleasure unlike anything I've ever felt barrels down my spine, and I burst open inside her. My thick load fills her up, but I don't stop. I lick along her lips, grab her hips and turn her sideways.

A hand on her hip, I squeeze her soft flesh as I thrust into her. Nia arches her back, throws her head back, and screams my name. Still, I keep going, and another climax burns inside me. I keep my eyes open, watching her as sweat slicks down my back. Hooking her leg up over my shoulder, I find her clit and flick it until she falls into another orgasm.

"That's it, *cara mia*," I hiss, pounding into her as another climax hits me. "That's it. Keep coming for me. Let me show you how I'm going to treat you for the rest of our lives."

She grins back at me, then reaches up and twists a nipple between her fingers. Fuck, she's perfect. She's perfect for me.

Grabbing her hips, I change positions again. I sling her legs around my waist and clutch her full ass-cheeks, bouncing her on my lap.

"You're so naughty, *cara*," I grit out, then bite her lower lip.

"Just for you," she replies, delicious lust on her face. "Just with you."

And she creams my cock yet again, and that's when I know it. Finding her had to be destiny. It had to be fate. Loving her is what I'm meant to do, and I will love her for the rest of our days.

EPILOGUE

NIA

Five years later

The warm winter sun of Sicily kisses my toes as I wiggle them. It's amusing how swollen they became this time. Little sausages, ten in each foot and ten in each of my hands. At least they're toasty sausages in the delicious Italian weather.

I scoot lower on the lounge chair, letting the sun warm my shins. Reaching out, I scoop the glass of virgin mojito from the small table next to me and tilt it back to my lips. A drop of cold water touches my tongue. I hum in disappointment, dropping my sunglasses to glare at the empty glass.

Virgin mojitos are the best thing for the Italian warmth. They keep me hydrated and refreshed all year, and I can add some alcohol to make it more interesting when I'm not pregnant.

Between pregnancies and lactation, I don't even remember the last time I had alcohol in my mojito. A fair price to pay.

I curl my hand around my lower stomach, swollen with my third baby. Simon's almost six now, and his tiny feet dart across the house and up and down our private isle. He has my chocolate hair and my eyes, and I'm so blessed that he doesn't have one feature that reminds me of his biological father. The sperm donor, as we call him. Lucien is Simon's father is everything but blood.

Our second child bears his godfather's name—Stefan, like Lucien's brother. Lucien's always been very careful about

which sides of the mafia business I have access to—not because he doesn't think I'm trustworthy, but because he doesn't want the risk and the nightmares.

He wants to keep me and our family safe, above all else. Safe and happy.

“A penny for your thoughts,” the hoarse, delicious sound of my husband's voice calls.

I tilt my head back to watch him walk closer. Lucien is more handsome than when we first met. He has wisps of silver across his temples now, and though we have other houses around the world, we spend a lot of time in Italy, and he's more tanned than ever. He's in swim trunks and shirtless, his chest exposed, golden skin glinting under the sun. My mouth waters.

Then my gaze lands on what he's holding. A fresh glass of mojito.

I sit up, grinning. “Why would you pay a penny for my thoughts when you can clearly read them?” I chuckle, accepting the glass.

He smiles back, taking my hand and lifting me off the chair. Lucien takes the seat next to mine and pulls me to his lap. My favorite spot ever. His hands curl around my hips and he lands a kiss on my warm shoulder.

“Stefan's coming for the weekend,” he says, brushing the tip of his nose along my skin. “He's bringing a French chef with him.”

“Mm,” I hum sipping from the virgin mojito. “That one who can do pastries? I'd die for a fresh croissant tomorrow morning.”

“The one and only. Stefan knows you love those pastries.”

I smile, putting the glass away and hugging Lucien closer. “Having Stefan around is fun. Not our child, your brother.”

Lucien arches an eyebrow. “Our child is fun, too. He might be three, but I swear he says the funniest shit ever.”

I laugh with him, wiggling on his lap. “You know what I mean. When you and Stefan get together with the kids, no one could guess your day job. You roll around on the floor with them, and you swim with them, and you let them climb on your backs...”

Lucien squeezes me against his chest. “The one reason we work so hard is to make sure we have those moments. Happy moments. Safe with our families.”

I nod, sobering up under his hard gaze. “I know, love. And I’m thankful for that.”

Lucien kisses me on the lips, his hand finding my lower stomach, brushing along the bump of our baby. “No, I’m the one who’s thankful you ever gave this old man a chance. By the way...” And he digs into his trunk pocket for a small box, which he offers me. “Here.”

I open it to find... an exact copy of my engagement ring. Blinking in confusion, I glance at my hand, but I remember leaving it on my bedside table when I couldn’t get it on. My fingers are sausages, after all. “What is this?”

He pecks the corner of my mouth. “You said your fingers were swelling and you couldn’t wear your engagement ring. Here’s a bigger one.”

“You bought a new, bigger one?”

“Yeah.”

I blink in exasperation. He gave me a much more expensive one for our wedding, but I kept the engagement ring for the memories. Still... “You know you could have gotten it adjusted? Or I could have not worn it until the pregnancy’s over?”

Lucien clicks his tongue, grabbing my hips. “I don’t want my woman without her ring. Everyone should know you have a man so they don’t feel tempted.” And he drags me along his hardness, flush against my backside.

Grinning, I brush my lips against his. “So, how many kids did you want again?”

“All of them,” he replies without missing a beat. “Why? Do you want to train for the next one?”

“Absolutely.”

Lucien chuckles, the rich sound sending shivers down my arms. He scoops me up on his arms, shooting to his feet as I gasp. “Let me make you feel good, *cara mia*.”

THE END

ALSO BY ERIN HAVOC



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erin Havoc writes steamy romance with curvy heroines. Her heroes might look tough, but they have a soft spot for their girls. No matter if they are mountain men, CEOs, or wolf shifters, there's always a happy ending. Check out her Amazon page for more books, and a link to a free story.

