



THE *Good*

BAD BOY

A FORBIDDEN MAFIA ROMANCE

SALLIE STEADMAN

The Good Bad Boy

Sallie Steadman

Copyright © 2023 by Sallie Steadman

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

Contents

1. Chapter One Thea
2. Chapter Two Scott
3. Chapter Three Thea
4. Chapter Four Scott
5. Chapter Five Thea
6. Chapter Six Scott
7. Chapter Seven Thea
8. Chapter Eight Scott
9. Chapter Nine Thea
10. Chapter Ten Scott
11. Chapter Eleven Thea
12. Chapter Twelve Scott
13. Chapter Thirteen Thea
14. Chapter Fourteen Scott
15. Chapter Fifteen Thea

16. Chapter Sixteen Scott
17. Chapter Seventeen Thea
18. Chapter Eighteen Scott
19. Chapter Nineteen Thea
20. Epiloge Thea

Chapter One Thea

As Shelby climbed into the car, I waved her off and turned to walk back into the hotel. Just then, I was confronted by two burly men, one of them stepping out in front of me.

“I’m sorry, we’re not booking in guests yet—”

The man grabbed me by the collar and yanked me towards him. My heart dropped. Over the years, I’d had some trouble living in Vegas, everyone had, but there was nobody here to help me right now, and I didn’t even know what I had apparently done to piss these guys off.

“Where’s your brother?” He demanded, shoving his face close to mine. I could smell his stinking breath like he had been drinking and smoking all night long. How long had he been waiting for someone to come out, someone they could intimidate into giving them what they wanted?

“I—I don’t know,” I blurted out. It was the truth. I knew Mark had been in a meeting this evening. It was why he hadn’t

joined Shelby and me for drinks, but beyond that, I had no idea.

“Come on,” the man demanded, shaking me. I felt like a ragdoll in his hands, unable to do anything but go along with whatever he wanted. I swallowed hard, the tipsiness making it even harder to think straight.

“I’m sorry, I think you should go,” I told him. I should have screamed and told him to get the fuck off of me and stay away or I’d call the police, but I recognized this type of guy. And I had learned a long time ago that you didn’t piss these kinds of guys off. Better to pretend you were the one who had made a mistake, even if it was anything but that.

“I’m not going anywhere until you tell me where your fucking brother is—”

“Gentleman, is there an issue here?”

Another male voice cut in, and all of us turned to see where it had come from. Behind these guys, a man had just stepped out of the hotel, and he eyed the situation before him with open distaste.

One of the brutes retreated immediately, as though he had good reason to be scared. The guy holding me, though, didn’t move.

“Stay the fuck out of this,” he snapped.

I stared at the stranger, silently pleading with him to do something, *anything* to get me out of here. I didn’t care what it took, but I couldn’t just let this happen. I couldn’t just let one

of my first nights at the hotel be soured by these fucking psychos. What the hell had my brother done to piss them off, anyway? I had no idea. But I didn't want to find out...

The man stood his ground. He was a little older than me, maybe ten years or so, with bright blue eyes and hair shaved close to his head. The suit he was wearing looked expensive, which surprised me. It wasn't that we never got any upmarket guests at the hotel under my parent's ownership, but usually, upscale clients would spring for somewhere a little fancier.

He took a step towards the man hanging onto me, holding his ground. The stranger wasn't scared of them, even though he likely should have been. In fact, he seemed almost amused by the whole thing, like the fact they thought they could handle him was humorous.

"Let her go," he ordered one more time. His voice was low and commanding enough to make me shiver. I didn't know who the hell he was, but he clearly believed he had the right to call these guys out—and honestly, thank God he did because I wasn't sure I would have stood a chance against them otherwise.

The man let go of me, and I thought about running past him and into the hotel, but I wasn't sure I would be able to put the distance between us before he came after me. Besides, what if my brother was in there? I didn't know what they planned to do to him, but it was clear they had nothing good in mind. I didn't want to bring them right to his doorstep...

Before I could make a run for it, though, the guy who had been holding onto me made his move—and, in a matter of seconds, blood spattered over the concrete around me.

In shock, my mind goes back over the evening. I was having dinner with Shelby. I haven't seen her in a few months. "Here's to finally having you back!" she exclaimed as she lifted her glass to mine and touched them together.

I laughed. "You're just happy because you finally get free drinks at the hotel again," I teased her.

She waved a hand. "Well, yeah, kind of," she replied. "But having you back isn't so bad either, I guess."

I smiled at my best friend and lifted the glass to my lips. I had to admit, even though it felt like a lifetime since I'd last been here in Las Vegas, it was good to be back.

Hard to believe it had been nearly four years since I had been drinking with Shelby in this very spot, the family hotel I had practically grown up in. Back then, we never had anything other than sodas. My mom had always been hovering around, making sure we weren't going to try and sweet-talk Harry, the old bartender, into giving us anything stronger.

I felt a pang in my chest when I thought of my mom. God, I was still wrapping my head around her not being here any longer—I had always imagined toasting with her when I had finished my degree, the two of us celebrating it finally being over.

But instead, just a few weeks after I had graduated, they had—I could hardly even think of it—I was still trying to grasp the reality. My parents, both of them, were killed in a car accident on the way back from some dinner with their friends. I could still remember the moment Mark, my big brother, had called me—hearing his voice, cracked and broken, telling me they were gone. Feeling like nothing was ever going to be the same again, and having no idea how I was going to survive it.

I had been planning to stay in my apartment in New York for a little while longer, but I knew I couldn't leave my brother alone here to deal with all of this. I'd come back as soon as I had the chance to help him—make sure he knew how to handle all their business affairs. It's what I'd studied, after all, even if I hadn't expected my first job to revolve around handling my parents' will like this.

Having left college and my New York apartment behind, I returned to Las Vegas and was staying in the small hotel my brother inherited until I could find a place of my own. Mark was already there working on a few ideas. He'd started converting one of the old meeting rooms into a small, bespoke casino, which was a good idea. Everyone in Vegas expected the hotels to come with casinos, and I was sure we would bring in more guests once he'd gotten it set up, even if I was still trying to work out exactly how he was going to afford it. Dad had left him the hotel but also a decent amount of debt. All I could figure was that Mark must have found a way to pay it off.

It was good he was looking toward the future. I wasn't sure I had it in me to do the same right now. It was so hard to think about what I was going to do next now that our parents were gone. I missed them so much, sometimes, it felt like someone had hollowed out a giant hole in my heart, and I didn't know what could fill it. Hell, I didn't even know if I could fill it without them.

But I knew they wouldn't have wanted me to spend the rest of my life sitting around, waiting for something to change. My mom especially.

"If there's something you want to get done, then you have to be willing to get out there and do it yourself," she had told me when I was a teenager. Back then, I had likely just rolled my eyes at her, but now I could see she was right. And I was grateful for how much she had inspired me to pursue the career I had. She'd been involved in charity work all over the city, especially when it came to supporting women, using every little bit of clout and influence she had to try to make a difference in this world. There weren't many people out there who would have gone as far as she did to try and make things right, but her commitment was what was keeping me going these days. If she could do it, I could, too, right?

"What's on your mind?" Shelby asked, tipping her head to the side and raising her eyebrows at me. I shook my head. I didn't want to bring down what was meant to be a fun night with my solemn thoughts. Besides, with a few drinks in me, maybe I could loosen up a little and focus on having some fun.

And if there was anyone I could have fun with, it was Shelby. She had always been the kind of girl who knew how to let loose and party. Born and raised in Las Vegas, just like me, she might as well have been made for this city. It was a miracle she had managed to last as long as she had without getting caught sneaking into clubs with fake IDs, but I figured she didn't have to worry about it any longer.

“Nothing,” I replied, shaking my head. “Come on, let's get another drink, I want to have fun tonight.”

“Yeah, seems like your whole family is going that way,” she remarked, cocking an eyebrow. “Mark's setting up a casino, isn't he?”

“Yes, should be open by the end of the month,” I replied. She frowned.

“Sorry if this is over the line,” she told me. “But...how are you guys affording that? I mean, everything you told me about your family, it seemed like your parents didn't leave you much more than the hotel. Not enough to open up a place like that, anyway.”

I shrugged.

“I'm honestly not sure,” I replied. “I haven't asked him about it. He wanted to take over the hotel, and I'm not going to stick my nose in. Besides, I think a casino would be good—I mean, this is Vegas, after all. People expect there to be one in every hotel.”

“Yeah, don’t get me wrong, it’s a great idea,” she replied. “And I’ll get free drinks there, too, right?”

“You’ll have to talk to him about that,” I laughed. “But I don’t think he’s going to be throwing around the free booze if he can help it.”

“What, even for a beloved family friend like me?” Shelby cooed, planting a hand on her chest.

“You’ll have to sweet-talk him if you want that,” I pointed out, and she pulled a face.

“I’ll pass,” she replied and lifted her glass to her lips again.

Just like that, we turned the conversation on to her dating life. She always had some guy on the go, most of them sure they could tame her, and swiftly finding out they didn’t stand a chance. Ever since we’d been in high school together, she’d always been the one the guys paid attention to.

It had never really bothered me then because I got to hear all the juicy details while I could actually spend my time focused on my studies and getting the grades I needed to win the scholarship to NYU. But now? Now, I was starting to wonder if I should have been looking for someone. Maybe it could have eased the pain of losing my family if I had another half, someone I could share my emotions with.

But I didn’t want to jump into anything just for the sake of it. There had been plenty of offers when I was in college, given that everyone was pretty much trying to hook up with everyone else, but I had never wanted to fall into bed with

someone just to say I had. There'd been a few guys, a few dates, and even a few fun nights, but none of it had ever really turned into anything more than that. I had been too focused on my work to let some fling get in the way of it, and most of the guys I liked seemed to sense that from a mile away. They didn't want to get involved with me, because they knew I never would have put them first—not when there was so much about the world I wanted to change.

We drank till late into the night, and I walked Shelby outside so she could get a cab home safely. She lived in a little studio on the other side of the city, though she spent most of her nights with the random guys she hooked up with. She gave me a tight hug before she climbed into the car, as though she could tell there was a lot on my mind.

“If you need to talk about anything, just let me know, okay?” She said to me, looking me up and down. She knew me too well to let me get away with how quiet I had been this evening, how in my head I had let myself get. It wasn't that I wanted to be, of course, I didn't, but I was just...there was so much going on in my mind, and most of it was so dark I could hardly even think about putting it into words. I wouldn't have known where to begin.

“I will,” I replied, offering her a smile, hoping it would be enough to get her off my back for the time being. She had already been there for me so long as it was. She didn't need to be burdened with anything more than she already had.

“What a fucking idiot.” The stranger said.

And just like that I am back to the present. My eyes wide in surprise at all the blood. Shelby's gone and I'm looking up at the most beautiful man I've ever seen.

Chapter Two Scott

Fucking idiot.

That was all I could think as this fool made a lunge for me. I spiked my hand into his nose in a split second, sending a spray of blood across his face and dripping down his shirt. He had been drinking so it poured from him like a fountain as he staggered back, groaning in pain.

“Now, the two of you, get the fuck out of here,” I ordered them. The other assailant had hung back this whole time, and he grabbed his friend and muttered something to him. When he looked back at me, his eyes widened, and then, he rushed off, seeming to think better of the whole thing. Good. Better for them to figure that out now rather than wait and get themselves in more trouble than they could handle.

I turned to the girl, who was shaking hard. Her face was pale, and her whole body was tensed, shoulders drawn up to her ears.

“Are you okay?” I asked as I reached out to touch her arm. She jumped as soon as I laid a hand on her, and her eyes flared.

“I’m sorry, I just—” She blurted out.

“It’s okay. You don’t have to apologize,” I assured, pulling back so I didn’t put too much pressure on her. I had to remind myself that not everyone was used to this kind of thing—used to those kinds of thugs bursting out of nowhere to cause trouble. For me? They’d been background noise for my whole fucking life. They were downright average to me by now.

“I don’t know what just happened,” she stammered, her voice cracking. “I—I was just making sure my friend got to her car in one piece, and then, they came out of nowhere, they were...”

“Hey, hey, take a breath,” I told her, and she closed her eyes and drew in a long, shaky one. As she let it go, she looked up at me again.

“Thank you for that,” she murmured. “I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t been here.”

“It’s okay. I was. That’s what matters,” I assured her, glancing back toward the hotel. “Are you staying here? Do you want to walk me to your room?”

She paused, her eyes moving back toward the building. It was clear she didn’t much like the thought of stepping back in there, and, after what had just happened, I couldn’t blame her.

She was visibly shaken, and must have worried someone else was waiting to jump out of the shadows at her.

“No, I really don’t,” she confessed, lowering her eyes to the ground. “But I don’t have anywhere else I can go. I’ll have to call for a car. I hope they can get here fast.” There was doubt in her voice.

“You can stay with me, if you want,” I offered, before I had a chance to think about how ridiculous the words probably sounded. I wasn’t trying to get her back to my place, not like *that*, anyway. But I couldn’t just leave her standing around here waiting for an Uber, feeling it was a better alternative than returning to her room. She deserved better than that.

She parted her lips in surprise, and I could tell she was about to turn me down. She likely thought I was just trying to get into her panties, even though I had no intention of anything like that.

“I’m not trying to sleep with you, if that’s what you’re worried about,” I told her quickly. “It’s just—” I looked into the shadows “—you don’t want to be out here alone.”

She paused for a moment, considering the offer. It clearly wasn’t what she had expected, but I could tell she didn’t want to be out here any longer than she needed to be. Her shoulders sagged, and she nodded.

“I don’t like the idea of standing out here alone,” she admitted, finally. “Not after what just happened. I hope you don’t think I’m crazy...”

“I just saw you get confronted by two thugs,” I reminded her. “I don’t think you’re crazy for not feeling entirely safe. Hey, my name’s Scott, by the way. Scott Stewart.” I held my hand out to her to show her I didn’t bite.

Her soft hand managed a firm shake. “Thea Simpson,” she said.

She managed to smile. She had a nice smile, slightly crooked but warm and welcoming. Now that the danger had passed, I couldn’t help but notice how attractive she was. In her simple black dress and heels, she could have looked like any other girl out on the strip for a fun night on the town, but there was something different about her; something about the way she carried herself, her athletic body set in confidence, despite what she had been through.

“Come on, let me get you to my car,” I told her, and touched her shoulder, steering her toward where I had parked. The last thing I had expected when I came to this meeting with Mark was running into trouble like this. Still, I supposed I should have been ready for it. Much as I liked Mark, and as much as I was sure I could turn his business into a lucrative opportunity for the two of us, he had been in financial trouble when I had stepped in. No doubt there was a stack of debts he had to pay off and plenty of guys who would do whatever it took to get them paid.

But they hadn’t expected someone like me to turn up. Never did. I mean, honestly, I doubted they had imagined a person like me would have been anywhere near a place like this, but

that was the point—it was the perfect cover for some of our finances because nobody would have expected me to invest in a hotel as unremarkable as this one.

I could figure that out tomorrow, though. Right now, there was a woman who needed my help, and I was sure my father's spirit would have struck me from beyond the grave if I hadn't done everything I could to help her.

She paused in front of my car, eyebrows raised, and then turned to me.

“This is yours?”

“It sure is,” I replied, opening the door for her. It was a sleek Mercedes Roadster I had picked up last year, the newest model, and I had to admit, I liked the chance to show it off whenever I could.

“This is nice,” she murmured as she slipped into the soft leather seats. I grinned, taking the driver's side, and watched as she admired the handsome interior I had selected.

I pulled away from the hotel and heard her breathing begin to slow down and steady as she relaxed. I stole glances at her out of the corner of my eye and silently thanked whoever was watching over her that I had been around to help before anything went too crazy.

“I don't even know why they came at me like that,” she muttered once she had managed to pull herself together. “I just...they targeted me specifically, but I can't figure out why.

I've never had something like that happen to me before, not in the whole time I've lived here. Not really."

"You lived here long?" I asked.

"Most of my life," she replied. "I came back a few weeks ago, just finished college, but I grew up here before that."

"Welcome home," I remarked, and she let out a wry laugh.

"Yeah, not sure this is the welcome I was hoping for," she replied, settling back into the seat.

Finally, we pulled up outside my place, and her eyes nearly bugged out of her head when she saw where I had taken her.

"You have a townhouse?" She asked, sounding stunned. "Those things cost, like..."

"A lot," I finished up for her. She seemed to be getting it through her head that I had a decent amount of money, and I wasn't exactly planning on playing it down. I was proud of everything I had, everything my family had worked for, and I didn't see any reason to pretend I wasn't.

"I have a spare bedroom. I can get you set up in there," I offered, and she looked guarded but smiled and nodded.

"Thank you for this," she told me. "Not everyone in this city would do what you just did. Most would just look the other way. But...I appreciate it. I really do."

"I guess I'm just trying to set an example for everyone else, then," I replied, and I led her up the steps to the opulent townhouse I had been renovating for the last few months. It

was starting to look just how I had imagined it, and I was proud to call it my home.

Inside, the place was quiet, and after the rush of the city and the road, it was a relief. She peered around, and grinned.

“This place is amazing,” she remarked. “Way better than the hotel room.”

“Glad I could be of service,” I replied, dipping myself down into a playful bow. “Are you hungry—thirsty?”

“I guess...a drink, maybe?” She replied, pulling a face like she was worried she was being an imposition. “I could use something to settle my nerves...”

“Sure thing,” I nodded, walking over to the liquor cabinet at the far side of the room. It was stocked with the most expensive wines, spirits, and whiskeys in the country. I didn’t like to bother with anything but the best. Why waste time with so-so, when you could indulge in the finest?

I poured her a generous glass of brandy at her request and handed it to her. Our fingers skimmed against one another’s for the briefest moment, and I was sure I could see a small smile pass over her face as we touched.

“Thank you,” she murmured, and as she lifted the glass to her lips, I couldn’t help but notice how her lips brushed over the rim. They were soft, full, and damn appealing.

And maybe this was about more than rescuing a damsel. Maybe there was something in it for me, too. Maybe I wanted to find out exactly where this was going to take us.

Chapter Three Thea

“Excuse me a moment,” the man said as he rose to his feet and left the room. I stared after him as he went and felt the flutter in my stomach that told me this was going way, way better than I thought it would.

I didn't even know how I had ended up here. I shouldn't have been running off with strangers, I knew that. But there was something about him that just drew me in, something I couldn't deny, though maybe I should have. The way he had stepped in to help me, scared off those guys as though it was the most normal thing in the world, had me intrigued. He clearly held some sort of power over them, and I needed to know where that came from.

And, shit, my instincts hadn't been entirely wrong because this guy must have been loaded. I mean, *loaded* loaded, judging by how incredible his house and car was. I knew his name—Scott—but I didn't know much more about him, let alone what he had been doing at my brother's hotel.

I gave him my first name but hadn't mentioned to him that I knew the owner of the hotel or that I was a member of the family that had run it for so long. I wasn't sure why, but there was a part of me that wanted to hold that back. I wasn't ready to share every detail with this stranger yet. Maybe because I thought it might put him off. And I was enjoying his attention way too much to let something like that happen.

Yes, Scott was hot. Hot as hell, actually. Not just the way he looked, though that was a part of it—no, it was the way he walked, talked, moved, and acted like he had this whole city in the palm of his hand. Hell, judging from the way those guys had reacted to him, maybe he did...

I pushed those thoughts to the back of my mind as he returned to the liquor cabinet.

"Would you like another?" He asked, and I nodded. I probably should have stopped boozing, but I was going to need liquid courage if I would get up the nerve to make a move on someone like him. And I didn't intend to let this opportunity slide through my fingers. It would be good to blow off some steam, and forget about everything that had been going on in my life. Because this? This was a total fantasy. Some gorgeous, rich guy, sweeping me off my feet, stepping in to help me when I needed it most. I wasn't even sure if any of it could be real, but I didn't want to look this gift horse in the mouth, not when I was having so much fun.

He poured me another drink and handed me the glass. Our fingertips grazed just slightly, and I felt a shiver of electricity

run up my arm. Did he know the effect he had on me? I got the feeling he wasn't exactly oblivious to how women were around him. No guy in the world carried himself with that much confidence unless they were certain they had game, and he had more of it than he knew what to do with.

"Thanks," I murmured, watching as he slipped into the seat next to me. God, he was hot—the way he stretched his arm out over the couch, shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows to show off his muscles. He was getting me all hot and bothered in ways I knew I shouldn't. I was a grown woman, for goodness sake, I wasn't the kind who would just trip over herself with sheer thirst when she saw someone hot.

But he was more than just sexy. And he seemed interested in me and only me right now, which sent shivers down my spine. I hadn't been the center of anyone's attention like this in a long time, as though he was totally fascinated by me.

"So, you're just back in Vegas, huh?" He asked, and I nodded.

"Yeah, just graduated."

"In what?"

"Charitable business studies," I replied proudly. I could still hardly believe I got to say that out loud. I had worked my ass off for that degree, and knowing I had finally achieved my goal felt like a miracle.

"Worthy causes your thing, then?" He asked.

“Yeah, I think so,” I replied. “Plenty of people in Las Vegas who need help, that’s for sure.”

“Oh, tell me about it,” he chuckled. “Though I doubt most of them would actually accept the help they actually need.”

I laughed, and took a sip of my drink. Was it the alcohol that had me feeling tipsy, or was it something about the way he was looking at me? I could normally hold my drink well, but with his eyes on me, I felt myself getting a little dizzy.

And I loved every second of it.

We continued to chat as the night drew on, and it seemed like every time he got up, he would come back to sit just a little closer to me. I could smell his aftershave, which had to be as expensive as the rest of him. Inhaling the scent made my stomach flip over and over again, my system telling me to make a move before I let this chance get away from me. Hell, I was sure Shelby was somewhere out there, yelling at me to actually do something with this hot guy who had been dropped out of nowhere right onto my lap.

We were next to each other on the crushed velvet loveseat that looked out over the city lights in the distance. There weren’t many places in Las Vegas where you could get this kind of quiet, except for the upscale neighborhoods.

Scott moved his leg so that it was pressed up against mine, and the sight of his muscular thigh so close to me had me ready to melt.

I put my drink down, my hands shaking slightly as I did so. I turned to look at him. The expression on his face and the look in his eyes told me everything I needed to know—gave me all the come-on I required to convince me that I wouldn't be turned down if I tried to kiss him.

“Thank you so much for what you did for me tonight,” I told him shyly, reaching up to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “I...I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't been there to help.”

“Glad I was there,” he murmured, and I reached out, putting my hand on his leg. I felt bold—whether it was the drinks or the adrenalin of what had happened earlier, I wasn't sure, but I wanted to ride it—and him—as far as they would take me.

“I want to thank you properly, though,” I murmured, dropping my voice down low, letting him know exactly where my mind was at. He grinned, his hand sliding to my waist as he pulled me in a little closer.

“If you must,” he replied with a sexy growl. And, finally, I moved towards him, tilting my head to the side so I could bring my lips to his—and we could finally kiss.

The taste of his lips on mine had the hairs on the back of my neck standing up at once. His hand dropped to my hip, tugging me even closer. He deepened the kiss, pushing his tongue into my mouth as I brushed my hands over his chest, feeling his muscles beneath his shirt. My trembling fingers undid his buttons, but I tried to take my time. I wanted him so badly it was making it hard to think straight, so badly that just this kiss

was getting me way too overheated, and I didn't want to waste a second of the time I had here. I didn't know how long it would be before this fantasy was broken, and I was sure as hell going to enjoy it while I still could.

I climbed on top of him, straddling him on the couch and pushing his shirt open. I normally wasn't quite so forward when it came to sex, but I had been sitting here for so long, trying to contain myself, that the desire had gotten the better of me, and I was unable to do anything but let this happen.

“Fuck,” he growled against my mouth, grabbing my hips and pulling them down onto his lap hard, grinding himself into me. I could already feel him starting to stiffen beneath me, and it thrilled me, knowing that he wanted me just as much as I did him. How could we deny it? He might have just been playing Good Samaritan earlier, but right now, I wanted him to be anything but good to me.

I kissed his neck as he pushed up my dress, his fingers trailing over my bare thighs as he exposed me. I loved the feel of his touch on my skin, the way it seemed to send my already overheated body into orbit. He knew just what he was doing when it came to getting me all hot and bothered, and I briefly wondered how many other women had been in my position over the years—literally.

I pushed that thought to the back of my mind. It didn't matter who else had been here. It mattered that I was the one here now, didn't it? I moved my mouth back to his lips and

kissed him again, harder this time, as I slipped my hands down to his pants and pulled down the zipper.

I took his cock into my hand, slowly beginning to stroke him as our tongues met again. I could feel his desire for me, the way it seemed to pulse off of him in waves, and I wasn't willing to wait much longer to feel it for myself.

Well, maybe a little longer.

I slipped down between his knees, kneeling on the floor in front of him, and pushed my hands up and over his thighs, smiling playfully.

"I told you I wanted to thank you," I murmured as I took his cock in my hand once more, and I leaned towards him and planted a kiss on his tip. He groaned loudly, draping one arm along the back of the couch and bringing the other to the back of my head, cradling it gently as I started to go down on him.

I had never felt hungrier for anyone before in my life—the intoxication of being this close to him was mind-bending, and I pushed my head down, taking as much of him as I could at once. He pushed himself back up to meet me, sliding his hand down to my shoulders and massaging softly as I worked, like he wanted me to know he seriously appreciated everything I was doing for him.

I used my tongue to work the underside of his shaft before I reached back to his tip, dipping my lips over his head before I moved to engulf him once again. There was something so sexy to me about the way he felt in my mouth, the fullness of it, knowing I had been enough to get him to this point—that I had

been enough to turn him on beyond what he could handle. I had never been the kind of girl to have this effect on men. At least, that's what I'd thought right up until the moment the two of us had come together like this.

He let me go down on him for a little longer, moving my mouth up and down, up and down on him until he was swollen beneath my lips. It didn't take long, though, before he couldn't take anymore, and he reached down to pull me up on top of him.

He kissed me hard as he reached beneath me, pulling my panties to the side and lining his cock up with my slit.

"I really need to fuck you right now," he told me, his voice low and full of desire. I gasped as I felt him push into me for the first time, grabbing my hips and lowering me down on top of him like he just couldn't wait any longer. My head spun as his fullness took me, making it impossible for me to focus on anything but him. It was like the whole world, including the bullshit that had gone down earlier this evening had just slipped away.

I grabbed onto the back of the couch and moved against him hard, taking as much of him as I could inside me, rocking back and forth on his length. I could see the edge of a tattoo sticking out from under his shirt—it looked like scales wrapping around the top of his shoulder. I couldn't take my eyes off of him. I watched him as he entered me for the first time, the way his brow furrowed, jaw tightening, like the pleasure was just too much for him to handle. I loved seeing him like this,

utterly given over to the way I made him feel, the way our bodies felt coming together like this.

He pushed my dress up so he could watch himself inside of me, watch his cock moving in and out, in and out of me. He groaned with pleasure, and I pulled him back up to face me so I could kiss him again, our tongues meeting with a hunger I had never felt before in my life. Maybe it was the intensity of how we'd met, or maybe it was something else entirely, but I couldn't begin to control myself. Even though we had only met earlier this evening, my body had been demanding this, needing this, from the second we'd stepped into his house, and I could hardly believe I'd managed to wait as long as I had to do this.

He grabbed onto my hips and pushed me down hard on top of him, holding himself there, stirring his cock inside of me as he gazed up into my eyes like he couldn't believe I was really there. I pressed my forehead to his, breathing him in, drawing in his scent.

I knew it wouldn't take long for me to come—when he felt as perfect as this, as good as this, nothing could hold me back. I was moving down hard on top of him, filling myself with him, deep, hard, wanting as much as I could get. I could tell he wasn't far from the edge himself, his breath catching at the back of his throat as he drove himself into me over and over again.

He pulled me against him, wrapping his arms around me tight and pulling me in close as he thrust into me once, twice

—and then, finally, I felt him finish inside of me. He let out a long moan against my ear, and the sound of it was all it took to push me over the edge and into my own release. My mind went blank as the orgasm tore through me, my body clenching against his, my thighs trembling as I tried to find some way to keep myself upright on top of him. He trailed his tongue over my bottom lip as he felt me tighten around him, and I could feel the cocky smile on his lips, telling me everything I needed to know.

Slowly, I drew back from him to catch my breath, my heart beating so hard in my chest that I was sure he would be able to hear it. He smoothed my hair back from my face, and looked up at me.

“You good?” He murmured, tracing his fingers over my chin. I smiled and nodded, resting my forehead against his once more.

“So fucking good,” I replied, and we both laughed. He wrapped his arms around me, and I lowered my head into his shoulder, closing my eyes. This night might have turned ugly for a minute there. But now, here, with him, it couldn’t have been more perfect, and I wouldn’t have changed a thing about how it had turned out.

“I think I should get you to bed,” he remarked as I slid into the spot next to him.

“Guest bedroom?” I asked, and he flashed me a grin.

“What do you think?” He replied, and I laughed. Yeah. I was pretty sure we were fully and completely past guest bedrooms

by now.

Chapter Four Scott

When I woke the next morning, it was to the feel of someone in the bed next to me—not exactly something I was used to.

But, as I turned to face Thea, I couldn't help but smile. I had thought she might leave before I had a chance to wake up, but, listening to her slow breath as she slept, I was glad she had chosen not to.

I trailed a finger down her bare back, admiring the curve of it beneath my hand. Last night had been good—as in, really, really fucking good. Our chemistry was insane, and we'd spent most of the night fucking before we had collapsed into bed and fallen asleep next to one another in the early hours of the morning. It had been a long time since I'd had an all-night session like that, and I had forgotten how damn hot it was to not be able to get enough of each other—to make out and fuck and touch and do everything you could think of, just because you were so into each other you couldn't resist it.

I had no idea what was going to happen now, of course. No idea if she was going to slip out the first chance she got and leave all of this behind. I wouldn't have blamed her if she did. We had met in slightly odd circumstances, and I doubted most women dreamed of meeting a guy when they were being sized up by two random thugs.

But, at the same time, I had seriously enjoyed what we'd shared, and I wanted to know where it might have gone from here. What we might have been able to make if we just played our cards right. It was clear the desire was there between us—what else could there have been if we just played our cards right?

I sat up and stretched, heading to a shower to wash off the remnants of the night before and to give her a chance to sneak out without running into me if she didn't want to. I was never going to pressure her to stay. There were plenty of women out there who would have liked to be with me without a caveat, and if she wasn't one of them, she was welcome to go on her way.

But when I came out of the shower, Thea was still there, sitting up and looking around. It was clear it had taken her a moment to remember where she was—more an indicator of how brain-scrambling our time together had been than the booze, I hoped.

She smiled when she saw me, patting her hand down on the bed, motioning me to join her. I didn't need to be told twice. I

headed over and took my seat next to her, tucking a hand behind her head as I did so.

“Good morning,” I murmured to her, and she grinned as I pulled her into a kiss.

“Good morning,” she began, but before she could get out another word, there was a knock at the door. She jumped, and I sighed and pulled back.

“Sorry,” I apologized. “Probably just one of my associates stopping by with some papers. I’ll be back in a minute.”

I threw on a robe and headed down the stairs, opening the door to find Mark standing on the other side. He was holding a handful of papers that looked as though they had been crammed hurriedly in his bag before he had left the house.

“Hi, Mark,” I greeted him, keeping my voice as calm as I could. I didn’t want to let him know I had a girl upstairs. It would have been totally unprofessional. Even though there were men in my position who likely would have loved to show off their game, I had never been one of them.

“I’ve got the papers we were talking about yesterday to confirm your investment in the casino,” he explained as he handed them over to me. “You can take a look in your own time. No rush. I mean, the sooner, the better, but...”

He trailed off, stopping himself before he could get too forward.

“Thank you,” I replied, and I heard a creak on the stairs. I glanced around to see Thea ducking behind the banister. What

was she doing down here? And why was she acting like she didn't want to be seen by anyone? It's not as if anyone would know her. I doubted we were in the same circle—hell, universe. Maybe she had been trying to slip out and instead been caught in the act.

“I'll get these back to you as soon as I have the chance,” I promised him, and I tucked them under my arm. Mark frowned, having noticed me looking over my shoulder.

“Is someone else here?” He asked me, and I shook my head.

“Just me, as far as I know,” I replied, smiling at him. He nodded, though I could tell he didn't exactly believe me. He knew better than to go delving, though. The two of us were still pretty fresh in working together, and Mark was cautious around me. I was the first person in my position he'd ever worked with, and he seemed to approach every meeting as though he was expecting the cops to bust down the door and arrest him on the spot.

“Right, right,” He replied. “I'll catch you later, then?”

“Catch you later,” I echoed and watched as he made his way back to the car before I closed the door behind him. Maybe I shouldn't have given him my address. I wasn't sure I wanted him rolling up out of nowhere like that, but if we were going to be working together, I'd need to get used to it.

I turned around to find Thea standing there draped in one of my shirts, her eyes wide as though she had seen a ghost.

“Who the hell was that?” She demanded, wrapping her arms around herself, her eyes darting back and forth like she was expecting someone else to burst out of a cupboard when she least expected it.

“Just someone I’m working with,” I told her. “Why? What’s it got to do with you?”

“Mark? Is his name Mark?” She pressed me. I frowned at her in confusion.

“Yes, how do you know that?”

“Because he’s my fucking brother,” she exclaimed, rubbing a hand over her face and shaking her head. My eyes nearly bugged out of my head when she said that.

“Your brother?” I repeated, making sure I had heard her right.

“Yeah,” she muttered, shaking her head. “I...I didn’t know the two of you were working together. Are you something to do with the new casino?”

“Yeah, I’m helping him get it set up,” I replied, and she groaned.

“Holy shit, why didn’t you say something about it last night?” She asked me. “I never would have...I mean, I would have thought twice about it, at least...”

“You didn’t say anything about your family owning the hotel,” I protested. “Why didn’t you tell me? That’s why those guys were coming after you, because they were trying to get to your brother...”

“Because I didn’t think it was relevant,” she argued. “If I’d known you were working with Mark, I shouldn’t have...”

She trailed off, stopping herself before she could go any further.

“What’s the big deal?” I asked her. “It’s not like I’m sleeping with your brother...”

“The big deal is that he would fucking kill me if he found out I had hooked up with someone he worked with,” She replied, shaking her head. “He hates getting business and...*not* business mixed up. Can’t say I blame him. But if he knew I was here, he would have lost it, trust me.”

“And that’s why you were hiding behind the stairs?” I asked her. Her cheeks flushed a little.

“I just couldn’t let him see me, that’s all,” she said. “I didn’t want to make this more complicated than it had to be.”

“This?” I asked her. “And what exactly is this?”

She narrowed her eyes at me.

“I don’t know, but we can’t let it happen again,” she told me firmly. “I’m not going to let this get in the way of whatever you’re doing with my brother. And I’m not going to spend my first few weeks back here getting distracted by someone like you.”

“Like me?” I raised my eyebrows. I wasn’t sure exactly what she meant by that, and, judging by the look on her face, she didn’t, either.

“It doesn’t matter,” she replied, waving a hand as though she was dismissing everything we just talked about. “I just need to go. Get my things, and go. And, as far as you’re concerned, none of this happened, alright?”

“Sure thing,” I replied, rolling my shoulders back and meeting her gaze steadily. There was something about her that suggested to me it might not be over as easily as she was hoping, but I wasn’t going to say that right now. If she wanted to walk out of that door and pretend none of this had ever happened, that was on her, and I wasn’t going to race to try and keep her here.

“Thank you,” she sighed with relief. “I...I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about my brother and the hotel sooner. If I’d thought it was going to matter, I wouldn’t have come here at all.”

“No problem,” I told her, keeping my voice calm. Really, I wanted her to stay, but I knew if I was going to find some way to tempt her back, I was going to have to rely on our chemistry to do it, not by pressuring her. If there was a single thing that put women off, it was feeling as though they were being pushed towards an inevitable conclusion, shoved in the direction of something they didn’t want to do.

And besides, after how we’d spent the night before, I was pretty certain she wasn’t going to stay away for long.

She headed back upstairs to get dressed, and I followed her with my gaze, checking out her long legs beneath my shirt. God, she was hot. And the sex we’d had last night...maybe it was just the intensity of the way we’d met, the potential

danger, but it had been enough to burn itself into my memory. The feel of her around me, the sigh of her on her knees in front of me, so delicious and so sexy I couldn't even imagine going without it now that I'd had a taste of it.

But hey, if she wasn't comfortable with it—so be it. It wasn't as though she was going to be rid of me just like that, given that I was working with her brother. The two of us would be seeing a whole lot of each other around the hotel, and maybe I would even go out of my way to make sure she couldn't put too much distance between us. I knew what would be on my mind whenever we laid eyes on one another, and I just hoped the same could be said for her.

Once she was dressed, she headed downstairs. Her eyes were lowered to the ground like she was doing the walk of shame. I leaned in the doorway, and she had to brush by me as she went out the door, close enough that I could smell the scent of her lingering in the air. God, I wanted to kiss her again, but I would hold back for now. I was sure she would be back for more in her own time. There was no need to hurry it along.

“Thank you for...being so cool about this,” she told me, as she lingered there on the doorstep. “I promise I'm not going to make this weird. Now that I know you're working with my brother. It's not—it won't make it weird.”

“Good to know,” I replied, keeping my voice neutral. I didn't want to give anything away. If she wanted to find out more about how I really felt, she was going to have to come to me to

do it. Anything to get her back in my home again—back in my bed again.

She smiled at me one last time, then turned and headed for the elevator. Downstairs, she hailed a cab and climbed in quickly, and before I knew it, she had been whisked away, probably speeding off back to the hotel.

Back to her brother.

The man who had no idea that his little sister had been in the house with me when he had stopped by earlier. I couldn't help but smirk in amusement. Yeah, I would make sure to keep that one to myself. I doubted he would have been too happy if he'd known what had really been going on behind closed doors last night.

I turned back inside to look over the papers that Mark had dropped off. I needed to get back to work. Last night had been a pleasant diversion, but I had to keep my head in the game.

Even if I wished I could have been keeping my head between Thea's legs instead.

Chapter Five Thea

I drummed my fingers on the desk as I waited for my brother to show up. Where the hell was he? I needed to talk to him.

I knew he would be confused by all of this, by my sudden interest in the business, but I had to find out what was going on with Scott and how the two of them had come to work together. And just what it was Scott was doing to earn all that cash.

I knew I shouldn't have even been thinking about him, really. Ever since I had seen Mark turn up at his door, I had known I needed to forget Scott ever existed, forget anything had ever happened between us in the first place. God knows I had tried.

Honestly, when I climbed into that cab after leaving his place, I had sworn to myself in all the ways I could that I wasn't going to let anything that happened get the better of me. Yes, it had been hot—yes, it had been some of the best sex of my life with a guy who had saved me as nobly as he had.

And maybe there had been a part of me that would have wanted more if I could get it.

That morning, when I'd woken up in Scott's bed, I had just felt as though I belonged there. Hearing him in the shower, seeing him in the light of day when he had emerged, he was so damn sexy to me that it was hard to think straight. Seeing that gorgeous, muscular body, his cocky grin, and the way he ran his hand over his near-shaven head like he knew just what was going through my mind when I stared at him. In the light of day, I could see his tattoo, a large snake that curled up over his torso, its head resting on his shoulder, tongue flickering out over the top of his chest. It was intricate. Each scale was picked out in ink—a little scary and a little sexy all at the same time.

He was well aware of the effect he had on me, and he enjoyed it. And I enjoyed him enjoying it.

If I could have stayed in his bed all day, I would have. Even as I had been lying there, before I'd heard Mark's voice at the door, I had been thinking about how I could spend the rest of my week there with him. How I could have his hands all over me, his touch hungry for my body, his kiss as starved as it had been last night.

And then I'd heard Mark, and I'd known I had to get out of there. Mark was *always* particular about keeping business away from pleasure, and I knew he would have lost it if he had known I had slept with someone he was working with. He was more protective than he needed to be of me, too, especially

since we'd lost our parents, and I had no doubt he would do anything he could to chase Scott away from me.

I got it. I did. Mark just didn't want to see me hurt again after everything we had been through. But it was hard to imagine someone like Scott hurting me. He had *saved* me. And what we had shared was so intense and so passionate and so, so good. In fact, much as I had tried to convince myself I could do without him, much as I had been the one to call a halt to things between us, I had also been the one unable to shake the memory of him from my mind, much to my chagrin.

And so, I had decided to meet with Mark, ostensibly so I could talk to him about the casino. It was *our* family business, after all, and even if he was running it, I wanted to make sure I was involved with it wherever I could be. But, in truth, I was going to delve as much as I could into the man he was working with to learn just how they had come to go into business together. And maybe learn where Scott had managed to get his obviously sizeable fortune from.

I had this nagging feeling there was something heavy going on behind the scenes—the way those guys who had confronted me had reacted to him, it was as though they knew they had to put as much distance between themselves and him as possible, and I couldn't help but wonder why. What did he have that made him so commanding? What was going on that made it so difficult for people to stand up to him? I knew there were plenty of shady enterprises in this city, and it wouldn't have surprised me if he was part of at least one of them.

“Hey, hey,” Mark greeted me, slightly out of breath. “What’s up? Sorry I’m late, I was getting a coffee.”

He came over to me and gave me a quick hug, and I squeezed him right back. Sometimes, in the midst of all this craziness, my big brother felt like the only touch of normalcy I had. He took his seat opposite me and I sipped the large iced coffee he had brought with him.

“That thing’s going to give you a heart attack,” I scolded him looking at his quadruple latte, but I knew he was never going to listen to me when it came to matters of his caffeine consumption.

“Yeah, well, you try running this place without drinking your body weight in coffee,” he told me.

“I just finished college, Mark. I know all about coffee.” I laughed. I almost felt bad that I was bringing this to him, but I figured it was the best way to get myself over the guy who had been on my mind since the weekend—even if Mark had no idea why I had so much interest in Scott. I planned to keep it that way, too.

“Yeah, of course you do,” he replied. “So, what did you want to talk about?”

“Just the casino,” I told him with a shrug, trying to keep my voice casual. “I wanted to know where you were with development. You know, when you’re going to open, who’s involved, stuff like that...”

“I thought you said you didn’t want to be involved with the hotel details?” He asked, looking confused.

“Well, now I’m back. I thought it would make sense for me to help out where I can,” I replied. “So, what’s going on with it? How did you get the money for it? It’s not like Mom or Dad left us much to work with...”

“Uh, I joined up with some businessmen in the city,” He replied, but his eyes slid away from me as he spoke. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up. I knew my brother well enough to know when he was bullshitting me, and I would be damned if he wasn’t trying to pull that off right now.

“What kind of businessmen?” I pressed him. Of course, he didn’t have to know that I’d wound up in bed with one of them just a few days ago, but I still wanted to find out what exactly Scott was investing here.

“A few people who want to develop businesses in the city,” he added vaguely.

“Yeah, but why did they decide to invest here?” I asked him. I knew business well enough to know that what my father had left behind wasn’t exactly the most appealing thing for someone looking to get ahead in the game, and I couldn’t figure out why they would have made a choice to work with Mark over so many other up and coming places in the city.

“We, uh, offered them benefits not everyone was willing to put out there,” he continued. The way he was talking, it was starting to get me really worried. Like he was trying to cover something up.

“Like what?” I asked.

“Does it really matter?” He replied, shrugging.

“Yeah, it matters to me, Mark,” I replied firmly. “I know I said you were going to run the place, but this is still my family business, too. I want to know what’s going on with it.”

“It’s fine, you’re just back from college, you have other things to focus on,” he replied, waving a hand and getting to his feet. “Anyway, I really have to—uh, I have to get back to work...”

“Mark, what’s going on?” I asked him. “Why won’t you tell me who’s working with you? Or why?”

Something hit me, and my eyes widened.

“Is it illegal?”

“You really don’t have to worry about it—”

“Mark, sit down,” I ordered him. “You know me well enough to know I’m not going to let this go until you tell me the truth. So, what’s going on? Who’s investing in the hotel?”

He stared at me for a moment and then seemed to realize there was no way he could just blow me off by saying what he thought I wanted to hear and hoping for the best.

“Okay, look, I know you’re not going to be happy about this,” he told me. “It’s why I didn’t want to drag you into it. I didn’t want you worrying about all of it...”

“And why would I be worried about it?” I asked him. “What’s going on?”

“There are some...*people* I’m working with who’ve agreed to help out with the hotel if I let them use the casino,” He explained.

“Use it? For what?” I pressed.

“They’ve invested so they can use the casino for some of their own business interests—you know, ways they can get money moving through the city...”

“You mean laundering?” I demanded. “Is that what you’re talking about?”

He fell silent. If he wasn’t arguing, then it was because he didn’t have a comeback. I groaned and sat back in my seat.

“Laundering. Mark, are you fucking crazy?” I demanded. “You must know how dangerous this is. And Dad would never want you to get involved with those kinds of people...”

“Yeah, well, it’s either do something like that or watch this place fail, and I’m not going to do that,” he snapped back.

“These people you’re working with... who are they?” I asked. This was how I would get to the bottom of what was going on with Scott. I couldn’t bring up his name, not yet, not without Mark figuring out I knew more about him than I should have, but I wanted to find out just how fucked-up his business was—what exactly was he laundering money for?

“Just some...family businesses around the city.”

“You need to stop talking like you’re trying to hide something, it’s only making me more worried,” I told him. “Criminals?”

He dropped his head to his chest, then nodded.

“Some of them.”

I closed my eyes, hardly able to comprehend what I had just heard. My brother, involved with criminals. My family business, being used like this. And me, falling into bed with one of them...it was all more than I could wrap my head around.

“I think I bumped into one of them recently,” I replied, furrowing my brow as though I was having a hard time bringing his name to mind. “Scott...something?”

“Oh, yeah, Scott,” he replied. “He’s our main investor, actually. It’s his business we’ll be...helping out.”

“And what exactly is his business?” I asked him.

He sighed heavily. I could tell he didn’t want to have to share this part with me. But he was going to have to. I wasn’t going to back off until I had found out exactly what was going on with him, with his business—with our family hotel. And he knew it.

“Mafia.”

My stomach dropped. I felt like I was going to throw up. The corners of my vision began to blur slightly, and I tried my best not to fall forward onto the desk.

Mafia? Fucking Mafia? I had known it wasn’t going to be anything good, but this—this was beyond what I could have imagined. Not only was my brother wrapped up with some of

the most dangerous people in the city—not only was Scott part of the business, but I had slept with him.

No wonder he was so rich. No wonder his penthouse was so expensive. No wonder he had scared off those guys who had tried to start shit with me. All of it was falling into place now—in the most horrible way I could imagine.

“Mafia?” I repeated.

“It’s really not as bad as it seems,” he tried to assure me. “I know how it sounds, but—”

“Yeah, you know how it sounds!” I exclaimed. “You’re working with some of the most dangerous people in the city! Laundering money for them! What happens if something goes wrong? Your head’s going to be on the chopping block—mine, too, maybe!”

“They would never come near you,” he replied, and his voice was so sure and so determined I didn’t want to tell him the truth—that they *had* come after me just a few days before, looking for money he owed them. He would never have been able to forgive himself if he knew I was put in harm’s way, and this confrontation was hard enough as it was.

“That’s not the point,” I replied, quickly changing the subject. “You can’t do this—you have to be able to see how dangerous it is, right?”

“I didn’t see what other choice I had,” he replied, and his voice cracked as he spoke. “It was go into business with these people or watch this hotel fall apart—and I couldn’t let that

happen, not after we just lost Mom and Dad. It didn't seem fair. We'd already been through enough as it was."

I looked at my brother and felt a wave of sadness hit me. He'd been so strong. So strong for me because he knew I couldn't handle the enormity of looking down the barrel of a life without my parents. *Our* parents.

"But you can't let these people into our lives," I told him.

"It's done now," he shrugged. "We have no choice. They'll make more trouble for us if we stop now than if we go forward."

I felt my shoulders sag. I knew he was right. If we tried to pull out of this now, the people he was working with would cause more problems than if we just pushed on with it.

But the thought of being tied to the Mafia in any respect scared me shitless—especially since I had just made things a whole hell of a lot more complicated by having sex with one of them.

"I'm sorry, Thea," Mark told me, and I reached over the table and squeezed his hand.

"I know you were just trying to do the right thing," I assured him. "I just...please let me know before you accept any more deals, okay? And let me help out with the casino. I can make sure you're not getting fucked over."

Any more than you already have.

The words hung unspoken in the air between us, but I was sure he knew what was on my mind. I didn't want to be too

harsh with him, especially not given what I had done, but at the same time—I was horrified. My father had worked to build this little hotel from the ground up, and now Mark had joined forces with the kind of people he would have done anything to avoid. I didn't even want to think what he would have had to say about it.

But that wasn't relevant right now—there was nothing he could say about it, because he wasn't around anymore. It was just the two of us now, the two of us out here doing everything we could to keep the family business alive, and we had to be prepared to do some stuff we might never have imagined before.

I rose to my feet and bid farewell to my brother, heading out of his office and closing the door behind me. Squeezing my eyes shut, I tried to take in everything he had just said.

I couldn't believe I had slept with someone in the mafia. Someone so dangerous. The only guys I had been with before were college students like me, about as dangerous as a room full of cotton wool, but Scott? Scott was something else entirely.

Something far, far more threatening.

And yet, despite everything I had discovered about him, I still found my mind drifting back to our time together—how hot it had been—his kiss, his hands all over my body. The way he had caressed me and held me like I was dropped from heaven right into his living room.

I needed to forget about him. Right now. I can't let my mind wander back to him. Whatever had happened between us, it was in the past now. He was working with my brother, just in case I needed any other reason to keep my hands off of him, and I was sure he had already moved on anyway. A guy like that, he could have anyone in the city he wanted, and I was sure he made the very most of that power every chance he got.

I felt a twinge of jealousy in my chest as I thought about it. Yeah, he really could have just called up any girl, and no doubt they would have run to him. That was probably why he had been so damn confident in making a move on me, inviting me back to his place—maybe he thought I already knew who he was, and I would fall at his feet the first chance I got.

And, shit, I hadn't exactly disproved it, had I? I had fallen into bed with him the first night we'd met. Even now, I felt a little flushed about it, thinking that I had given him exactly what he wanted. But there would have been no way I could deny myself his touch—the chemistry between us had burned way too bright to deny.

Maybe it was the same with every girl he was with. He seemed like the type to get them wrapped around his finger in no time. Hell, I'd been wrapped around that finger, the memory nearly making me purr. I shake my head to toss the thought aside. If he had made it that easy for me to fall for him, fall for his charms, there were probably a hundred other girls in this area code who had done the same thing.

I was probably nothing special to him. And I just had to keep telling myself that until I believed he was nothing special to me, either.

Chapter Six Scott

“Can I get you anything? Coffee? Tea?” Mark asked as he fussed around me in his office. He had been the same way every time we met like he was trying to come across as though he had everything under control, even when I could tell it was anything but.

“I’m fine, thank you,” I replied, and he nodded, running a hand through his hair.

“Right—uh, great,” he said, sitting opposite me. He always looked nervous when I first entered his office, but he soon chilled out as we got talking.

I supposed it made sense. He had never worked with someone like me before, and people were always a little freaked the first time they came into contact with someone of my profession. They had probably been told their whole lives to be scared of people like me, wary of us, but then they actually met us and found out we’re nowhere near as cold or hard or frightening as they’d been led to believe.

“I signed the papers to fund the rest of the development,” I told him, pushing the pages across the desk towards him. “You can pass them on to your construction team. I can’t imagine the changes will take much more time, probably a couple of weeks at most.”

“Yeah, probably not much more than that,” he agreed. He tried to stay on the same side as me as much as he could, not wanting to disagree, like he thought I would whip out a gun and slap it down on the table if he dared. It was almost funny, but I never let him see how much it amused me.

“And then we can start talking about the official opening,” I continued. “I’d like to plan a real event to make sure we get it on the map. The more people coming through, the more traffic in the hotel, and the easier it’s going to be for both of us to reach our goals. Right?”

“Right,” he replied with a nod, but before he could say anything else, the door behind us opened, and in walked Thea.

God, she looked *good*. Dressed in a pair of jeans and a cropped tee should have been innocent enough, but the way it grazed the top of her pants and showed off just an inch or two of her belly had me shifting in my seat to find comfort. Maybe it was just because I hadn’t seen her since the night we had spent together, but I couldn’t take my eyes off her. She glanced over at me, and I saw a pink flush to her cheeks as though her mind had gone right back to our time tossed up in the covers of my bed.

“Hey, Mark, sorry,” she told her brother, trying to keep her focus on him. “I—I just wanted to talk to you about Jerri, at the bar—she needs some time off to go see her daughter, but she won’t ask for it. Can I switch shifts with her and surprise her?”

“Sure,” Mark replied. I could tell she wanted to look around and meet my gaze, but she was doing her very best to pretend I wasn’t in the room. Could her brother sense the chemistry between us? Surely, he couldn’t have ignored it. It felt as though the air between us could burst into flames at any moment with the sheer intensity of my attraction to her.

“Thanks,” she replied, glancing over her shoulder at me. Her hair was pulled back into a simple ponytail, and she wasn’t wearing any makeup, but somehow, she looked even hotter than she had the first time we’d met. Something about seeing her like this, understated and off-guard, was going to throw me off for the rest of the meeting. I was sure about that.

She left the room, and I couldn’t help but follow her with my eyes.

“Sorry, that’s my sister,” Mark told me, and I remembered I wasn’t meant to know who she was. “She’s normally not that rude. I don’t know what’s gotten into her.”

“It’s fine,” I assured him quickly, trying to contain the slight smirk on my face. If only he knew why she was really rushing out of there, he would have totally lost it—and I had to admit, some part of me kind of wanted to see that happen.

But I wouldn't reveal her secret like that, not when I knew she was relying on me to keep my mouth shut. Besides, I had a meeting to get through, and I needed to make sure I didn't let myself get distracted by the unfathomably hot woman who'd just walked into this office.

I made it through the rest of the meeting without giving anything away, though I was sure Mark could sense something was off about how I handled myself. I finished up with him, headed outside to the car, and found my mind still firmly stuck on the girl I should have known better than to let play on my mind.

I gripped the wheel, glancing over to the spot she had sat in when we had been driving around together before. God, the tension had been palpable just being with her like that and spending time with her. I could still remember how I felt to sit just a few inches from her, to feel her flirtation coming off her in waves, to know how much she wanted me. The anticipation had been enough to drive me crazy, even as I tried to contain myself.

It wasn't often that women had that kind of effect on me. In fact, I prided myself on never being the guy who fell head over heels for someone and landed in trouble as a result. I knew there weren't many people like me out there, men who had kept it in their pants long enough to actually succeed in this career. Before his death, my father had told me so many stories of other heirs to Mafia families who'd wound up running off with a stripper and getting their hearts broken—too pampered

and convinced that life would go their way to consider that it might not.

But me? Yeah, I had never been that guy. I had never been the guy to let myself get involved with anyone if I could help it. I had worked underneath my father, handling as much of the business as he would let me and slowly working my way up the ranks until he was confident in me stepping up to run the show—handle all of his interests, from the drug runners bringing money into the city, to the loan sharks he used to collect money from some of the hapless gambling addicts in Vegas. Not exactly clean work, but he had done everything he could to build a solid foundation for me, his only son.

My mom had died years ago when I was a kid, and it had just been my father and me for a long time. The two of us had grown close, closer than most parents did with their kids, and I had seen everything he'd done to get to where he was now—all the hard work he'd put in, all the passion he had poured into his job to make sure he was at the forefront of everything that happened in Vegas. He would have been proud to see where I was now, how far I had come, and how far I was planning to take his legacy. I wouldn't stop until I was sure I had honored him, and I wasn't even halfway done yet. Working with people like Mark was a start—a way to spread our influence further—but it wasn't the end of the job, by a long shot.

I knew that Mark and his sister had recently lost their parents; he had mentioned it in passing a couple of times, explaining how he came into ownership of the hotel. Maybe

that was what had drawn me to Thea, made me feel some connection to her because I had seen some correlation between us. We had both just lost our families, the last of them we had left.

I felt a pang of sadness when I thought about how much she must have been suffering. I hoped I hadn't added to that, complicating things with her brother, but I got the impression I had. She had ignored me earlier, but I could tell she had wanted to talk to me. No matter how she tried to play it, I could tell she still felt the draw between us, and she wanted to act on it, too.

I had never really met someone who made me feel like she did. Maybe just because she had broken things off so soon after our night together. I was used to getting what I wanted, but she had denied me, which had her stuck in my brain like a song on repeat.

I decided to head down to the gym and blow off some steam before going home. I turned off to head into the parking lot of the ultra-exclusive gym, and used the gold card they'd gifted me after five years' membership to get into the locked building. Mostly, it was populated by low-level celebrities, but sometimes you saw an established name in there.

I made my way to the weight room, glad for a chance to burn off some of this excess energy that seemed to be getting the better of me. I passed by a couple leaning against the reception counter, the woman in tight workout gear that usually would

have caught my eye, but there was only one woman on my mind right now, and it wasn't her.

Maybe Thea was just looking for something I couldn't give her. Or maybe she had decided someone like me would never be able to deliver what she needed. She had probably done some digging with her brother, found out what kind of person I was and what kind of business I was involved in, and decided she didn't want to get involved. I couldn't blame her; she seemed totally normal, totally outside the chaos and danger that came with this kind of life.

And yet...and yet, I found myself wanting to draw her into it.—wanting to see how she would handle all of it, everything that was thrown at her. She seemed as though she could handle herself, even though I'd had to step in and help her before—she hadn't panicked or tried to run from those guys. She seemed more confused than anything else.

And then, she went home with me. She had clearly felt something there, even if she wasn't sure what it was, even if she couldn't have put it into words. And after, she claimed it was because of her brother, that he was the reason she wanted to put distance between us. But maybe that was just an excuse to make sure she didn't fall back into bed with me when she knew what kind of man I was.

I had no idea. But I was curious. I focused on the burn of my muscles as I lifted the weights, sweat dripping from my brow and onto the floor mats. The music was blaring from the speakers, and I was glad it was up as loud as it was—I needed

something to scrub out the memory of her from my mind, if just for a while.

Maybe if I didn't have to run into her, I would have been okay, but knowing I had to see her again, knowing I would bump into her as a matter of course when I was working with Mark, it was going to make things far more complicated than they needed to be.

Or maybe a whole lot easier. Because I wasn't done with her yet, not a chance in hell—and I knew from the chemistry that filled the air between us when she came into the office that she wasn't done with me either, no matter what she might have wanted to tell herself.

No matter what story she had spun to keep me at arm's length.

I headed into the shower and closed my eyes, letting the warm water rush over my skin. I had a whole lot of work to take care of when I was out of here but nobody to go home to. Nobody to welcome me in, ask me about my day or share what they had been up to.

“You have to pick the right person to build your legacy with, son,” My father had told me more times than I could count. “Not many women can handle this line of work, but the ones that can—they're like gold dust, and they should be treated accordingly.”

That was part of the reason I had never settled down with anyone. How could I be sure they were suitable for this if I didn't share my work with them? And, once I had, there would

be no taking it back if they turned out unable to handle it. It felt like a catch-22, or maybe that was just the excuse I had given myself so I didn't have to spend time getting distracted by dating.

Thea knew. Thea knew, and she hadn't tried to sabotage the meeting between Mark and me, so she couldn't have had too much of an issue with it—willing to look the other way, at least. And the thought of coming out of this gym, going home to her, made something in me feel warm and comfortable as though it's what I wanted—as though it's where she belonged.

Probably just wishful thinking on my part. No doubt she would have laughed me out of the place if I had told her what had actually been going through my mind. We'd spent one night together, practically anonymous, and if it hadn't been for my business with her brother, it was unlikely we would ever have seen each other again—not exactly the basis for a long-lasting and healthy relationship, right?

I got dressed after my shower and made my way back down to the car, slipping into the plush leather seat. Maybe it was time I thought about settling down, building a legacy of my own. Now that my father was gone, I had nobody to rely on but myself and I wanted to pass down what he had worked so hard to create to someone else one day.

Damn, I was getting sentimental—not exactly a great trait for someone in my line of work. I shook my head, turned up the radio, and pulled out of the parking lot to head back to my apartment. I didn't know what had gotten into me.

Or perhaps I just didn't want to admit that it was her.

Chapter Seven Thea

“I’m not sure about this,” I protested to Shelby, for about the dozenth time since she had twisted my arm into going out tonight.

“Thea, it’s the grand opening of your brother’s casino,” she reminded me. “I’ve never been to a grand opening before! If you think I’m going to just back off and let this happen without me, well, no friggin’ way!”

“I know, I know,” I grumbled, and I looked at myself in the mirror. Shelby had lent me a dress for the evening, and I still wasn’t sure if I actually looked good, or if I had just convinced myself I did so I didn’t go back to my closet and find something else to change into.

I knew Scott was going to be there, which threw me off the most. I didn’t know how I was going to feel, seeing him once more, and I had been doing all I could to get him out of my mind, put him to the back of my head for as long as it took for him to vanish completely.

But he was still there, and I would have to see him tonight—another good reason why I had tried to worm my way out of this event, though Shelby had made it impossible for me to pull that off. She would never miss out on a party, and I hadn't told her why I was so freaked about the thought of going there tonight. If I'd come clean that I'd slept with Scott and that was why I wanted to hide out here for as long as possible, she probably would have been understanding, but as it stood, she was just picking out her shoes for the evening with no idea I felt like I was about to walk into the middle of a viper's nest.

It wasn't going to be that bad. I mean, there were going to be loads of people there tonight, weren't there? So many I doubted I would even notice Scott, not really. Maybe a glimpse from across the room, but nothing more than that...

Though maybe that would be enough.

"You look great, stop worrying about it," Shelby told me as she caught me looking at myself in the mirror again, mistaking my worry about the state of my outfit. I grimaced. Maybe I should just tell her...

No, if I told her, then I was going to have to come clean about how I felt, and I wasn't ready for that yet. I had already felt the tingling attraction to Scott when I'd popped into Mark's office earlier, and he had been there, and I knew discussing that night with Shelby would have just stirred up all those emotions again. Better to leave it in the past, where it belonged, and hope I could just get through tonight without too much of an issue.

I was wearing an emerald green dress that hugged my waist and flared out below the knee. I also had on a pair of killer high heels that I hoped would give me the confidence to get through the night—if I didn't fall over and break my ankle first. I had let my hair loose, and Shelby had insisted on doing my makeup, so I was wearing a deep berry-red lipstick that I normally would never have dared to try out.

I had to admit, I looked good—but there was still a part of me that just wanted to take it all off and crawl back into bed. We were in my hotel room now, the place I had been staying while I searched for an apartment, and I could already hear the buzz downstairs as people started arriving for the party.

Mark had told me it wasn't going to be a big deal. Just a couple of hundred people. The drinks were on the house, and I had no idea how he could afford that, but I had a horrible suspicion. Scott was probably the one funding all of this, and I didn't even want to think about how he'd come into the money to do it.

“Free drinks, right?” Shelby reminded me as she slipped her arm through mine and guided me down to the door. “Come on, what are we waiting for?”

I stuck by her side as we made our way down to the lobby, and I couldn't help but gasp when I saw how many people were there. I had never imagined a new casino opening would attract this many guests, especially in a place like Las Vegas that was swimming with much more significant and grand venues. Still, there had to be two hundred people milling

around already. We arrived at the bottom of the stairs just as Mark was about to cut the ribbon for the casino entrance. He was in the middle of his long-winded speech I had heard him practicing in his office mirror this past week.

“...so without further ado, let me introduce you to Las Vegas’s newest casino, the SIMPSON STAR!”

He snipped the glossy red ribbon, and it fell away to a burst of applause from the crowd. Mark led the way as people made their way inside the casino, and Shelby and I followed behind.

My eyebrows shot up when I stepped inside. I hadn’t seen much more than an empty, concrete-floored auditorium with only the bare basics of the place, but it had been transformed into something glamorous with deep red carpets, gold Roman columns, soaring indoor trees, and even a fake waterfall. The staff was impeccably dressed in uniforms that could challenge the most expensive hotels on the strip. These people looked nothing like the humble employees of the functional hotel attached.

“Holy shit!” Shelby laughed as she looked around. “This place is amazing!”

“Yeah, it really is,” I murmured, furrowing my brow as I took it all in. I couldn’t help but start crunching the numbers inside my head as I tried to work out how much it must have cost, and how much Scott must have poured into this place to fund it, and I tried my best to push those thoughts down. I couldn’t let that get to me, no matter how easy it would have been to focus on exactly what Mark had done to allow this

place to be built. It was here now, and I just had to pretend like I was as excited as everyone else to see it there. Simple as that.

“Champagne, ladies?” A waiter asked us, a silver tray of bubbling drinks balanced on his splayed hand.

“Yes, please!” Shelby replied for us, and she grabbed our drinks and handed me one. She touched her glass to mine and took a sip as she stared around again, wide-eyed.

“I can’t believe this is your hotel,” she murmured. “It’s so...”

“Expensive?” I filled in.

“I was going to say glamorous, but sure, if you want to go with that,” she said.

A few people were already crowding around the craps tables, and she grabbed my arm and pulled me over. “Ooh, let’s try our luck! I feel like I’m going to get exactly what I want tonight...”

I let her lead the way, my focus distracted. Honestly, there was someone in particular I was looking for, even just to make sure I could avoid him. I had expected Scott to be front and center of all of this, just like my brother was, but I couldn’t see him anywhere. Was it for the best? Probably. Maybe he had decided not to come out tonight. God, that would have been a blessing—

And then, all at once, I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, and I knew he had to be close by.

I glanced over my shoulder as casually as I could, and, just like I'd suspected—there he was. I felt my heart skip several beats when I saw him. Attractive. Sophisticated. Scott had a presence that just commanded you to look at him. Did anyone else here know how he really made his money? I almost wanted to ask, but I couldn't ruin my brother's opening like that.

Scott was wearing a navy suit that hugged his athletic body and contrasted with the light periwinkle of his eyes. He was talking to someone, making them laugh, and then his eyes slid past them to me.

As soon as his gaze met mine, it was as though a bucket of cold water had been tossed all over me. I drew my eyes away at once. What the fuck was I doing? I needed to pull myself together, but I just didn't know how. I wanted to run away, but it wouldn't have done anything to stem the burning want rising up inside of me right now.

I gripped the long stem of my champagne flute a little tighter and tried to focus on what was going on in front of me at the craps table. See? I could keep focused, right? I wasn't going to let myself get distracted. I wasn't going to get pulled into the desire I felt for him, not again. I was stronger than that.

Even if I could feel a tug deep down in my stomach, begging me to inch closer to him and close the gap between us.

"You okay?" Shelby asked, looking concerned as she glanced up from the table to see me staring off into space. I blinked and nodded.

“I’m fine, yeah,” I replied quickly. “Just...a little overwhelmed, that’s all.”

“Oh, I get it,” she replied, nodding enthusiastically. “This is incredible! Do you want another drink...?”

I nodded and we went to get some more champagne. The rest of the evening felt like a game, a game I was swiftly losing, in which I was doing the very best I could to keep from staring at Scott. I could feel him looking at me, but whenever I turned around to catch his gaze, he was gone. Was I just making it up? Fantasizing that he still wanted me? He hadn’t brought a date with him, or at least, I hadn’t seen one if he had. Was he alone right now? I had so many questions, and no idea where to start with any of them.

I sipped on my second glass of champagne, and then my third, and soon, the need was rising in me again—the need for him. I couldn’t deny it, not now that we were in the same room together, it was as though every defense I had tried to build was being torn down just by his presence.

And he knew it. Every time I looked over at him, he was grinning at me, making sure I knew what was on his mind. I could feel the tingling deep in my belly, and the champagne was making it even harder to deny myself what I craved so badly, the feel of his hands against me, his lips on mine. Did he have any idea how difficult this was...?

Fuck it. Something snapped within me. I couldn’t keep denying myself what I wanted. It would only make it harder for me to resist in the long run, and I couldn’t stand the

thought of being this close to him and not doing anything about it. Maybe once, just once, just one more time, and I would be able to get him out of my system...

I brushed up past him as he headed to the bar to get himself another drink, and he half-turned his head as though he already knew it was me. I wasn't sure how he could sense me so clearly, but maybe it was the same draw I felt for him, a shared sense of awareness.

"Bathroom, five minutes," I whispered to him, and I ducked my head down and hurried out of the room before I could change my mind about this. Shelby was chatting up some guy over by the craps table, she wouldn't notice I had gone anywhere for a while; I felt my heart thudding in my chest as I tried to handle my nerves, my want, and the confusion they created inside my head together.

I slipped into the large bathroom just outside the casino entrance and closed the door behind me. I could feel my need throbbing between my legs, and I tried for deep breaths as I waited for him to arrive. I could handle this. Whatever happened next, I could handle it. I didn't know if he was going to come here or if he was going to leave me waiting and make a fool out of me, but I didn't care. I just needed to get this out of my system, and I was sure the only way to do it was by...

The door opened, and he stood in front of me.

"Scott," I breathed, and before I could stop myself, I moved towards him, pulled him into the bathroom, and kissed him hard.

He locked the door behind him, ensuring nobody would interrupt us. He slipped his hands beneath my dress, pushing up the skirt so he could sink his fingers greedily into my ass, and then lifted me off the floor and pinned me against the wall.

I wrapped my legs around him and kissed him hard, our tongues coming together with a wanton hunger neither of us could control. It felt so familiar and so new at the same time, as though this was where I had belonged all along, and I moaned against his mouth as I felt his cock starting to swell beneath his pants.

There were crowds of people out there, and any one of them could have noticed that both of us were missing right now—and if they did, we were going to be exposed. My brother would find out. The world would find out. Everyone would know I was hooking up with someone as dangerous and criminal as Scott Stewart.

And at that moment, all it served to do was turn me on even more.

He reached beneath my dress to pull my panties aside and unzipped his pants a second later. He knew we were in a rush, and he didn't want to waste a second of our time together. I panted against his mouth as I arched my back, making it easier for him to reach my pussy, craving more of him—craving the feel of him sliding deep inside of me, just like he had done the other weekend.

“I've wanted you ever since I saw you in this damn dress,” he murmured against my mouth as he wrapped his hand

around his cock and brought it up against my pussy.

“Please, just fuck me,” I begged him, the words catching at the back of my throat as I begged for more. He grinned against my mouth, and, finally, pushed himself inside of me in one long motion.

I couldn't hold myself back. I cried out, tipping my head back against the cool tile behind me, and gripped his shoulders tightly. The sensation was everything I had wanted it to be, and more, the sheer relief of feeling him entering me was almost more than I could take.

With me pinned to the wall in front of him, he began to fuck me hard and fast, taking me in long, quick strokes that filled me right to the brim. My pussy was already soaked just from being in the same room as him for so long, and I couldn't deny how badly I needed this. No matter how I tried, no part of me could hide from how good we were together, how hot it was to just give myself over to this pleasure, even if I should have known better.

“You're so fucking wet for me, Thea,” he murmured in my ear as he caught my lobe between his teeth and tugged on it lightly. I moaned again, hardly able to form words. The only thing on my mind in that instant was how much I wanted to come and how much longer I could hold off while he fucked me like this.

“You've been thinking about this all night, haven't you?” he continued, and I nodded, making some unintelligible response. He kissed me again, driving himself even deeper into me. I

gasped, clinging onto him for dear life, inhaling the scent of his aftershave as it filled the air around us.

He moved his face to my neck, brushing his lips over my throat before he found my mouth and kissed me.

I could already feel the orgasm clenching inside of me, every part of my body starting to tense as the pleasure built. I had been waiting for this for so long, and now he was here, right in front of me, inside me, kissing me, holding me, showing me how much he wanted me. I couldn't keep from going over the edge.

“Oh, fuck,” I groaned, as I dug my fingers into his strong shoulders, feeling his muscles beneath the fabric of the jacket. He moved inside of me, slowing his thrusts, letting me enjoy every second of him.

And then I felt it happen. My pussy clenched around him, the rush of pleasure getting the better of me as I came—the orgasm tearing through me, and I gritted my teeth to try my best not to make too much noise. I needed to keep quiet or risk attracting the attention of everyone in the casino, but attempting to hold myself back felt impossible when the pleasure he gave me was just this intense.

“I want to hear you, Thea,” he murmured to me. “Let me hear you when you come.”

I did as I was told, letting out a long groan of relief, and moaning as the orgasm continued to flood through my body. I knew he loved making it this hard for me to keep quiet—knew he loved watching me unable to resist the pleasure he gave me.

A few moments later, I felt him reach his own release inside of me, driving in deep and holding himself there for a long moment before he pulled back. I could feel the warmth of him flooding me, filling me, and the thrill of it was enough to make me forget what a crazy, stupid idea this was.

Slowly, he helped me back to my feet, my legs trembling so damn much it felt as though they were going to give right out underneath me at any moment. I squeezed my eyes shut, clamping my thighs together and pulling up my panties. I needed to clean myself up before I went back out there, but I couldn't think of anything but him right now.

“Fuck, I needed that,” he murmured as he tucked himself away and zipped up his pants once more. My breath was still shaky as I looked up at him, wondering what the hell I had just done—why I had just fucked him again when I knew he was probably more trouble than he was worth.

“Me too,” I admitted. No point in denying it, not now that we had such hot sex again. There was no way for me to hide how much I desired him, how badly I wanted him, even though I would have done anything to be able to push down those feelings inside myself.

He straightened himself up and turned to look at me. As soon as our eyes met, I felt a twist in my stomach. I didn't know what was going to happen now, how he was going to react to what we'd just done, but I prayed he wasn't going to make this more complicated than it needed to be. He was working with my brother on the very casino we were at the

opening night for, and I was sure I had already overstepped my bounds by a good twenty feet by having sex with him for the second time.

“I want to see you again,” he told me firmly. I bit my lip.

“Uh, I—I’m not sure if I’m going to be free,” I stuttered, and he cocked an eyebrow at me.

“I haven’t even told you when it is yet,” he remarked. The way he was looking at me, it was clear he wasn’t going to take no for an answer, and I didn’t want to risk sparking his anger if I tried to argue with him. Maybe it would just be easier to go along with whatever he wanted. I had no idea how he might react if I didn’t. A cold wave of panic washed through me as I wondered if he might take it out on Mark or the hotel.

“Dinner. Tomorrow night,” he continued. “I’ll give you my number, and I’ll send a car to pick you up. You’re staying at the hotel, right?”

“Right,” I murmured. I wished I had the nerve to argue with him, but I panicked.

And maybe—just maybe—there was a part of me that wanted to see him again, a part of me that wanted to find out what he was really like. My brother and protecting the business was a useful excuse. I couldn’t turn Scott down, even if I wanted to. And shit, I really didn’t want to right now.

“I’ll see you then,” he told me, and he grinned as he let his gaze trail up and down my body once more. He leaned in

again and planted a kiss on my lips, the kind that I knew he wanted me to remember him by.

“Catch you tomorrow,” he added, and with that, he turned and walked out of the bathroom, leaving me standing there, wondering what the hell had just happened—and what exactly we were going to do tomorrow night, now that he’d basically just confirmed a date for us.

A date that, I had to admit, I was already looking forward to.

Chapter Eight Scott

I watched as Thea's car pulled up outside the restaurant, and finished my drink before I headed out to meet her.

"Make sure there's a bottle of champagne waiting at my table, okay?" I instructed Horatio, the host of the Soraya Café, where I was taking Thea out to dinner tonight. The upside about owning the place was that I got to choose exactly how I wanted this date to go, every little detail perfect so that when she arrived, she would know I had gone all-out for her.

In a tight black dress and heels, she emerged from the sleek town car I had sent to pick her up in. Her hair was down loose over her shoulders, and she had a slightly nervous expression on her pretty face, but I intended to make her comfortable in every way I could as long as she was here.

I stepped outside the restaurant and offered her my arm. She hesitated for a moment before she took it.

"How did you get a table at this place?" She asked. "It's the most exclusive restaurant in town."

“Helps when you own it,” I replied, and her eyes widened.

“Wait, you own this place?” She exclaimed as we stepped inside.

“Yes, my family helped fund it to get it off the ground a few years ago,” I explained. My father had been the one to see the potential in this place, and, with a few well-placed investments, it was soon soaring to the top of the most coveted seatings in Vegas. The food really was good, but it was the atmosphere—the low Persian music, the scent of the food in the air—that really sold it for me.

We were guided to a table at the back of the room. It was lit by candles and draped in an immaculate white tablecloth. I pulled her seat out for her, and she sank into it. As she clasped her hands in front of her on the table, I couldn’t help but notice that they were shaking slightly.

“Are you alright?” I asked, concerned. “You’re shaking.”

“I’m...I’m fine,” she replied. “I’m just not used to places like this, that’s all.”

“Places like this?”

“You know, fancy stuff.” She waved her hand. “My family... we never really had the money for anything like this. It’s all new to me.”

“Well, I look forward to introducing you to it,” I replied, smiling at her. She frowned, leaned forward, and lowered her voice.

“Is this a front for something?” She demanded, and my eyebrows shot up.

“I’m sorry, what did you just say?” I cleared my throat, giving her a chance to take it back.

“Is this a front for something? Is this place open so you can launder money through it or something?” She asked me bluntly. I was surprised at how forward she was being, but given what I had invested in her brother’s casino, it shouldn’t have surprised me that much.

“No, it’s not,” I stated. “It’s just a restaurant my father invested in before he passed.”

As the waiter approached us to pop the champagne and top up our glasses, I eyed her across the table. How did she know about all that, anyway? Had Mark talked to her about it? That would explain why she seemed so intent on avoiding me at the party before she had given in and snuck off with me to the bathroom.

“Did Mark talk to you about my business?” I asked her. If she could be straightforward then I could do the same with her. I wasn’t going to hold back, not if she insisted on being that blunt.

“I got it out of him, yeah,” she replied, looking down at the table. “I just...I had a bad feeling. I wanted to find out what he was getting involved in, and he can’t keep anything a secret from me. I know him too well for that.”

I trusted Mark to have kept his mouth shut when it came to everyone else, but I supposed Thea had a right to know what was happening with her family business. I reached for my drink and took a sip.

“Something tells me you don’t approve,” I remarked, and she shook her head.

“No way,” she replied. “I just...I don’t understand how someone could dedicate their whole life to that...*business*.”

I frowned. I knew she wasn’t intentionally putting down my father, but it was hard not to see it that way. Sometimes, I forgot how people on the outside could be, how they could see all of this—the way they judged, right up until the point they were getting something out of it, too.

“My father worked hard to make sure his family was provided for,” I replied coolly. “And I’ll do the same thing for my family in the future. Isn’t that just what your parents did, too? With the hotel?”

“Yes, but it’s different,” she protested. “They weren’t...I mean, they didn’t hurt anyone in the process...”

“Who’s saying that I’m hurting anyone?” I asked her, and I gestured around the restaurant. “Does anyone here look like they’re suffering?”

She followed my gaze around the place. Almost all the tables were occupied. Couples held hands in the soft glow of the candles between them, and the food and wine was flowing.

“I guess not, but this isn’t the only place, is it?” She pointed out. “There are others—other connections around the city...”

“And yet, you’re sitting right here opposite me,” I reminded her. “So it doesn’t seem like you have too much of a problem with it.”

She shifted in her seat and reached for her champagne. She had no comeback for that one, and she knew it. Much as she might have wanted to get up on her high horse and pretend she was above all of this, anyone could see how much she liked sitting at a table at the most exclusive restaurant in town.

“I don’t approve of it. I don’t like it,” she protested, but her voice didn’t have the same fight in it. Something had shifted, and I could tell.

“So what are you doing here, then? With me?” I asked her, leaning forward, not taking my eyes off of her. I was genuinely interested. Some part of her wanted nothing to do with this, but another part, a more dominant part, had brought her here anyway.

She looked away from me as though the intensity of my gaze was too much for her to take. But I wanted answers, and I wasn’t going to let up until I had them. If she had such a great issue with what I did, and who I was, then why was she here? Why was she sitting right beside me as though it was the most natural thing in the world? Why had she hooked up with me again at the party? I had so many questions, and she must have been able to read at least a few of them on my face.

“I didn’t know how you’d react if I said no,” she replied. “I thought you might take it out on Mark or something...”

“I’m a man of my word, Thea, and if I’ve made a commitment to your brother and his business, nothing’s going to get in the way of that,” I replied. “If that’s the only reason you came here, you’re welcome to get up and leave now.”

I leaned back in my seat, falling silent for a moment. I knew she wasn’t going anywhere. She didn’t have it in her. Her lips parted as though she wanted to argue with me, but then she sank back in her seat. She wasn’t going to get up and leave, not now that she was here.

I could tell some part of her wanted to. Some part of her wanted to get to her feet right now and prove to me that she wasn’t stuck here, that she didn’t feel like she needed to stay if she didn’t want to, but the draw between us was too strong for that. No matter how much she might have wished she could just get up and walk, she knew it wasn’t that easy.

She didn’t move a muscle. Finally, she let out a sigh.

“I don’t want to leave,” she admitted, her voice dropping slightly.

“You don’t?” I asked, a smile curling up the corners of my lips. “I thought you disapproved of everything I do. Seems a little hypocritical to go out to dinner with me, doesn’t it?”

She narrowed her eyes at me, but I could see a small smile crossing her mouth too. She might have been doing her best to

pretend otherwise, but she was enjoying my company more than she would have liked to admit.

“I like spending time with you,” she confessed, finally. “I like...parts of it, anyway.”

“Let me guess,” I murmured, lowering my voice and leaning a little closer to her across the table. “You like the part where I’m fucking you senseless?”

Her lips parted in surprise, and her eyes darted back and forth to make sure nobody had heard what I had just said. I could see a pink flush tinging her cheeks, but, at the same time, it was obvious she enjoyed hearing me speak that way. There was desire in her eyes. It was written all over her face, blatant and impossible for her to hide.

“Yeah,” she replied, finally, as though daring me to come out with something else quite as filthy as that in public. If she thought I wasn’t going to push my luck, she had another thing coming. I could have ordered everyone out of this restaurant right now and fucked her over the table, and there wouldn’t have been a damn thing anyone here could do about it.

“So what are we doing having dinner?” I asked her. “When I should be making you come instead?”

What came next was something of a blur. I called us a cab, and soon, we were making out in the back seat, my hands traveling hungrily all over her body, her slim form pressed up against mine as though she had been waiting for this all night long. I was sure there was more for us to talk about. Sure we should have focused on discussing what the hell was

happening between us, but the tension had been too much for me to bear. I didn't want to hold back. I didn't want to hide from it.

I just wanted her in every way I could have her.

We arrived back at my place, and the two of us practically fell out of the car together as I led her up the steps to the private elevator. I pushed my hand beneath her skirt as the elevator doors closed, and she arched her back and pressed against me. I loved the way she responded to me like nothing else could even touch the way she felt right now. For all that she disapproved of what I did, she still couldn't deny the intensity of the want between us, and all the two of us needed right now was to give ourselves over to it and let it take control of us.

We went inside, and I pushed her up against the door, kissing her hard. I loved the way she tasted. I was pretty sure I would never get tired of it. She slipped her arms around me, her fingertips tracing lightly over my tattoo as she tugged at my shirt and brushed her fingers against my skin.

I lifted up her dress, cupping her ass and pulling her against me. God, her body was so perfect. She moaned against my lips, the needy little noise sending a shock of arousal through me. My cock was already hard, and I wanted to be inside her—but more than that, I wanted to taste her. I wanted to gorge myself on every part of her.

I led her to the stairs, taking her back to the bedroom where we had spent our first night together, and laid her down on the

bed, moving on top of her so she could feel the hardness of my cock grinding against her hip. She was panting against my mouth now as I moved my lips to her ear, then her neck, brushing over her throat and pulling down the zipper of her dress to expose her.

I traced my fingers down the line of skin the parted material revealed, and she turned to watch me as I touched her, taking in the sight of my fingers like she couldn't believe this was really happening. I wondered if this was how she had expected the night to go or if she had convinced herself she was going to refrain. Either way, she sure as hell wasn't complaining now, and the feel of her soft skin beneath my fingers was making it even harder for me to resist her.

I pulled off her dress and slid down between her legs, planting my lips against her pussy through the thin fabric of her panties. I heard her moan loudly from above me, and I looked up at her, grinning and planting a kiss on the sensitive spot on the inside of her thigh.

“You want me to go down on you?” I asked her, letting the words tease on the tip of my tongue—as though she would have said anything other than yes. I could tell she was beyond the point of being able to control herself, her mind too muddled with want to turn down anything I offered her, and I loved knowing that I could have that kind of effect on her. She nodded.

“I want to hear you say it,” I ordered her playfully. She closed her eyes, pulling herself together as though she needed

to work out exactly how to think straight again.

“I want you to go down on me,” she murmured, finally, and that was all I needed. I pulled her panties to the side and buried my face against her pussy for the first time.

She tasted exactly as perfect as I knew she would, her musky sweetness filling my senses. I slipped one hand beneath her ass and pulled her to me, pressing my mouth against her and swirling my tongue around her clit.

I could feel her legs starting to tremble on either side of me already, and I loved feeling her body shivering and shaking in response to me. I loved knowing I was turning her on as much as I was. Nothing got me off like hearing the little moans she let out as I went down on her. I let my tongue trail down to her slit and pushed myself an inch or two inside of her, tasting her throbbing pussy from the inside out.

She reached down to grip my head, and soon, she was grinding back against me as I gently kissed and sucked on her clit—I loved feeling the way she responded to me, loved feeling her body tense and tighten as she got closer and closer to the edge. I wanted to take her right to the very point of no return—so she couldn’t hold back. And then...

Once I was sure she was right at the edge, I moved my mouth from her pussy. She gasped, looking down at me with wide eyes.

I moved on top of her and kissed her before she could say a word, unzipping my pants and taking my cock into my hand.

“I want to be inside you when you come,” I murmured, grinning as I brushed my lips across hers. She just moaned, arching her back, and lifting herself up so I could enter.

I didn't need to be told twice. I pushed inside of her in one swift motion, filling her right up to the brink with my cock. She wrapped herself around me, pulling me in deep and holding me there, her entire body shivering as she was so close to the edge. I could feel her need coming off her in waves—could feel her desperate need to come and how much she wanted me to be the one to make it happen.

And I was all too happy to oblige.

I shifted so that I was grinding against her clit with every thrust and began to fuck her properly. The feel of her around me was impossibly tight, her wetness making it easy to move in as deep as I wanted to. Getting her so riled had turned me on so much it was hard for me to hold back, but I focused on breathing deep, taking it slow, feeling every part of her, and letting the pleasure subside before I started to build it again.

She was grinding against me hard and fast, her breath coming quickly, and I could tell she was close to the edge. I could tell she wanted to come more than anything, but there was a part of me that wanted to linger in this place before I let her—a part of me that wanted to see how long I could make the intense feelings last. I could hear her moaning with each exhale, her breath catching at the back of her throat as she pushed herself against me, wrapping her arms and legs around me to pull me in even deeper.

“You feel so good,” I murmured, brushing my lips against her ear, and I felt her body tense once more. She was on the very edge of her orgasm, and I needed to feel her go over into it—I needed to push her towards it, make it so she couldn’t think of anything but how good I made her feel and how much she wanted to be with me like this again.

Finally, I felt it—the contraction of her pussy around my cock as she moaned against my ear and came hard. Her fingers dug into my back, and even through my jacket, I could feel her nails raking against my skin. I loved it.

I fucked her harder as I felt her come, pushing in deep, and a few seconds later, I went over the edge myself, finishing as I filled her with my seed. She reached down to grab my ass, pushing me deep inside of her as though she couldn’t get enough. She was panting hard against my ear, her need obvious, even as she had just come.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” she gasped against me, and I turned my head so I could kiss her again, properly, pushing my tongue into her mouth to taste her. She grabbed my head and held me there, our tongues dancing against one another, our lips tracing out a million unsaid words.

Finally, I eased back, pulling myself out of her and catching my breath. She didn’t pull back from the kiss, clearly not done with me yet.

And, as I rolled over and pulled her on top of me, I decided I was anything but done with her, too.

Chapter Nine Thea

Slowly, I opened my eyes and tried to remember if I had really let myself go home with him last night.

I lifted my head and looked around, taking in the now-familiar setting of his bedroom. Holy shit—so that hadn't been a dream, right? The sex we'd had, the intensity of it, the sheer levels of pleasure he had taken me to—all of it had been real.

I sat up, rubbing a hand over my face. My body was a little achy from everything that had gone down the night before, but it was a good kind of ache. The ache that told me I had spent my night in the throes of pleasure I would never have even been able to imagine before I met him, a kind of pleasure I'd never thought I would get to feel again until the two of us had tumbled back into bed and I had let my guard down once more.

He was sleeping next to me, and I glanced over at him. In the light of day, his tattoo was kind of beautiful, and I couldn't resist reaching out to trace the shape of it on his skin. The snake went all the way from his waist to his opposite shoulder,

the scales almost shimmering in the sunlight from the bedroom window. It was a cool tattoo, I had to admit, or maybe it was just the guy it was attached to that I was finding myself obsessed with.

I slipped out of bed before he woke up and made my way to the bathroom to splash some water on my face and get my shit together. I wasn't sure if I wanted to be around when he got up. What were we going to do, have breakfast together, when I had all but told him over dinner the night before that I didn't want anything to do with him? He would have thought I was a total hypocrite, and hell, I probably was. But when he had looked me in the eye and reminded me of our amazing night together, there was nothing I could do to hide from the want I felt for him, and he knew it. He could feel it. And what was one more night together, anyway? Maybe it would be enough to get him out of my system.

I ran some water in the sink and splashed it on my face, looking at myself in the mirror. A little make-up was still smudged beneath my eyes, my lips slightly swollen from where we had been making out all night long, and my hair was a total mess.

But I was happy. I hated to admit it, but it was true—I was seriously, genuinely satisfied after what felt like one hell of a long time without it. Being with him was hot, the kind of hot that distracted me from everything else going on in my life, the kind of hot I could get used to, given the chance.

If I wanted to give myself a chance, that was.

I still didn't know if this was a good idea or not, if I was being honest. I didn't know if I should be sticking around here or if I should have taken the first chance I had to get the hell out of his place, and put as much distance between myself and this guy as humanly possible. I knew he was trouble, probably in more ways than I could wrap my head around, but the desire I felt for him, the need that coursed through me when he was around...I couldn't deny it. Even if I wanted to, even if I should have, I couldn't deny it, and the worst part was, he was completely aware of it, too. Even as I tried to put space between us, even as I tried to convince myself not to get any closer to him than I already had, I found myself drawn in.

I ran a hand through my hair and headed to his wardrobe, grabbing a shirt and a pair of boxers and slipping them on. I probably should have been putting on my own clothes, but there was something intimate about wearing his, and I didn't want to pass up a chance to indulge in a little of that.

He was still asleep. It looked as though I had totally wiped him out. I couldn't help but feel a little smug about that. Even though I was sure he would be up soon, I wanted to take this small amount of time I had alone in his apartment to snoop around a little, see what was in here, what he might have tried to hide from the rest of the world—or from me.

There weren't any photos of family or anything else in his house—a few landscape shots, but they looked like they had come from professional photographers more than family vacations or the like. The townhouse, for all it was beautiful,

suddenly seemed really empty to me. All this space just for him.

I headed down to the kitchen and started making a pot of coffee. Maybe I should have been taking this chance to get out of here instead, but I didn't want to leave, not so soon. I was sure there was a lot we needed to talk about, and I wanted to find out just what was going on inside his head, why he would be so keen to bring home a woman who had all but told him she didn't approve of what he did.

Maybe he got off on it, somehow. Got off on knowing that my attraction to him overcame the fact I should have known better. I couldn't help it—there was just something about him, something that excited me more than it should have. Perhaps it was knowing I should have been putting distance between us, the taboo of it which made it hard to deny, or maybe there was some form of connection buried underneath everything else that I just hadn't been able to put my finger on yet.

I poured myself a cup, and as I did, I heard footsteps on the stairs. I felt a little flutter in my chest. God, I was down bad for this guy. I really was. I needed to get a handle on myself. But why would I do a thing like that when spending time with him was proving to be so much fun?

He leaned in the kitchen doorway, a grin on his face as he looked at me.

“You've made yourself comfortable,” he remarked.

“Hope you don't mind,” I replied, and he shook his head.

“Not at all,” he smiled. “You look better in those than I ever did.”

“You want a coffee?”

“I’d love one,” he said, and I handed him a cup. He leaned on the counter and took a sip. He took his coffee black and bitter, just like me. I eyed him over the top of the cup, wondering if it was my business to ask about why his house was so empty of any mementos of anyone else. Maybe he didn’t want to talk about it.

But, hell, he had seemed unbothered by my judgment the night before—maybe he wouldn’t mind if I just tried it again now? I was curious, and it wasn’t as though the two of us hadn’t shared a whole hell of a lot already.

“Can I ask something?” I wondered aloud.

“Of course.”

“Why aren’t there any pictures in here?” I asked him, gesturing around. “I mean, of people, that is. Your friends, your family...” I trailed off. I couldn’t read his expression and couldn’t tell if he was pissed at me bringing it up.

“Sorry,” I muttered, shaking my head. I didn’t want to push him. I wasn’t sure what he would do when he felt like he wasn’t in control, and I didn’t want to find out.

“It’s fine,” he murmured, voice low, but I could tell from the tone it was a sore spot. He took a deep breath.

“I don’t like being reminded of my family if I can avoid it,” he replied. “I already run my father’s business. I don’t need to

come back here and see him everywhere I turn, too.”

“He passed?”

“Recently,” he replied. “Nearly a year ago now, but it feels shorter than that.”

“I know what you mean,” I replied. “My...my parents died—a few months ago. That’s why I came back here.”

He reached for my hand and touched it lightly. It was just a small gesture, but it made a lump form in my throat. I wasn’t sure why. It wasn’t like he really knew my parents or anything about my family. But maybe he felt the same things I had—no matter how different our family businesses might have been, perhaps he could feel some of the pain I was struggling with right now, the pain that sometimes felt as though it might never go away.

“It’s hard, isn’t it?” He murmured. “I know it is for me. I can’t handle having the reminders of him around. It’s still too...raw. And besides, I’m certain he’d be telling me I was doing a terrible job if he was here.”

He smiled, slightly sad. I cocked my head to the side.

“What do you mean?”

He shrugged. “He was never that impressed with how I did things,” he said. “He always had it in his mind that everything needed to be handled a certain way, and if it wasn’t...yeah, he was never the kind to keep his mouth shut about it and just let it happen.”

“That sounds tough,” I remarked.

“It’s what I’ve always known,” he replied casually. “Not like I had much of a choice but to step up and take over the business.”

“The...the criminal one?” I asked fretfully. I was still trying to wrap my head around that part. I knew it was part of his life, but how could someone who otherwise seemed so... normal be involved in the Mafia?

“Yeah, that one,” he chuckled, amused by my reaction. “You’re still freaked out by it, huh?”

“More freaked out that my brother decided to work with you,” I muttered, shaking my head. That said, it was starting to make more sense to me now that I had spent a little more time with Scott myself; I could see why Mark would have been drawn in and trusted him. If I hadn’t gotten the inside scoop on the truth of his work, I would never in a million years have guessed what he did. He just seemed too smooth, too cultured, too together to ever get into something like that.

Maybe he hadn’t had a chance.

“Did you ever think about doing anything else?” I wondered aloud. “Not working with your dad, I mean?”

He shook his head.

“Never crossed my mind,” he replied. “Not that I had much of a chance. I’m his only kid. I was always going to step up and take over when he passed. Just didn’t expect it to happen so soon.”

I eyed him for a long moment, looking at him intently. I wanted to know just how much of this was his choice. Maybe, because I felt so attracted to him, I wanted to believe there was some other side to him, another side that hid behind this exterior. So many people in this city were probably scared shitless of him, but when I stood in front of him, I couldn't find that fear in myself. Even though I likely should have, he was just a guy I liked, a guy I *really* liked, sipping on a coffee while I stood there in his kitchen, wearing an old shirt of his that felt almost as good on my skin as he did. It was difficult to imagine he was anything other than that.

“So you don't want to see your dad every day, huh?” I remarked, gesturing around the house again. “Don't want to be reminded of losing him, or...?”

“That's part of it,” he agreed. “But it's more to do with running the business. I know it's not good enough for him. I can just feel that. Seeing him around here, it's just going to remind me of that. Of how I'm not going far enough for him.”

“You really believe he would feel that way?”

“I know he would,” he replied with a shrug. “He never exactly held back on telling me. Even when I was working my ass off, it was never quite enough for him. He always wanted more from me.”

“Shit, that sounds hard,” I muttered, and he shook his head.

“No, it was a good thing,” he replied, and it sounded more like he was trying to convince himself than me. “It meant that I couldn't slack. He put all his effort into the business. He just

wanted me to do the same. It's how he was able to give me the life that I have. I wouldn't have been able to live like this if he hadn't."

He waved his hand around the room, and I followed his gaze around the house. Was this the kind of thing he meant? The life his father had left for him? Because it looked pretty damn lonely to me. He had no memories of his family here because they would have brought up too many issues inside his head and his heart. Just him, no family, no friends, nothing but the striking quiet of this place. It might have been beautiful, but it was empty and seemed to echo with the enormity of what his life lacked.

I locked eyes with him again. There was something I needed to know. Maybe it was just something I invented, this idea that he didn't like all of this, but I had to find out if I just imagined it—or if he wanted more—craved more than what he had now.

"If you'd had the chance to live a different life," I began, slowly, trying to find the right way to frame this so I didn't offend him or scare him. "Would you?"

He stood there for a moment, looking surprised. Staring off into space like he didn't quite know what to say to that. I wondered if anyone had ever asked it before. Had he ever been offered the chance to consider what might have been if he hadn't been born into the family he had, born from a father in the Mafia?

But before he could answer, another voice cut through the quiet between us. A voice I recognized.

“What the *fuck* is going on here?” Mark demanded.

Chapter Ten Scott

Thea had sprinted upstairs, pulled on her clothes, and gotten dressed before I could even work out what was happening. I was still holding my coffee like a defensive shield as Mark stormed toward me, his face flashing with fury as he closed in on me. I heard the front door shut as Thea made a break for it, leaving me to deal with the blowback of whatever was about to happen next.

“What the fuck was my sister doing here?” Mark demanded, barely even noticing the fact that she had just run out of here like her ass was on fire.

“Mark, I appreciate that you care about your sister, but it’s really none of your business,” I told him, doing my best to keep my voice calm. His face was turning beet red, and he looked like he was about to blow a fucking vein right there in my kitchen. I didn’t even know what he was doing in here, why he had decided to storm into my house without knocking.

“None of my business?” He spat back.

I could hear the fury in his voice, and honestly, it kind of surprised me. In all the time I had worked with him, I had never seen this side of him. He had always been deferent to me, not wanting to piss me off or upset me—but now, it was like he wanted to tear my head from my shoulders.

“Yeah, what I do in my private life is—”

“Your private life matters when you’re pulling my sister into it,” he spat. “Where did you meet her? At the opening of the casino?”

I decided to nod along. Better than telling him the truth. I was sure he would freak out even harder if he found out this had been going on longer than that.

“I can’t believe you would go anywhere near her,” he snapped. “Thought your type would be—well, different than someone like her.”

“Why?” I fired back. I figured he wouldn’t appreciate it if I pointed out how damn hot his sister was, but he couldn’t be that oblivious to it, could he? I couldn’t have been the first guy he knew who had hit on his sister.

“Because she’s innocent to all of this,” he replied, shaking his head. “She doesn’t know anything about your world. And I don’t want her to.”

“You’re the one working with me,” I pointed out, cocking an eyebrow. I could see him growing angrier as he stood before me, clearly having a tough time controlling how much he wanted to go at me right now, but he knew better than to do

anything like that. No matter how tempted he might have been, no matter how mad he was about what had happened between his sister and me, he still knew the power I had in this city, and he wasn't going to invite more trouble than he needed to right in his lap.

“Yeah, working with, nothing else,” he replied. “I didn't want you getting anywhere near my family—she's the only fucking family I have left. I'm not letting her get pulled into your bullshit.”

Irritation nagged at the back of my mind, hearing him talk about me that way, but I knew there was no point in arguing with him. He had made his mind up, decided I was nothing more than a problem to him, and he wasn't going to let anything change his mind on that. Fine. If that was how he wanted to go about it—let him think he had the upper hand—that he was the better man out of the two of us, because he had decided to be ashamed of what he did with me.

But he wasn't the man I had worked with, not now. No, Mark was someone else entirely. The anger behind his eyes was evident, the fury written all over his face. He was in big-brother mode, and this version of him didn't want me within a million miles of his sister. I was sure he was far from the first big brother to feel that way about me, but that didn't mean I was just going to roll over and let him tell me how it worked.

“Stay away from her,” he growled at me. “I never want to see you within a ten-foot radius of her again, alright? She

doesn't understand what kind of person you are. She doesn't—she's not ready for any of this.”

I stared at him. Was I really going to let him talk to me like this? If he pulled out of the casino, it would leave me high and dry, and I couldn't risk losing that laundering source.

“Fine,” I replied, keeping my voice cool and calm. I wasn't going to let him see he had gotten me. I wasn't about to allow him to win this round, even if he needed to believe he had, even if I wished I could just turn around and tell him to get the fuck out of here, that what his sister did was none of his damn business and he would have been wise to forget he had seen what he had seen.

“Promise me,” he told me, and I was certain I wasn't going to get him to leave until I did. I sighed.

“We're not fucking children, Mark,” I snapped at him. “I'm not going to pinky-promise you or some shit—”

“Promise me,” he snarled. He was nothing like the man I had worked with before, but fine—if this was what he needed from me, I would give it to him. Whether I meant it or not, well, that was another thing entirely.

“I promise,” I muttered. Was that it? Would he be satisfied now? I was certain Thea would get the same treatment from him the moment he saw her again, but that was between the two of them, and I didn't much care to put myself in the middle of it.

Mark glowered at me for one more moment before he finally turned and stalked out of the house, leaving an air of unease behind him. I rubbed my hand over my face. Whatever had happened, I knew we just made things a whole hell of a lot more complicated—as if they hadn't been enough of a mess already.

I reached for my coffee, wishing I had something a little stronger to wash away the taste of that confrontation. If there was one thing I didn't like, it was being told what to do, let alone by people like Mark.

And let alone when he was telling me to stay away from the one woman I couldn't get out of my head.

Chapter Eleven Thea

“M^{ark?}”

I passed my brother in the corridor as he emerged from his office, but it was like he didn't even hear me. He brushed right past me, and I let out a sigh.

How long was he going to give me the silent treatment? Yes, I got it, he was mad at me, but did he have to play games like this? I thought the two of us were a little more mature than that, but clearly, I had been mistaken.

I got it. He was pissed. As far as he was concerned, I had gone behind his back to sleep with the one person in the city I should have stayed away from, and maybe he was right to be furious with me. I just couldn't stand my own brother brushing me off like he had never met me, especially now that I was trying to keep my distance from Scott, too. Apart from Shelby, it felt as though I didn't have anyone to talk to, and I felt more alone than ever. I wasn't sure how much more of it I could handle.

I trudged back up to my room to continue the job search I had been in the midst of before I had come down here to try and speak to Mark again. I knew he couldn't ignore me forever, but he sure seemed like he was going to try.

It had been nearly a week, and it felt like I was losing my mind. I didn't know what the chances were of Mark walking in and seeing the two of us together like that, but he hadn't given me any room to deny it. He'd stayed behind, and I'd heard him yelling at Scott before I had managed to flag down a car. Since then, he had been utterly ignoring me, making as though I didn't even exist. I wasn't sure what he had said to Scott, but I hadn't heard anything from him since then, so it must have been enough to get him to keep his distance.

But I didn't want him to. Did I? As I flopped down on my bed again, pulling out my laptop, I ran the thought around my head once more. I had been trying to work it out for so long, just what I wanted from Scott if I wanted anything at all. Did I need to see him again? Or was it better to keep my distance?

The night we'd spent together, and especially the morning after, I felt as though I had seen a different side of him. A softer side. He had opened himself up to me a little, and I had felt like we were beginning to deepen our connection, to find some space between us that we could use to close the distance between our lives. I knew he had lived such a different life than mine, but there was more that we had in common than we didn't. Right?

I wasn't even sure anymore. Maybe I was just dreaming, hoping it worked that way, even though I was sure it couldn't have been real. I wanted him to be a better person than he was, than the man Mark clearly believed him to be.

Perhaps my brother could see him for who he really was, and I needed to trust that he had my best interests in mind when he made his distaste for the two of us clear. I just...I just missed Scott, which I realized was crazy because we hardly knew each other. But when I thought of him, I felt this pang in my chest, as though some part of me still craved him. I should have known better, but the taboo was only making it harder for me to keep my distance, and I felt like I was losing my mind, lying in bed alone at night, feeling as though I couldn't go on missing him this badly.

I had been trying to throw all my energy into finding work, but honestly, I would have been lying if I said I wasn't distracted. I wanted to find a job I could focus my time on, something to keep me busy so I wouldn't spend every waking moment thinking about him.

I wanted to find something I could use to continue my mother's legacy. I knew she would have wanted me to use what I had learned to make this city a better place, and that was exactly what I intended to do—even if it was hard to find paying work in the charity sector.

If only I could actually just—I don't know—focus my skills on helping out somewhere without worrying about the pay. I knew I couldn't rely on the hotel to provide for me, I had

signed that over to Mark, and I doubted he would have been in any rush to assist me after what had just happened. But everywhere I looked, it seemed people were searching for help, but they couldn't afford to pay a living wage.

I was up to my eyeballs in college debt, and I had to start paying it off soon. I needed to get into the job market, but I didn't know if I was going to have to sacrifice my plans of working in charity to do so. How had my mom managed to pull it off? She had helped run the hotel and then spent the rest of her time pouring her energy into the community, as well as raising the two of us. Even thinking about that much work was enough to make my head spin.

But she had done it, so there must have been some way for me to keep up with it, right? Some way for me to get on top of all of this. I just wanted to have some focus to my life, some purpose. Studying at college had been a great way to keep myself busy and give myself goals, but now I was out, I was starting to feel lost, especially without my parents.

I had looked through all my mom's charitable work she had done over the years, and it was hard to know how to keep up with her standards. She was so prolific. Maybe the women's shelter? Or the food banks? Or the homeless shelters? I should start volunteering just to get myself out there, get myself out of my own head and onto the streets for a while.

I sent in a few volunteering applications and closed down the laptop, flopping back on the bed to take a breath. I felt exhausted. My mind had been running so fast since I last saw

Scott, and I hadn't had a second to myself—my brain was always full of him, my brother, and of everything that came with being stuck between them both.

Most of all, though, I was busy beating myself up about getting into this kind of mess in the first place. I should have been smarter than that, I really should, but there was a part of me that just wanted to throw caution to the wind and fall into bed with the last man on Earth I should have even been looking twice at.

I hadn't spoken to Shelby about it yet, though I knew I probably would have felt better if I'd had her take on all of it. I just...I was sure she would judge me for getting involved with someone like him, and maybe she would have been right to. She was always the one with these crazy dating stories, not me, and I doubted she would ever have let me live it down if she found out I'd been hooking up with a gangster.

All of this was just too messy for me to wrap my head around. I wasn't sure where to start. Maybe if I just kept my head down and hoped it went away on its own? All this chaos had to resolve itself eventually, didn't it? Even if I felt like I was going slightly crazy right now, stuck out here without anyone to talk to. Mark would give up the game after a few more days. There was no way he was going to keep being this mad with me, even if he might have had good reason to.

He was my brother. And the two of us, we were the only family either of us had left. Maybe that was why his emotions were so concentrated on me for now. Maybe it was why he

was so mad at me, because he felt as though I had betrayed him, as though the one person in the world he could actually trust had just turned around and stabbed him in the back.

But he was the one who had brought Scott into our lives. Sometimes I wanted to point that out to him. I would never have met Scott in the first place if Mark hadn't started working with him. I would never have had any reason to come into contact with Scott. It was that simple. But Mark had decided to make him part of our family business. Did he really think that someone like Scott Stewart was just going to play by his rules, no matter what? Surely, he couldn't have been that stupid...

Or maybe I was the stupid one. The one who saw a softness in a man who was anything but, the one who believed there might have been something else to him if I had just looked hard enough. I wanted there to be because otherwise, there would have been no reason for me to get close to him—no reason for me to allow myself to get drawn in to his sweetness, to believe in a part of him I was sure could never have really existed.

I rubbed a hand over my face, and tried to pull myself together. Shit, I didn't know what was wrong with me, but I felt like I was losing it. I wished I could talk to Scott again to get a feel for whether or not he had just been playing me when he had convinced me of the kind of person he was before or if there was really something to it.

He must have been able to convince Mark of a hell of a lot of it, too, and I couldn't help but wonder if I was the idiot for

letting it get into my private life—if I was the fool for allowing him this close to me. I guessed I would find out. He hadn't reached out to me since the last time we'd seen one another. Maybe he had lost interest in me now that he had slept with me again. Perhaps I wasn't as attractive to him as I had been before.

I stared at the ceiling. I was still staying in the hotel, but I really needed to find a place of my own to call home, somewhere I wouldn't have to deal with Mark's judgment every time I turned a damn corner. Some place I didn't have to worry about running into Scott every time I headed downstairs because knowing I might see him at any moment was making it seriously hard for me to relax. I wanted to see him, of course, I did, but at the same time, I was scared about running into him, scared of what I would say, of what I would do, of how he might be able to see right through the front I put up and make me feel like a complete idiot for letting myself get drawn in by him.

I pulled the covers up and over my head and let out a long sigh. I would have to figure it out when the time came. For now, though? For now, I just wanted to get some damn sleep and forget about the mess I had managed to walk myself into.

Chapter Twelve Scott

I paused outside the hotel, looking up at it in front of me.

Was Thea in there? Probably. She had no idea I was coming to the hotel tonight to pick up some money from Mark. I could have sent someone else down here to do it, but honestly, I wasn't going to pass up the chance to see her if I could.

It had been nearly ten days since I had last laid eyes on Thea, and I kept waiting for the moment when she would slip out of my head. The moment where I was going to be able to forget about her, about the girl who had shared my bed for just a couple of nights and managed to burn herself into my brain ever since.

I had missed her. I couldn't remember the last time I had really missed someone the way I had her, but my mind was hooked on her, stuck on her, constantly returning to her. Maybe it was knowing I couldn't have Thea, or maybe it was something else entirely, but I could not move on. I'd thought about hitting the town and finding someone else to get my

mind off her, but I knew it would have been futile. No matter who I met, or what I did, I would be craving her above all of them, and that was going to be a problem.

Mark had been replying to my messages, which was a positive step. I could still tell how pissed he was from the bluntness of his replies, but I could handle that part. The part I couldn't take was when he told me to stay away from his sister. He had no idea how intensely I felt about her and how hard he had made it to keep my distance. Laying down the law had just made her even more attractive to me. She was forbidden fruit, and there was nothing sweeter in this world.

Really, I was just at the hotel to pick up some money from him and leave. I should have made my way straight down to his office and done everything I could to get in and out without getting distracted. I stepped inside, and I truly was planning to just go straight to him...

Right up until the moment I heard her voice.

It cut through everything else, even the sounds of everyone in the casino. The place was pretty busy for a Thursday evening, which I should have been happy about, but all I heard was her. Her laughter. Was she with a guy? On a date? It didn't matter, and it was none of my business, but...

I peered around the door, and there she was, leaning at the bar with the same friend she had come to the opening night with. She was wearing a pair of jeans and a tee, just something light and chill, and she looked so hot I couldn't take my damn eyes off of her. I didn't know how she wasn't being hit on by

every guy in the place right now. She had probably shot a few of them down already. The way she looked, I was certain they'd tried their luck with her. It was like a spotlight shone on her, picking her out specifically, the whole world slowing to a halt just so I could see her like this.

And, as though she could sense me looking at her, she glanced around and saw me standing at the door. Her eyes widened, and I half-expected the smile to fall from her face, but it didn't. She grinned at me, watching me across the room, and I grinned back. Yeah, there it was, the same heat between us, even at this distance. There was no way we could deny it, try as I might. And God knows I had done what I could to forget about her.

I glanced around, making sure Mark was nowhere to be seen. I knew he would lose it if he saw me looking at his sister, but right now, it was hard to care. I just wanted to be close to her again. I had already spent so much time away from her, and what harm would one little conversation do?

I sauntered over to the bar, playing it cool like I didn't even see her, even though I had already smiled at her. I could play it like I was smiling at the bartender, right? I ordered a drink, feeling her watching me. I was aching to turn around and say something to her, but I didn't know the situation with her friend. Did she know about me? Maybe her friend was telling her to stay away from me. Or maybe she had no idea, and the only people in this room who could feel what we were feeling were Thea and I.

I ordered a whiskey sour and sipped on it as I leaned on the bar, casually turning around to survey the room. The place was busy, which was a good sign. I should have cared more about that than her.

She had made her way over to one of the blackjack tables, hanging out with her friend. She stole a glance over her shoulder, looking for me, and when she found me gazing back at her, she glanced away again. I could see the flush on her cheeks from here. Hey, no harm in saying hello, was there?

I made my way over to the table, moving slow as though I hadn't decided where I wanted to gamble tonight. But it felt like I was being pulled towards her, impossibly, irrevocably closer. She was irresistible to me, like a force of gravity, and no matter how much good sense I liked to think I had, I couldn't deny how much I just wanted to be close to her.

I slid up to the table, moving in a few inches away from her. I could see her smiling, see how much she wanted to greet me, but she was playing like she didn't know me. I planted my drink on the table next to her, and let my hand drop down by my side; our fingertips brushed, just for a moment, and she drew in a sharp breath.

"Next round?" Her friend asked her, and she nodded, smiling.

"Yeah, that would be great," she replied. "I'll get it—"

"No, it's fine, you got the last one," She replied, waving a hand. "I'll grab this. Back in a second!"

Her friend seemed oblivious to what was going on here, much to my relief. It was so much hotter to me when it was just a secret between the two of us, something for us to share. There were so many people in this room, but none of them, not a single one, was aware of the history between us, the want that seemed to crackle in the air around us.

I was dealt in for the next hand and played a quick game with her, but I couldn't focus on the cards in front of me. Her hand brushed against my side again, just the briefest little touch, the caress enough for me to feel my cock begin to stir. I could smell her, the scent of her skin and her perfume lingering in the air, and all I wanted to do was grab her, kiss her, and fuck her right over this table.

But holding myself back was so much more fun. I didn't know where the hell we were going to go or what was going to happen tonight, but just being near her again was the balm I needed to deal with the irritation of not being able to have her. It felt devious, doing it right here in public, but we could pretend we didn't even notice one another, right? Pretend we hardly even paid attention to each other's presence.

Her friend returned with her drink, planting it in front of her, and she picked it up, her fingers gliding around the stem elegantly. I had never noticed how graceful she was—how sure of herself. Every move she made seemed to be designed to accentuate the most sensual parts of her, and I couldn't take my eyes off of her as she lifted the glass to her lips, her mouth skimming across the rim. I wished they were pressed to me instead...

But before I could so much as think another word, I heard someone yelling my name.

“Scott!”

I turned, and my heart dropped when I saw Mark standing in the doorway to the casino. He didn't look happy. In fact, he looked utterly pissed. And I couldn't blame him. The one thing he'd told me to do, the *one* thing, was to stay away from his sister, and here I was, all up in her business, close enough that there was no plausible deniability about what my intentions had been.

“What the hell do you think you're doing here?” He demanded as he stormed towards us.

A few people glanced around to see what all the fuss was about. He didn't seem to notice or care. I rose to my feet and turned to meet him before he reached the table. I could already see the anger blazing in his eyes.

“I was stopping by to check on how the casino's doing,” I replied.

I exchanged a glance with Thea. We hadn't actually done anything, had we? Nothing at all. The two of us had just been sitting next to one another. No way he could go crazy at us for that, could he?

“Yeah, bullshit,” Mark snapped. More people were turning to see what the commotion was. This was supposed to be a relaxing, fun evening at the casino for them, not a chance to witness a damn soap opera.

“I told you to stay away from her,” he reminded me, stabbing his finger toward his sister.

“Mark, please, this is really—” she began, but her friend cut in before she could finish what she was saying.

“Wait, you know this guy?”

“Shelby, can we talk about this later?” Thea replied, her voice taut with stress. “This is...this is nothing to do with you. I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, and it’s about to be nothing to do with you, either, Scott,” Mark said, jerking his head towards the door. “Go on. Out of here.”

“That doesn’t even make sense,” I chuckled, which seemed to incense Mark even more.

“You don’t give a fuck, do you?” He demanded. “You don’t give a fuck what I want. You’re so used to taking everything you think you deserve. You haven’t even considered the possibility of not being in the right.”

He got even closer to me, jamming his face close to mine. This didn’t look good—he was meant to be my partner, the two of us were meant to work together, and if people saw us battling it out like this in public, they would doubt whether we had what it took to run this place.

“Out, now, and don’t let me see you anywhere near my sister again,” Mark ordered.

I crossed my arms over my chest.

“You wouldn’t even have this place if it wasn’t for me,” I reminded him. “And you want to tell me I can’t even be in here? I’m making sure you’re not driving this place into the ground, that’s all. Surprised you have an issue with me helping.”

“You’re not fucking helping,” Mark spat. Had he been drinking? He seemed furious. Thea stepped between us, lifting her hands.

“Please, guys, just stop fighting,” she begged. She was peering around, all too aware of how many people were watching us now and how bad this looked for the casino in general.

“Thea, don’t worry, I can handle this,” I told her gently.

I didn’t want her to think I was just going to let her brother order me around. Yeah, we might have been working together, but honestly, he knew I was the one calling the shots. Not many people would have been bold enough to stand up to me, but he seemed to have it in his head that he could handle me. Oh, yeah? Well, he didn’t know who he was dealing with.

“Yeah, you can deal with it by getting the fuck out of here,” Mark snapped, and he pointed to the door. “I’m not going to tell you again. Don’t make me have to get security.”

“The security I paid for?” I asked him, incredulous. “That’s the security you’re going to send after me, Mark?”

“Get the fuck out of here,” he snarled, pushing his face up close to mine. I could see the fury in his bloodshot eyes. It was

written all over his face. I didn't want to have to deal with this, not when I had just come to pick up some cash. I glanced over at Thea, who looked like she was going to puke right there on the ground. Couldn't say I blamed her; this was chaos, in the worst way possible, and we seemed to have attracted the attention of everyone around us. There were eyes on us, stares, and I was sure a lot of them were ready to spread the gossip of this confrontation like wildfire the first chance they got.

Yeah, well, I wasn't going to let it get any further out of control. Even if I was sure Mark was acting ridiculous, there would be no talking him out of this. He had already made up his mind, had already seen me talking to his sister, and decided I needed to get out of here. Fine. I would put space between us if that was what he needed, even if it pissed me the hell off to be told what to do by someone who basically worked for me.

"Fine," I muttered, and I adjusted my jacket before I headed to the door.

He would cool off soon enough, and we could have an actual conversation about this like adults, but right now, it was clear he had made up his mind. Once he had chilled out, we could actually discuss this properly, and I wouldn't have to worry about him making even more of a scene than he already had.

I didn't bother to stop and talk to Thea. I was sure he would fucking flip on me if I tried, and I had already drawn enough attention for one day. No, I was well and truly done, and I wanted nothing more than to get out of here and pretend this whole mess hadn't even happened.

I stormed out of the casino, eyes fixed ahead of me, jaw clenched tight. All that tension between Thea and I, and we hadn't been able to do a damn thing about it—and now, her brother was pissed at me too. I would get him to chill out eventually, but would Thea see me the same way if she knew I came with this level of drama? I had no idea.

Stepping out into the blistering evening once more, I closed my eyes and rubbed a hand over my face. Shit. That didn't exactly go to plan.

Even if the plan I'd had wouldn't have led anywhere good, either.

Chapter Thirteen Thea

I hovered outside Mark's office door, wondering if I should go in. Maybe it would have been smarter to just let him cool down for a while, but I couldn't let him get away with what he had pulled last night. No matter how much he seemed to think he had been in the right, I wasn't about to let my brother dictate who I could spend time with, even if he clearly hated the thought of me being anywhere near Scott.

He had made such a scene in the casino. I'd hurried off to my room the first chance I'd gotten, barely even saying goodbye to Shelby before I vanished. I was so humiliated at how he had stepped in between us, forcing himself into a situation that had nothing to do with him. I wished I had the nerve to tell him to fuck off and keep his nose out of it, but the fury he was showing was something I'd never seen before in my life, not from him. Not over anything I'd done, at least.

But I wasn't about to let it stand without actually taking the time to discuss with him what he had done. I wasn't sure how

he was going to take it, but we were family, and the last thing I needed was a wedge driven even further between us.

Because I had enjoyed spending time with Scott, even though I knew I shouldn't have. The sexy games he played, and the closeness we shared lit a fire within me, and I knew that if my brother hadn't stuck his nose into it, something more would have happened last night. I wished it had. I wished I could have taken Scott to my room. I wished the two of us could have spent the night together, but Mark took that choice away from us.

All the staff were talking about it this morning. When I came downstairs for breakfast, the staff had all quietened down at once, a sure sign they were discussing me. I could feel my cheeks blazing as I tried to brush it off, but I couldn't. I hated being the subject of gossip, and right now, it seemed as though everyone was interested in my business.

I couldn't let it get to me. Not until I'd had a chance to speak to my brother about it, at least—I needed to know what was going on with him, why he had kicked off so aggressively when he had seen Scott talking to me. Yes, I got it. He was protective of me. He was my older brother, but he didn't need to go so batshit crazy about it, did he?

Because...well, what if I wanted to spend more time with Scott? What if I wanted to get to know him a bit more? What if I was starting to see a side to him I had never imagined could have existed in someone like him? I didn't know if he would even believe me if I told him that, but I needed Mark to

understand there was more to Scott than he knew, more than the label he had pinned on him.

I inhaled deeply and pushed open the door.

Mark was sitting behind his desk, glowering at some papers before him. Clearly, he was still furious with everything that had happened, and maybe it shouldn't have come as a surprise. He had never been good at letting things go, and this seemed unlikely to slip his mind. He had been so mad last night that I was sure the event had burned itself into his brain, forcing him to confront the possibility of the two of us together.

His head snapped up when he heard me enter, and he looked up at me with irritation.

“Thea, what are you doing here?”

“I want to talk to you, Mark,” I told him, crossing my arms over my chest. “About what happened last night. You know you can't be making that kind of scene in public. People will talk—”

“And you think they're going to keep their mouths shut when they see you with someone like Scott?” He fired back. He had clearly already decided how this was going to go, and I hated how quickly he was off the mark—how fast he was to shut me down. And that he had a point.

“Look, I know you're just doing the big brother thing,” I rationalized. “I get it. And I don't begrudge you that. I really don't. I just...I want you to know that I'm not just going to be letting you decide how my life will go. I still have a life

outside of you, outside of this place, okay? And if that involves Scott—”

“Then it’s not outside of this place at all,” he shot back angrily. “Because he’s working with me, remember? You really want to shit where you eat like that?”

“You’re the one running the hotel, not me,” I reminded him. “If I want to date someone—”

“Date someone?” He exclaimed. “You’d think about dating a guy like that?”

“He’s not what you think he is,” I protested, and he shook his head, lifting his hand to stop me in my tracks.

“This isn’t about what I think,” he told me, his voice sharp. “This is about what I know. And what I know about him...you don’t even want to find out.”

“So tell me,” I replied, incredulous. “Tell me if it’s that bad, and you really think it’ll keep me away from him. Go on.”

I raised my eyebrows, and he just sat there. Just like I thought—he didn’t have anything. He was trying to throw shit out there to scare me, to get me to back off, but it didn’t work that way, not for me. I had already decided I wasn’t going to let Scott’s reputation scare me off. Whatever Scott had done, whatever kind of person he projected to the world, I could sense something else behind the façade. I could tell there was another man there, a man who was kinder, softer, gentler. A man who might not even have wanted any of this in the first

place but didn't have any choice but to take on his family business and hope he could make it out in one piece.

"You don't know him like I do," I argued.

"Oh, I know I don't," he replied, rolling his eyes. "I don't want to, either. It's just business with us. I'm not stupid to let myself actually get attached to the guy."

Anger flared in my system. I hated when he talked down to me like that. Hated when he spoke to me like I was an idiot who didn't know what was good for me. But I was more than that. I wouldn't stand for him acting as though I couldn't make the right decisions for my own life, no matter how much he seemed to think they were the wrong ones.

"He's...different," I protested. "Trust me. There's something else, something he tries to hide from everyone, but it's there. I know it. I've seen it."

"Yeah, he's doing a pretty good job hiding it from everyone, then," he replied. "Because nobody thinks he's anything other than a gangster."

I closed my eyes, squeezing them shut as I tried to gather myself. I couldn't let him get to me. He was just angry, lost in his emotions, and I had to cut through them to get him to see things from my perspective.

But when I opened them again and looked at him, I could see there would be no getting through to him. He had made up his mind about Scott, and I could have stood there all day and fought with him, and he wouldn't have budged. He was

fuming with me, and I wasn't going to get past that to get him to accept my perspective.

I gritted my teeth and turned my back on him. I wouldn't let him try to fight me into believing he was right. He hadn't seen those glimpses of Scott that I had, he never would. He was too closed off to it, and the thought of him seeing Scott through that twisted lens stung, badly.

"Yeah, that's what I thought," he called after me, clearly smug, as he believed he'd won this round. I didn't even respond. I had nothing to say to him.

There was only one person I wanted to speak to right now, and it wasn't my brother.

It was Scott.

Before I could stop myself, I pulled out my phone and dialed his number. This was stupid, I was sure of it, but I couldn't stop myself. I needed to hear his voice. I needed to hear that kindness in it, the promise that I wasn't completely inventing everything I had imagined in there. He was the man I thought he was, right? He could be, anyway, even if he might not have been now...

He answered after a couple of rings, and as soon as I heard him greet me, my heart flipped in my chest. I should have been done with this, done with him, but the tension between us the night before had burned itself into my memory, into my body, and I wouldn't be able to escape it until I saw him again.

"Thea?"

“Scott, I need to see you,” I told him. “Can I come over?”

“Of course,” he replied at once, as though surprised I even needed to ask. “There’s a bar near mine, Casper’s - let’s meet there.”

“Okay, sure,” I replied. I could use a drink. It was barely past midday, but the stress from that conversation with my brother had made it hard to think straight.

“See you soon,” he replied. He didn’t even question why I wanted to see him. He just accepted it. I wasn’t sure there would have been anyone else in my life who would have done that. Maybe it’s what I needed right now, somebody to make sure I was okay, even when it felt like things were spinning out of control.

I said my goodbyes and went outside to hail a cab. I was still a little shaky, but knowing I would see Scott soon was making it all a little easier to handle.

Even if I had no idea what we were going to talk about or what we were going to do, being around him made everything simpler for me.

Chapter Fourteen Scott

As soon as I saw her walk through the door of the bar, I could tell she wasn't exactly happy.

She looked as though she had been crying on the drive over here, her eyes slightly red and puffy, and her hair was a mess like she had been running her hands through it non-stop. I rose to my feet, lifting a hand to guide her over to me, and she practically collapsed into the booth next to me.

“You okay?” I asked her.

“I need a drink,” she replied with a faint smile. “Something strong.”

I went to the bar to get her what she requested and looked back over my shoulder to check on her as I waited for it to be prepared. It was clear she wasn't doing well, and I hated seeing her like this, hated seeing her so shaken up. I didn't know what had happened, but I would bet it had something to do with her brother and the crazy confrontation he had pulled on me the night before.

I hadn't expected to hear from her again so soon. Honestly, I had thought she would be done with me after her brother had made a scene the way he had. I wasn't worth all that trouble, was I? But here she was, ready and waiting for me again, ready to talk, and I wanted to hear what she had to say.

I made my way back to the table with a couple of whiskeys for us and pushed the glass across the table to her. She took a sip and pulled a face.

"I always forget how strong this stuff is," she muttered. "Tastes like lighter fluid."

"That's the most expensive whiskey in the city," I remarked, half-smiling. "If you don't like that, you're not going to like any of it."

She wrapped her hands around the glass and stared down into the amber liquid for a moment, breathing heavily. She looked like she wanted to cry again, but she didn't. Instead, she lifted her gaze up to meet mine and asked me the last question I ever expected to come out of her mouth.

"Do you think about getting out?"

I frowned at her, confused.

"Getting out? Of what?"

"Of this business," she replied. "The one you're in. The one your father made for you. You ever think about doing something else instead?"

I leaned back in my seat, the question circling around my mind. I wasn't sure what she expected me to say. She had

danced around this question before, but now she was just coming right out with it.

I wasn't sure what to tell her. Before I'd met her, it had never been something that I'd considered much. Why would I? My father had never given me much of a chance to consider it one way or another. I'd just been thrown right into the depths of it the first chance he'd gotten. I was always going to do this job, always going to jump into it feet-first, and I wasn't going to fail him on that front.

And yet...when I looked at her, it was as though something else opened up in front of me. Something I had never imagined before. Like I could glimpse another life, another reality that I might have been able to live if I had just played my cards right.

Or maybe it was just a fantasy, some fantasy I was living out for the sake of it. Would I really ever have been able to make it out of this business? Out of this world? Was my name too deeply tied to it now? I didn't know. I wasn't sure.

"I don't know," I replied, finally. It seemed like the most honest answer I could give her. I didn't know what to say to her, what would have been the truth.

She sighed heavily and took another sip of her drink.

"Yeah, that's what I figured," She replied. "I just...I get it, I do. I want to uphold my mom's legacy, too, but I don't want to let my life be dictated by that, either."

“What’s her legacy?” I asked her, shifting the conversation to something else. I didn’t want to focus too much on my family. I knew it made her uncomfortable, and she wasn’t part of my world. Never had been, and I doubted she wanted to be.

She smiled like the memories were rushing up and through her head.

“She did a lot of charity work,” she explained. “She always said to me that she didn’t think there was anything beyond this life, so you just had to do the very best you could while you were here. I always liked that, you know? It always felt right to me. She never had excuses. She would always jump into anything that came her way. I always loved that about her.”

“And that’s what you want to do?” I asked, and she nodded.

“I mean, I don’t think I’ll be able to make the same impact she did,” she admitted. “But I want to try, at least.”

“Why don’t you think you’ll be able to keep up with her?”

She shrugged. “She worked her whole life to make a difference in this city,” she explained. “She worked at the hotel part-time to make money, and she used her influence and cash the rest of the time to help people. Donating to women’s shelters, organizing charity drives—I don’t think there’s anything she didn’t do, any group she didn’t try to help while she was here. I’m not sure anyone would be able to keep up with that. And with the hotel...well, it’s not like I have that to fall back on the way she did.”

She ran her finger around the rim of her glass, and I could tell she was thinking of her mother—thinking of all she had lost with her. I reached out to take her other hand, giving it a squeeze.

“She sounds like an amazing woman,” I remarked, and she nodded.

“She really was. I just miss her so much sometimes, you know?”

“I get it,” I said. “I feel that way about my dad. Working the business helps me feel closer to him, I guess.”

“Yeah, I think that’s why Mark wanted to take over the business,” she agreed.

It was the first time she had brought up her brother since we had had that confrontation the night before, and I was surprised to hear her speak his name like that.

“You weren’t interested in it?” I asked, and she shook her head.

“I wanted to use my degree for other things,” She replied. “I know my mom would have wanted me to strike out into the world—do my own thing, you know?”

I nodded.

“Guessing your dad wasn’t much the same way, huh?” she remarked, tipping her head to the side. I shook my head.

“No, not really,” I agreed. “He was...he was always sure I was going to take over the business. That was why he did this

kind of work in the first place, actually. He wanted to make a legacy for me. He grew up struggling. His whole family did. And he never wanted me to have to go through the same thing. I never did, I guess, so I should be grateful to him for that...”

I trailed off. A twist of guilt turned in my chest. I should be grateful for it, so why did all of this feel like an imposition all of a sudden? My father had worked his whole life to get me where I was, to make sure I would never have to struggle the way he had, and yet, I was sitting here, doubt in my voice and questions in my heart. I should have known better.

“You feel bad about that, don’t you?” She asked me as though she could sense what was going on inside my head. I stared at her. Was it that obvious? Or was she just that perceptive? I wasn’t sure. I wasn’t sure I even wanted to know. I nodded.

“A little,” I admitted. “I just...you’re right. I never chose any of this for myself. I just went along with it. I did what I thought he wanted because it’s what I’ve known my whole life. I could never have imagined it going any other way. I was always just...sure this was how it had to be.”

She linked her fingers through mine on the table. I looked down at our hands, joined like that. They looked...right, on some level that I couldn’t quite put into words.

“It doesn’t have to stay like that,” she told me, her voice softening. “Think of all the change you could make in this city. With the money you have...you could make everything better

here. For everyone. You could use that power you have for good.”

I drew my hand back from hers.

“I don’t know if anyone would even want my money,” I said, shaking my head. “Knowing where it comes from. What it was earned through.”

“Trust me, most charities don’t care where the cash is coming from as long as it lets them help the people they’re trying to assist a little longer,” she assured me. “And besides, you could turn the business into something more legit if you wanted, right? You’re the one calling the shots now. You run the place.”

I hesitated before I responded. She was right on some level, but even after all this time, I still felt as though my father was looking over my shoulder, watching my every move. And I wasn’t sure if he would have approved of me trying to turn this business into something it wasn’t, something it had never been. I could almost hear his voice telling me not to try and change what he had worked toward for so long, not to bother shifting my approach when he had already proven success.

But maybe she had a point. Maybe there was something to be said for changing things up. When I sat opposite her, I could almost feel something moving inside of me, something shifting into place. I had never imagined it before, never even thought about it, but she made me want to change. She made me want to try a different life, a life I could never have come close to imagining.

“I don’t know,” I said again.

I didn’t know what else to say to her. I didn’t want to commit to anything I wasn’t sure I’d be able to follow through on, and I was sure she would see through it even if I tried.

She sighed again. Maybe she’d hoped I would turn it all in right then and there, give it up on the spot, but surely she must have known it wasn’t that easy. No matter how much I liked her, how much of a draw I felt to her, I was still my father’s son—I had still been born into a legacy I couldn’t just walk away from, no matter how tempting the idea might have been when she pitched it to me.

We spent the rest of the evening drinking, talking, and soon, she began to relax. I steered the conversation away from our families, away from everything we had been through. I didn’t want to spend too long hung up on it, even if there was still so much to be said between us. She had clearly had a hard time, and she eventually admitted she had tried to talk to Mark, who hadn’t taken it very well.

Which was fine by me. Because, as long as it wasn’t enough to drive her away from me, I could handle anything he attempted to drop on us. When I was with her, all of that just fell away. None of it mattered. The conversation flowed with ease, and I knew I wouldn’t have wanted to be with anyone else tonight.

Eventually, though, she began yawning, and I could tell she was exhausted. I almost wanted to invite her back to my place, but honestly, it looked more like she could have used a good

night's sleep, and she wouldn't have gotten that if I had been around.

"Let me call you a cab," I told her, and I called up my car company and got them to bring a town car to the entrance of the bar. She tried to protest, telling me she didn't need me to do that for her, but I just lifted a hand to quiet her.

"I want to make sure you get home okay, and my company is the only one I trust," I replied. She smiled at me.

"Thank you," she murmured, and we headed outside, where it had just begun to rain. It had been muggy the last few days, the intensity of it crackling in the air, but the cool rain seemed to have broken it.

I slipped an arm around her waist. Really, I wanted to take her home, but more than that, I wanted her to be well-rested. It was strange to want to put her well-being in front of my desires, but I was going with it. I didn't want to let anything get in the way of this, the way I felt about her right now.

She turned to me, and before I could say another word, she slipped her soft hand to my face and kissed me. As soon as our lips touched, I felt the warmth spreading through me. Not just arousal, though that was a part of it, but something else. Something deeper. Something that told me that, whatever we had, it ran deeper than just sex.

She pulled back and skimmed her thumb over my cheek.

"You should think about what I said," she murmured. "About getting out of the business. I know you haven't really

given it much thought, but if you ever wanted another life... you could have it, okay?"

I parted my lips in surprise, but before I could say anything in return, the car pulled up, and she climbed inside. She smiled at me from behind the darkened glass, and then vanished off into the night.

I stood outside the bar for a long time, trying to wrap my head around her advice. I didn't know what to make of it. Should I have been annoyed that she seemed to be acting like she knew me better than I did? Or was she offering me a lifeline, a way out when I had never really considered one before?

I never really allowed myself to consider one, if I was being honest.

I didn't know what to do now. I was a little tipsy, and the alcohol seemed to have opened up doors inside my head that I would have otherwise kept shut. Doors that looked out onto a life I might have had if I hadn't been caught up in my father's business, doors I did my best to pretend didn't exist.

I wasn't sure what would happen if I allowed myself to look through them, to see into the other side. It seemed too dangerous even to allow myself to consider, even though maybe I should have—even though perhaps it would have been smart for me to think about what else was out there, what else I could have done with my life.

I wasn't just a lapdog, going along with everything people wanted from me. I knew I was more than that. But meeting

Thea had drawn out that side of me. She made me feel ways nobody else had before, and I knew if I wanted to keep feeling those things, I was going to have to take a step back from this business.

I needed to get home and think about what the hell we had just talked about this evening. There was a whole hell of a lot going through my head, and I wasn't even sure where to start with unpacking it all.

I called myself a car and leaned outside the door, staring into space. I didn't know how to navigate this. But there was one thing I did know, for damn sure—I wanted to see more of her.

And if that meant making some major changes to do it? Maybe it was the right call.

Chapter Fifteen Thea

I paced back and forth; shooting looks at the paper bag sitting on my bed. I could do this—I could. I just needed to get it done, and over with, and soon, this would all just be a paranoid memory.

It had hit me this morning when I had woken with a wooziness in my belly and sprang out of bed just in time to throw up. I never usually got sick, but the nausea was kicking my ass, and I had no idea why. At first, I thought it was food poisoning, but I had been eating at the hotel, and nobody else seemed to have come down with anything.

And then it clicked in my mind. My period was late. About two weeks late, actually. But with all that had been going on, it could have just been the stress. That's what I told myself, anyway, as I tried to shove down the thought of it being anything else.

But I needed to find out, one way or another, even if it wasn't the news I was hoping for. No matter how scary the possibility was, it was scarier for me not to know, and I wasn't

going to sit around and torture myself with the thought of it. Better to just take a pregnancy test and find out.

It had been about a week since I had last seen Scott. I had decided he could contact me if he wanted to talk again, but he hadn't bothered yet. I hoped it was because he was pondering what we had discussed, not because he was totally done with me.

I knew I had pushed my luck, talking to him about the possibility of a life outside everything he had known for so long. But I could tell some part of him craved it, even if he never would have admitted it to himself. He had been locked into all of this for so many years now. It was clear just from looking at him that he didn't want to consider the thought of what could have been if he had given it up.

Or maybe I was just imagining it because I wanted him to feel that way. I wanted him to see another way out of this, even though he was so tied up in the darkness of this city. Maybe he didn't want a way out. Maybe he thought this was where he belonged, and fine, if that was the case, he could stay there.

Even if the thought of giving up on him, or being wrong about him, made my chest ache.

And now, I was back here, in my hotel room, trying to pluck up the courage to take the damn test waiting for me in that paper bag I'd picked up from the drugstore. I had to get this over with. The chances of me being pregnant when we'd only hooked up a handful of times were slim, right? I didn't

actually have anything to worry about. This was nothing more than a precaution.

Finally, I ripped open the packet and went to the bathroom. My heart was beating so fast I could hear it, but I ignored that and went ahead and took the test, balancing the plastic strip on the back of the toilet and breathing in slow deep breaths. I had to get through this. Just one little test and it would all be done with.

I counted down the seconds, my leg bouncing nervously. I was crunching the numbers in my head, trying to work out how likely it was that I was really pregnant. There was no way, was there? It had to be miniscule the possibility of it. And yet...

And yet, I couldn't rule it out entirely, and that scared the shit out of me.

My mind couldn't help but wander as I tried to pull myself together. What was I going to do if I really was pregnant? It would be a nightmare. I was only just out of college. I didn't have a job yet, hell, I didn't even have a place to live outside of this hotel. And the man I was pregnant by...my brother hated him, at least in that context, and he was caught up in so much dark shit I couldn't even wrap my head around it.

Finally, the count was up. I took a deep breath and turned around to check on the test...

And there it was. Staring right back at me like a cruel, twisted joke.

Positive. It was positive.

I felt my stomach lurch as the corners of my vision blurred, and I dropped down to my knees, heaving over the toilet as the panic hit me square in the face. No. There was no way. There was no fucking way I could be...

Once I had managed to stop dry-heaving, I lifted my head and looked at the test again. There they were, the two little lines that told me everything I needed to know. I was pregnant.

And I knew it was true. I had known deep down the moment it had crossed my mind it was true. It was the reason I had taken the test in the first place. Some part of me just feared, just *knew* that this was real. I planted my hands on my stomach and looked down, staring blankly at the spot where my child was growing.

I had never really given much thought to having kids before this—had never needed to. I had always been so careful when it came to hooking up with guys, but I had let all of that go out the window when I had been with Scott, the intensity of our chemistry making me stupid.

And now, I was paying the price for it.

I made my way to the bed and collapsed onto the covers, staring up at the ceiling as I tried to work out what I would do next. Would I—was I going to keep it? I could just get rid of the baby if I didn't want to have it. It was early enough that it would have been simple and painless. Nobody else would need to know.

But I didn't want to do that. It might have been the more sensible choice, but I didn't want to go through with it. I wanted this baby. I could feel this deep attachment growing to it already, to this little life growing inside of me. Maybe it was just the jolt of emotion and shock talking, but I didn't want to have an abortion.

Which meant...

Which meant I was going to be carrying Scott's baby. Shit. The enormity of it washed over me, and I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to wrap my head around it. What the hell would my life look like with his baby?

Scott wouldn't want anything to do with it. I was sure of it. He didn't strike me as the family type. But he seemed to have enough decency in him to pay for it, as far as he could—unless he thought this had all been a game on my part, and I had just been trying to trap him into child support. Oh, hell.

I couldn't even talk to anyone about this. It would have been too much to catch Shelby up on, and I couldn't put it into words, not yet. It was all too complicated, the way I felt about him, the way I felt about this baby, all of it. It was more than I could wrap my head around—more than I could begin to imagine.

And what would this baby be born into? That was what I was scared of. Would it become part of his father's legacy? If Scott chose to continue the family business, surely he would want to involve our child in it.

Our child. Even letting those words cross my mind felt enormous. It would tie us together for life. There would be no getting away from it if I let this happen. *If* I chose to tell Scott. There was always another option. Just hide it from him. Keep the child to myself.

But I knew I wouldn't have been able to handle it all alone. I didn't want to. I knew if I had this child, I would need my family around me, this child's family including Mark, who was going to flip his shit when he found out what was really going on, of course. He would lose it if he knew I had managed to get pregnant by the guy he didn't want me anywhere near. It would be a permanent tie between our family and Scott's Mafia ties, beyond just the connection of the business deal they had made with one another. It would be something to force us to stick together, no matter what happened, no matter how dark things got.

And I didn't know how much darker they were going to get. I had barely scratched the surface of what Scott was really like. I felt like I was getting to know him, but there was still every chance he was putting up a front to draw me in. What he wanted from me, I didn't know, but I had to keep my guard up, even if it was incredibly tempting just to let it fall, let myself fall for him the way I wanted to.

If I brought this baby into this world, I was making sure that it was going to be a part of his family—and that meant it would be a part of what his family stood for, too. Could I, in good conscience, let that happen? Maybe our child would

want to embrace such a life, or perhaps it would resent me for drawing it into a dangerous lifestyle.

I cupped my hands on my lower belly again, wishing I could talk to the little cluster of cells growing inside me. Wishing I could ask it what it thought of all of this. But I couldn't. I had to be the one to make the call, and I wasn't sure what the right call was, and it was tearing me up inside.

I didn't know what was going to happen. I really didn't. But I was sure of one thing—I would be the best parent I possibly could be to this little one. Scott? Yeah, I couldn't account for him, what he would do, or how he would react. But I could make sure I didn't fail this kid.

No matter what, I would do what it took to look after our child. I might have been terrified, looking down the barrel of a life I could never have imagined up until this moment, but sometimes, the world just threw you a curve ball, and you had to find some way to keep hold of the bat and knock it right out of the park.

I was still scared. God, I was still terrified. But I had made my mind up and decided I was going to keep this kid and do everything I could to give it the life it deserved. I wished my mom was here to help me through this. I was sure she would have had something smart to say, something that would have cut straight to the core of what I was feeling. Maybe she had even felt similar doubts when she had first found out she was pregnant with my brother.

I felt tears prick my eyes as it hit me that she would never be able to meet her grandchild. Neither she nor Dad could hold it in their arms, be there for it, spoil it the way grandparents were supposed to. I bit down on my lip hard, trying to keep the tears from falling. I couldn't let this turn into a pity party. I would have time to feel all my emotions further down the line once I had worked out what I was going to do next. Even though this might have felt impossible right now, even though it seemed as though the walls were closing in around me, I had made my choice.

And nothing was going to sway me from my path.

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Sixteen Scott

“**A**nd you’re sure about this?” Dalton asked me, raising his eyebrows, giving me another chance to back out. I nodded.

“Certain,” I replied. “I want to invest in this community center.”

“As a front for something else, or...?” My accountant asked me, clearly baffled by this whole interaction. When I’d asked him to meet me this morning, I doubted he had expected it to go like this.

“No,” I replied. “Because I want to help them. They need it. I was looking into their work this morning, what they do—you know how many kids they help a year? I want them to be able to double it.”

He stared at me for a long moment, then shook his head and shrugged.

“Whatever you say,” he muttered, pulling out a notepad and starting to jot some stuff down. I leaned back in my seat,

feeling a wash of contentment pass through me. Yes, this might not have been how I expected to be spending the day, but I knew it was what I wanted.

I had been thinking non-stop about what Thea had said to me the other night when we had been at the bar together. About how much change I could make in this city if I just played my cards right and did the right thing. I had never really thought of myself as an arbitrator of positive change in this place—well, unless you counted helping out guys like me in the bank account department, of course.

But I had gone looking into some of the causes she had mentioned to me, and I'd been struck by how hard they worked, how much time they spent with their noses to the grindstone to make what they wanted to happen, happen. I was sure my father would have called it a waste of time to dedicate that much energy to people who would never be able to give it back, but I could see how passionate they were, and how much they meant it.

And I wanted to help them. I did. Not everyone had had the same opportunities I'd had over the course of my life, but they all deserved the same boost up the ladder I had been given. People shouldn't have to scrap and grind just to make enough money to feed their families. I started doing some calculations, working out how I could help out, and how much difference I could make in the way of donations.

It felt exciting in a way I hadn't experienced for a long time in this business. All of it had just been standard to me for so

long I had forgotten what it felt like to have that injection of invigoration, that feeling like you were really making a difference and doing something that mattered. It was never something my father would have even thought about, and yeah, part of me felt guilty for doing something I knew he would never have been able to get on board with—but maybe it was time for a change. Time to shift things up.

“And I’ve been thinking,” I continued, musing out loud to Dalton. “I want to move some of the assets to a more... legitimate location. Find some businesses to invest in. Not in protection money. Just to give them a boost.”

Dalton was staring at me like I had lost my damn mind, and I couldn’t blame him. This was about as far removed from the man he’d known his whole professional career as possible. He had worked with my family for nearly a decade now, the only guy who could handle the stress of moving our money around, but this was a complete change of pace from what he was used to.

I wanted to do this, though. I was sure of it. I wanted to turn this business into something I could actually be proud of—something I could be honest about. And I knew the only way to do that was to start moving things around, shifting towards a more legitimate enterprise. I had the money to invest in a dozen different businesses, and I could have lifted them out of financial trouble in the process.

“Where has all this come from, Scott?” Dalton asked me. He seemed utterly confused by it. I wasn’t sure if I could put it all

into words for him, as easily as all that, but maybe it would do me good to try and get it out there.

“I’ve just been thinking a lot about the legacy I’m going to be leaving behind, you know, when I’m gone,” I replied. He raised his eyebrows at me.

“That seems needlessly morbid.”

“Maybe it is,” I agreed. “But I honestly don’t think I can keep pretending I’m happy just walking in my father’s footsteps. He left so much behind for me, set up so much for me, but I know he wouldn’t want me just going along with everything he wanted for the sake of it. No, he’s always wanted better for me. He’s always wanted me to be able to do what I want. And this, right now—this is what I want.”

“You sure you’re not going to change your mind?” He asked. “Because this is the kind of thing that would seriously harm your reputation if you walked it back...”

“I’m sure,” I replied simply. I had spent a hell of a long time turning this all over inside my head, and I was already certain I had made the right call. I needed to change something, shift some of the ground out from underneath me, and try something new. No matter how hard it seemed, no matter how much it scared me, this was the best thing I could do for myself.

And for Thea. But I wasn’t about to blurt that out to Dalton right now.

“Shit, well, if you’re certain,” he replied, raising his eyebrows and shaking his head. He knew better than to argue with me. He had worked with me and my dad for long enough to know that when we got an idea in our heads, we weren’t going to be easily swayed from it.

“Thank you,” I replied, nodding. “Let me know when the donations have gone through.”

“No problem,” he replied. “And I’ll pass on a list of businesses that might be good candidates for your investments. And what about...?”

He trailed off, and I knew at once what was on his mind—what were we going to do about the people we had worked with? The underground crew, those on the wrong side of the law?

“We’ll pay them what it takes to cut ties,” I replied, nodding with certainty. “Make sure there’s no bad blood there—I don’t want them turning up to cause me trouble down the line. Got it?”

Dalton nodded again, making some more notes on the page before him. I could see his hand shaking slightly, but I ignored it. He might have been scared, but I was set on this. I was set on what we needed to do next, what needed to happen. I couldn’t keep living in the shadow of my father’s legacy. If I wanted to be the kind of person Thea could love, the type of person she could be with. I had to start here, now. And I had to begin from the ground up with this business.

Dalton rose to his feet, and I could tell he was waiting for me to take it all back. Waiting for me to admit this had been nothing more than a joke on my part or something. But I met his gaze steadily, not shifting until he shook his head.

“I never thought I’d see the day,” he muttered, and he stuck his hand out to me. “I’m looking forward to seeing where you go next with this, Scott.”

“Me too,” I replied, taking his hand and shaking it firmly. “And I hope you’ll be there to keep me company through it.”

“Of course, I will,” he replied, flashing me a grin. “I can’t wait to see how this turns out.”

He turned and headed out of my home office, and I sank back down into the chair and stared at the spot he had just been in. This was it—things were moving now, no taking them back. I couldn’t undo it. I didn’t want to. This was what I had committed to, for a reason—and that reason came in the form of Thea, and everything we’d talked about the last time we had seen one another.

I knew it was a risk. More than a risk. It was the equivalent of throwing myself off the edge of a cliff without looking down first, without knowing how far I had to fall, but sometimes, you had to take that leap of faith.

My faith was in Thea, but more than that, it was in myself, in that I wanted this regardless of how things turned out with her. The more I spoke to her, the more I saw into this life that I desired, a life where I didn’t have to skirt around the sidelines of the decent world, a life where I could have a family without

fearing that I would put them in danger just by virtue of them existing. They would be safe, and this was the best way I could ensure it.

I knew my father would have been rolling in his grave, but honestly, I couldn't think about that now. Yes, he had spent a long time building up this business, these connections, but it was time to leave that behind. Wasn't that the aim of every man like him? To be able to claim legitimacy somewhere down the line? He might not have sought it out himself, but he had made it so I could pursue it, and I was grateful for that. One day, from wherever he was now, I was sure he would see it my way and forgive me in the process.

And what about Thea? Well, I wanted to make sure I had everything in place by the time I spoke to her next so that it wasn't just empty words. I wanted her to be able to believe everything I had to say to her and believe me when I told her I was ready to change. Even if it seemed crazy, I wanted her to believe it.

I didn't know if she would still want me. Maybe she had been attracted to the part of me that offered danger, the part of me that seemed impossible. She knew nothing could happen between us, not with her brother hating me the way he did, and perhaps it had been a safety measure, a way she could indulge in this romance without commitment.

But I needed to try. I needed to find out if there might have been something more to the connection I felt with her. She made me want to change, she made me want to be better, and I

couldn't think of a greater compliment I could give her. I couldn't think of anything more I would have been looking for in a woman.

I had fallen for her, hard, fast, harder than I had ever fallen for anyone in my life before. It was more than just a crush, more than just desire. I was sure of it. There was something solid between us, something I couldn't deny, something that was just beginning to bloom, but something I wanted to do everything I could to cultivate.

And judging by how she had encouraged me to look into doing better things with my money, I would guess she felt the same way too. She saw something in me that nobody else did or had tried to see—something I couldn't even imagine finding anywhere else.

I couldn't wait to tell her what I had done, the choice I had made, based on the advice she'd given me. I just wanted to make sure she understood how much I appreciated her and the support she'd shown me. Even though her brother clearly thought I was a criminal, maybe he would start to see me through a new lens when he understood how far I was willing to go to prove myself.

I got to my feet to pour myself a drink. I felt like celebrating. I knew it was early to go about hailing a new change to my life, a new world for me to live in, but it felt right. I knew this was going to stick. I had this feeling deep in my chest like this was it—this was what I had been waiting for.

I filled the glass up with a generous helping of whiskey—my father’s favorite drink. He had been the one to introduce me to it. Whenever I sipped on it, I thought of him. And now, I thought of how he might see me—what he might think of me and where I had taken his business.

But, at the end of the day, it was what *I* wanted that mattered. I couldn’t live my life in his shadow. I had to strike out and create a legacy of my own, even if I wasn’t sure how to go about it—even if this ground felt so fresh beneath my feet, I wasn’t sure if I could stand up straight.

I was ready for it. Ready for anything. And, most of all, ready for Thea to find out just how far I had gone to prove myself to her.

Chapter Seventeen Thea

I fiddled with the cup in front of me, trying to remember exactly how much coffee my doctor had told me I could have each day. Even though I knew I was well within the healthy limit, there was still a paranoid part of me that wanted to play it even safer.

But I wasn't exactly playing it safe now, was I? No, I was about to meet with Scott and tell him the truth of what was going on with me—the truth of why I had been dodging his calls, doing all I could to keep my distance. I was scared shitless about how he was going to react, but I couldn't keep this from him forever.

I had been going back and forth on how to tell him if I even wanted to. He had reached out to me a few times, and I had brushed him off, not ready to see him yet. But I felt as though he would just be able to tell with one look the truth of what was going on inside my head.

But I knew I couldn't keep it from him forever. He deserved to know the truth, of course, he did—and though I couldn't tell

for certain how he was going to react to it, this seemed the only way to handle this. I couldn't keep pretending this wasn't happening. At my first doctor's appointment, she told me the baby was doing great, looked healthy, and I just had to keep doing what I was doing. It was as real as it would ever be, and the last thing left to do was tell Scott.

When I saw him walk through the door, my heart skipped several beats. God, I had missed him. I didn't even realize I was capable of missing someone so much. Even though we'd only known each other a few months, my soul seemed to cry out for him when we were apart, drawing me in closer and closer until there was nothing left to resist.

He grinned as soon as he set eyes on me and greeted me with a kiss on the cheek. I inhaled his aftershave, taken back at once to the night we'd met, the night this had all started. Even then, I had known there was something special about him. I had known there was something I couldn't deny, something I didn't want to let go of. No matter how tempting it might have been to give in to it right now and try and live in that fantasy world where I didn't have to admit to what was really going on, I had to tell him the truth.

I had to.

He sat opposite me, eyeing me for a long moment as he tried to work out what was going on inside his head. I didn't blame him for being confused. He must have been wondering what had changed to draw me back in again, pull me back close to him like this when I had tried to put some distance between us.

When my brother had practically *insisted* we stay away from each other.

I wrapped my hand around the cup, gripping on for dear life as though it was the only thing in the world capable of bringing me comfort right now.

“What was it you wanted to talk about?” He asked me, raising his eyebrows and smiling at me earnestly.

God, his smile was so gorgeous it made my breath hitch in my throat. I couldn’t deny my attraction to him, couldn’t deny how much I had fallen for him. I couldn’t deny how much I wanted him and how deeply I hoped for a future together, even if the thought of it was crazy.

“I...there’s something I really need to tell you,” I confessed, blurting it out before I could stop myself.

My system was stirring with fear as I tried to figure out how I thought he was going to react. I had no idea if he would just storm out the moment I came out with it or hold my hand and tell me he was here for me or—shit, it was driving me crazy trying to wrap my head around it. I just needed to get it out of my system, get it into the real world so I could tell him what was happening.

“Are you okay?” He asked, frowning, his eyes searching mine with concern. “What’s going on, Thea?”

My name on his tongue—God, it lit something in me I couldn’t put out. I wanted to ask him to say it again, and again, and again, so I could listen to the sound of it, listen to the way

it made me feel, but I had to be stronger than that. I had to be smarter. I had to focus on what I had come here to do, and it wasn't to indulge myself in the sweetness of his attention, even if I would have given anything for that right now.

“I'm...” I tried to start but stopped before I could really get anywhere. How the hell was I supposed to tell him this? Really? Where did I even begin in putting it out there? Would he even believe me? Would he think this was some game I had made up for the sake of hurting him, getting to him, fucking with him? I had no idea.

I pressed my lips together, tipped my head back, and stared at the ceiling above me. Blinking, I tried to push back the tears that were threatening to slip. I didn't want to cry. I was so hormonal right now it was difficult to control myself, and even more so with him right there in front of me, staring at me, waiting for me to say what I needed to say.

“I'm pregnant, Scott.”

The words slipped from my mouth before I could stop them, and the whole world seemed to grind to a halt around us as I waited for him to say something. I dropped my gaze back to his, chewing on my lip, staring at him—needing him to react, needing him to come out with it, anything, anything at all. I would have taken any response, as long as it meant the two of us were on the same page with all of this, as long as it meant we could just open up the conversation of what the hell we were going to do next.

“You’re...pregnant?” He repeated, as though he wasn’t sure he was hearing me right.

I nodded. The tears had begun to fall down my face now. I couldn’t stop them even if I wanted to. Everything was crumbling around me, everything I had planned for myself. I had gotten pregnant by the kind of man I should have known better than to go anywhere near, and yet, here I was—here I was, having fallen for him, fallen in love with him, even though I was smarter than that. At least, I thought I had been, right up until the point I had locked eyes with him for the first time, and every bit of good sense I had been hanging on to fell away like it was nothing.

I nodded again, gathering myself.

“I took a few tests and went to the doctor,” I explained. “It’s real. It’s as real as they come. Oh, my God, I still can’t believe this is happening...”

I wiped away my tears, angry with myself for letting them fall at all. I didn’t want him to feel like I was trying to manipulate him with my emotion. I just needed to know what he thought of all of this. I needed to know if this was going to be as big a problem as I feared it would be for him. When I looked at Scott, at the life he was involved in, I didn’t see someone who could just take his hands off the wheel of his father’s empire and shift to changing diapers. How could he? He had dedicated his whole life to this—his father had dedicated his life to him, for God’s sake. I couldn’t change

who he was. But I knew, at the same time, I couldn't go through all of this alone.

“So, you're sure,” he murmured, as though he was speaking to himself as much as me. I nodded.

“I'm sure,” I replied. “And I'm sorry to drop it on you like this. I know it's not exactly in your game plan, you know, to have a kid or anything, but I...I want to have this child. I don't care if you want to be involved or not, I want to have this kid, and nothing is going to sway me from that.”

“I want to have it, too.”

“What?”

I stared at him momentarily, sure I must have heard him wrong. There was no way...was there? No way he could have actually just said that.

“What did you say?” I asked softly. I wasn't sure I wanted to hear the real answer to that question, the real truth of what was happening in his mind right now. Because there was no way in hell he could have just said what he said, no way he could have just come out with that as though it was the most natural thing in the world. I had to have heard it wrong.

“I said, I want to have this baby, too,” he replied.

I shook my head. He might have thought he could handle it, but I knew there was no way he could actually take on this enormous responsibility.

“It's not that simple,” I protested. “With your line of work... with everything you're involved in, it wouldn't be fair for you

to have a kid...”

“I’m not involved with it anymore,” he replied. The way he talked, it was like I had missed some fundamental piece of the puzzle, something obvious he had filled in and I hadn’t. I shook my head.

“What are you talking about?” I asked him. Some part of me wanted to believe this. God, some part of me wanted to just buy into anything he said that might serve as the promise I needed to get through this—that might serve as the way out I had been searching for when it came to starting over new with him, in this new life I wanted so badly. But it was going to take more than that to get me to believe him.

“After we spoke,” he explained, his eyes lighting up like everything was falling into place before him. “After we spoke, I decided I had to make a change. You’re right, I was just doing what my father had set me up to do for the rest of my life, and I’d never really given any thought to the possibility that it might not be what I wanted, you know? I looked at everything he’d done, everything he’d earned over the years, and I just realized—it was not for me. It never has been. I thought it had to be, because of who I was, who my father was, but the best way I can honor his legacy is by doing what I really want.”

He paused for a moment. I wondered if this was the first time he had ever said any of this out loud.

“And the more I think about it, it’s not what I want, this life he set up for me,” he continued. “I want my own life. I want to

be happy in my own way. It's going to take a while to fully extricate myself from everything my father set up for me, but I'm working on it slowly but surely. By the end of the year, I'm going to be purely investing in legitimate business. And I've given away a lot of my earnings to charities around the city."

My eyes were so wide it felt as though they were going to bug straight out of my head. There was no way I could be hearing this, was there? No way this could actually be happening. But he was confident as he looked into my eyes, meeting my gaze steadily as he waited for me to say something. I parted my lips, trying to find the words, but nothing came to mind. Hell, I didn't even know where to start. I felt like my head would pop with the sheer enormity of everything he had just dropped.

"You...are you being serious right now?" I asked him. I wanted to believe him. Of course, I did, but I wasn't going to just take it all at face value. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a crumpled-up piece of paper.

"Look," he told me. "I just got this from my accountant. It's a receipt for a donation I just made to a women's charity..."

He pushed it towards me, and I looked down, staring at it—and, sure enough, he was telling the truth. It might not have proved everything, but it proved something, at least. And it was enough for me to trust he wasn't making this up.

"Fuck," I murmured and lowered my gaze as I tried to gather myself. This was real. This was happening. The man he was,

the person I needed him to be, he had come to it on his own terms—not because he was trying to impress me, not because he wanted me to believe in him, but because he wanted it for himself. I couldn't have asked for anything more.

“Hey, don't curse like that in front of the baby,” he joked, and I laughed, a relief from the tears that had been nagging for so long. I looked up at him, eyes wide, and asked the question I couldn't believe I was going to ask.

“You want...do you want to start a family with me?”

He reached over the table and took my hand.

“Thea, the way you made me feel, I knew I couldn't just let it go,” he told me. “That's why I wanted to change my life. I wanted to be the kind of man you could be with. I wanted to be the person you could fall in love with. And I knew I couldn't do that with everything else I had going on in my life. The way your brother reacted made that very clear.”

I snorted with amusement.

“Don't tell me that Mark actually helped us in the long run,” I laughed, shaking my head. He grinned and tangled his fingers with mine.

“I guess he might have,” he agreed. “I know this is a big ask, and I know we still have a lot to get past—we have a lot of getting to know each other to do before we make this official. But I did this for you, Thea, all for you, and I want to share that with you. If you'll let me.”

I beamed at him. It seemed as though the world had stilled for a moment, allowing just the two of us to sit here together and enjoy this moment of sweet, comfortable quiet before everything else rushed in to cause trouble.

“I think I will,” I replied. It wasn’t even a question in my mind. How could it be? I just wanted him. I wanted everything about him. I had done so from the moment we first met. When I had seen his darkness, the mess he was involved in, I had done all I could to push down those feelings, but they were rising up now with nothing to get in their way.

And it felt pretty much perfect.

“I know we’ve got a lot to talk about,” he remarked. “How about we do it back at my place?”

I squeezed his hand tight. After everything we’d been through, I never wanted to let him go, not for anything in the world.

“Sure,” I replied, and we rose to our feet to leave.

Chapter Eighteen Scott

I opened the door for her, and she raised her eyebrows at me.

“You know you don’t have to do everything for me just because I’m pregnant,” Thea protested, but I shook my head.

“If you think for a second I’m going to let you so much as lift a plate, you’ve got another thing coming,” I replied. Honestly, I knew I should have been more shocked at the news she had given me, but something about it just felt...right. As though everything was sliding into place the way it needed to, as though this was just what I had been waiting for.

She was pregnant. We were going to have a baby together. And I was so, so glad I had decided to change up the family business before she’d told me. I wanted to be a part of this child’s life. I wanted to make sure I proved myself a strong, reliable father before the child took its first breath out in the real world. And the best way to do that for Thea was to step back from the dangerous legacy my father had left behind.

I guided her to the couch where we had spent our first night together. It seemed so long ago now, given everything that had changed, but I knew it was really just a matter of months. She had just transformed so much about my life in that time, so much I could hardly make sense of it all. I had shifted everything for her, not because she had asked me, but because I had wanted to be with her enough to drop my cling to an old life. I was done. I had left it behind.

And now, I had even more of a reason to commit to it.

I sat down beside her and brushed her hair back from her cheek.

“Can I feel your stomach?” I murmured. I still didn’t know for sure where we stood, and I didn’t want to put my hands on her unless she was totally comfortable with it. She took my hand and guided it down to her belly.

“There’s nothing much to feel there yet,” she warned me, but it didn’t matter to me at all. There was something so profound about laying my hand on her stomach. She was right, there was nothing different about it that I could feel, but there was something incredible about knowing there was a child growing in there—not just a child, *our* child.

The child I would raise with her. The child I would leave a legacy to. But not the legacy my father had left me, no—something better, more honest, something stronger and more grounded in the real world. They would never have to feel the same pressure I did, to step up and take over if they didn’t

want to. But, with the plans I had, there was no way they wouldn't want to take the chance to live up to my legacy.

Our legacy. The one we were going to make together. I gazed into Thea's eyes, looking at this woman, this woman who had changed everything about my life. She didn't even know how happy I was to have her here with me right now, how much I wished she could have come along sooner—but I doubted I would have been able to hear what she had to say until now. No, she had walked into my life at the exact moment I needed her most, and it was perfect.

"I want you to help me," I told her, and she frowned at me.

"Help you how?"

"You have all this business savvy, right?" I asked her, and she nodded.

"Yes, but I don't think it's going to help much with your line of work..."

"Maybe not what I was doing before, but now—now, it's different," I replied. "Now I'm doing something you could actually help with, something I could use your consultation on. I could hire you—as my business advisor, you know, as I move into a more legit line of work."

She laughed as though she didn't quite believe me.

"You would really do that?" She asked me, biting down on her lip doubtfully.

I nodded. "Of course, I would. I trust you, Thea. Completely. And I know your mother was involved in so much good in this

city, I want you to be able to do the same thing. I want you to be able to set the same example for our child one day.”

Her eyes filled with tears, and she glanced away from me, shaking her head.

“Ugh, sorry, I’m just so emotional lately,” she mumbled, dabbing at her eyes quickly. I caught her hand.

“It’s okay, Thea,” I promised her. “I like your emotion. You know I do. I want all of it. The good, the bad, the difficult, everything in between—I want it, every part of it.”

She looked as though she had let out a long breath when I said that—as though it was what she had been waiting for me to come out with in the first place. She smiled and reached up to cup my face in her hand.

“You know, I think I’d like that,” she replied after a long pause. “I’d like to work with you. I want to make a difference in this city, and I know...with all your influence, it’s going to be a hell of a lot easier with you by my side.”

“Exactly,” I agreed, and I turned to plant a kiss at the center of her palm. The words were on the tip of my tongue, but I wasn’t sure if now was the right time to say them. I wasn’t sure if I was pushing for too much, too soon, or if I dared to say what was really going through my head.

But when I looked back at her, I could see it written all over her face, the same way it was written all over my heart. Everything I had tried to push down was getting the better of

me, rising up inside of me, so I couldn't ignore it for another moment.

“I love you, Thea,” I murmured, watching as her eyes widened with shock—but instead of getting to her feet and making an excuse to get the hell out of there, she smiled, her face softening.

“I love you, too,” she told me, and her voice quivered as she said it—but I knew she meant it. The way she looked at me when she spoke, she couldn't have invented that, couldn't have acted it, no matter how hard she had tried. That was real.

And I wanted to take it with both hands and never let it go.

I leaned in to kiss her then, our lips coming together at last, the same way they had all those weeks ago when she had been on this couch with me for the first time. But this time, it was so different, so different it almost felt like the two of us were in another reality entirely. This wasn't about lust. This was about love, about the need we had for each other and the adoration we felt for each other and the future we seemed to be carving out with one another, once and for all, finding that in each other even when it seemed impossible. She was the one for me, I knew that—she made me want to be the best version of myself I could be, and I couldn't imagine anything more important in a relationship than that.

She moaned against my lips, and I parted hers with my tongue and pushed it deep inside her, tasting her, loving the way she felt against me. She wound her arms around me as she drew me down on top of her, and I was careful as I moved, not

wanting to put too much pressure on her or hurt her. She seemed so delicate to me now, so breakable, and what we had, I would have done anything I could to protect.

“You don’t have to be so careful with me,” she teased, her voice breathy in my ear as she moved her hands up my back to pull me onto her properly.

“You’re sure?” I asked her, and she kissed me again, raking her nails down my back.

“I’m sure,” she assured me. And that was all the promise I needed.

I undressed her slowly, taking my time as I exposed her. I couldn’t wait to get my hands on her, to feel the softness of her skin beneath my fingers. Even now, even after all the times we had done this, I couldn’t get enough of her. It was like an addiction, like something I could never have broken if I wanted to. That first day I’d seen her, some part of me had known—some part of me had been sure, even all those months ago, that she was the person I wanted, the one I needed.

“I need to feel you inside me,” she breathed as she arched her back on the couch and pressed her supple body against mine. She was naked, and I was still fully clothed, and something about the feel of my clothes between us was almost unbearable. I couldn’t stand not having her right then and there, not making her mine in every possible way.

She reached down, brushing her fingers over my bulge, over the hardness of my cock. Just the feel of her touch there made me groan, and I kissed her again, letting my teeth catch on her

lip for a moment. She groaned, and I could feel the want pulsing through her, coming off her in waves like she was starving and couldn't hold off any longer.

“Please,” she moaned again. The sound of the want in her voice turned me on more than anything else, and I couldn't bear to hold back any longer. I unzipped my pants, pulled my cock into my hand, and she tugged her knees back so she could expose herself to me. I didn't need any more invitation. Finally, after what felt like a lifetime, I pushed myself inside of her, and both of us let out these deep groans of pleasure as we fell together again the way we needed to.

“Oh, my God, you feel perfect,” she moaned, turning her head so she could kiss me on the lips. I kissed her back, our tongues dancing against each other, her mouth moving against mine as though she was starved for me. I pushed myself into her, moving deep, filling her all the way to the hilt with my cock, and holding myself there for a long moment.

It felt different from how it had before. Different from the feelings I'd had in the past. Of course, it had always been hot with her, but now—now there was something else there, something else entirely. Something profound and wanting, but something satisfying and comforting, too. As though this was where I belonged, as though, after all this time, I was finally where I needed to be.

She hooked her legs around me to pull me in even deeper, and the two of us moved against each other, slowly, surely, feeling ourselves together, feeling the passion begin to envelop

us. We had hidden from this for so long, but now we could finally be honest about it, honest about what we wanted and needed from one another.

I kissed her as I moved inside of her, taking her in long, slow strokes, feeling the warmth and wetness of her around me as I went. I couldn't hold back for long. I knew it wouldn't take much for me to tip over the edge and into my release, and I was sure she could feel it, too. I could sense it in the way her body tensed against mine, her muscles growing rigid, and her breath starting to come faster and harder than it had before.

I moved at a steady pace, not changing, not shifting, as I listened to her inch closer and closer toward her relief. I needed her to come for me. I needed to feel that moment where she gave in, and the two of us could just get lost in the pleasure once more. I kissed down her cheek, along her neck, feeling the throb of her veins beneath her skin. The blood was pulsing inside my head. The pleasure was building deep down inside of me, growing fast, until I could feel it tingling in the tips of my fingers, every nerve-ending in my body lit up with the sheer intensity of it.

And then, finally, I felt the moment she came—her body contracting against mine, the cry she let out as the pleasure took control of her. Her pussy clenched around me, holding me there, holding me still, and I pushed deep and let her massage me from the inside out. She was gasping as she clutched onto me like she was worried she might shoot off into outer space if she didn't keep a good grip on me, and I knew how she felt.

A few moments later, I felt the pleasure of my own release take over, and I groaned and pushed my head into her shoulder, inhaling her scent and holding her close. I rolled my hips back and forth against her, making sure she got to feel how much I wanted her, how good this was for me, how addicted I was to the sensation of having her close to me right now.

Slowly and with one more kiss, I eased myself out of her. I didn't want this to be over, not yet, but I had to catch my breath, and I didn't want to push her too hard—she was pregnant, after all, and I knew her body would need even more care and attention than it normally did.

She slipped her hands into my hair, looking into my eyes and smiling as though I was the most perfect thing she had ever seen in her life. I couldn't resist leaning down for another kiss, just one more, and when I pulled back, she was grinning again.

“I love you, Scott,” she told me once more, as though she was still getting used to the feel of the words on her tongue.

“I love you too, Thea,” I murmured, slipping down beside her and pulling her into my arms. I knew there was still so much outside of this room we needed to think about, so much we needed to do, but when it was just the two of us here, it felt as though the whole world could just wait.

For now, we were the only people who existed on this entire planet.

Chapter Nineteen Thea

“It’s going to be okay,” Scott tried to assure me, but he must have known there was no way I could have believed him. With the chaos circling around my mind right now, I felt like I was going to throw up on the spot—or maybe that was just the smell of Italian food floating out of the kitchen right now.

We planned to meet Mark for dinner because it seemed too risky to do this at the hotel. We needed neutral ground. Somewhere he couldn’t make too much of a scene without his staff all rushing around to protect him.

This was it, the day I was to tell my brother about Scott and me. The two of us had been together officially for a couple of weeks now, and I had been putting off this part for as long as I could, but Scott had insisted—we couldn’t do this properly unless we told my brother about it. He was the only family I had left and the uncle to my child. He needed to know, even if I was sure he would freak out when we told him.

I had expected Scott to panic when I had come clean about the child, but he had been amazing every single step of the way—getting me booked in with a good family doctor, making sure he would be free for all my appointments, even as he did his best to turn the business around and move it towards a more stable and respectable place.

And as he got me set up with my new occupation. I couldn't believe I would be working with one of the city's wealthiest and most influential men for my very first job here, but I could hardly wait to get started. As he moved everything into a more legitimate side of the arena, he started up a charity wing, which I was going to be in charge of. Using everything I had learned from my mother and from my time at college, I was going to use his family's fortune to make a real difference in this city. It was a little intimidating, for sure, but at the same time, beyond exciting. I thought I would have to work for years before I got to the point where I could make this kind of impact, but he handed the opportunity to me on a platter, and I didn't want to pass it up for the world.

And that left just one more thing to be dealt with. Mark. I avoided him as much as I could, and he had let me keep my distance. I was sure he didn't want to have to talk to me about everything that had happened. Probably thought I was nursing my wounds after what had gone down a few weeks ago with Scott at the casino. I knew he was going to be hurt by this, and I hated having to hit him with something as enormous as the truth we were about to dump into his lap, but we had to start

somewhere, and I wouldn't be able to relax until I knew he was on my side.

The stress wasn't good for the baby, was it? I had to think of my little one. And when I did, when I put them at the front of my mind for all of this, it made it a whole lot easier. I took a deep breath as I saw Mark appear at the door to the restaurant, and his face dropped when he saw who I was with.

He stalked over to the table, his face like thunder. His eyes were fixed on Scott as though daring one or both of us to explain what the hell was going on here. I hadn't mentioned we were going to have a guest with us tonight, but I prayed Mark didn't flip his shit right away.

“What the fuck is he doing here?” He snarled, nodding to Scott.

Scott had his hand on my waist, a comforting presence that told me everything was going to be okay. I breathed deeply. If he was here with me, I knew I could do this. I had to.

“Mark, I know this isn't what you wanted to see,” I told him, doing my best to keep my voice neutral. “But I...but there's something we need you to know. Something we want you to be a part of. Will you at least allow us to tell you about it?”

Mark looked doubtful, downright cynical, in fact. But, as I gazed at him with pleading eyes, he took his seat. I couldn't do this without him. I knew that much. The two of us were all we had left, and I had to get him on my side—I had to get him to understand what Scott and I had was real, even if he wished we'd just forget about it in the first place.

“Fine,” he snapped, crossing his arms over his chest, looking between us. “Please, tell me you just ran into each other here by accident?”

“We didn’t, Mark,” I told him softly. “And I think you know that, don’t you?”

Mark’s jaw tightened. He looked furious.

“I told you to stay the fuck away from her,” He snarled at Scott, turning his attention to the man by my side.

I knew he was angry and wanted nothing more than to make us pay for what we had done, but I wasn’t going to let him turn this into some nightmare. I wouldn’t let him take away this moment from me, not when it felt so good. The joy of feeling Scott’s love and looking forward to a future together was everything I needed, and whether or not my brother chose to get on board with it, nothing was going to change what we had put into motion together.

“Mark, you don’t get to decide who I’m with,” I told my brother. Scott knew better than to interject, though I could tell he didn’t like Mark speaking to me that way.

“And besides, you’re going to have to get used to having him around,” I explained, taking a deep breath before I hit him with the next part. “Because...because I’m pregnant.”

Even though people were filling out this restaurant around us, even though there were still dozens of people around, it felt as though the world had narrowed down to just the three of us

sitting at this table, feeling like the world was dropping out from under us.

I had said it now. There would be no taking it back, no matter how much I wanted to pretend none of this was happening, no matter how much I wanted to put this behind us, it was out there now. It was out there, and nothing I could do would change it.

“You’re pregnant?” He asked, his voice incredulous. “By him?”

I nodded.

“Is this a fucking joke, Thea?” Mark demanded, his voice rising slightly, drawing the attention of a couple of the other diners around us. I gestured for him to lower it, but he shook his head.

“I can’t believe this,” he growled. “You’ve just tied our family to him for life.”

“I know,” I replied, taking Scott’s hand beneath the table. “And that’s...that’s the way I want it, Mark.”

“You can’t be serious,” he muttered. He sounded as though he was in shock, as though he couldn’t even begin to wrap his head around this. I didn’t blame him, couldn’t, but still—he was my brother. Couldn’t he at least pretend to be happy for me?

“You know what you’re bringing this child into, don’t you?” He continued, gesturing to Scott. “You know what kind of person he is? What kind of business he’s in?”

“Not anymore,” Scott replied quietly, but Mark didn’t even seem to hear him.

“You’re crazy if you think he’s going to put a child over that,” he continued. “Crazy. I thought you were smarter than that, Thea. I really did.”

“It’s not like that anymore, Mark,” Scott told him, more firmly than before. Mark stopped dead in his tracks.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not in that line of work anymore,” Scott explained. “I decided I wanted to go legit. I’m still going to be supporting the casino, don’t worry, but just as an investment. Not as a... not as we had planned it before.”

Mark paused for a beat, taking it in. I could tell he was still trying to find ways to contradict him, trying to find the holes in Scott’s story.

“Yeah, sure, that’s what you told her,” he continued, waving his hand. “But when it comes down to it, he’s just saying that because it’s what you want to hear. Thea, there’s still time to get out of this. You don’t have to go through with it.”

“I did it before I found out about the pregnancy,” Scott told him calmly.

I didn’t know how he was able to meet this kind of anger with such coolness, but it affirmed how sure I was about wanting to have this baby with him—if he could keep his cool in the face of my brother talking this kind of shit to him, he could handle anything.

“I started the process before Thea even told me anything about what was going on with her,” Scott continued. “I didn’t want to be part of that world anymore. I thought I did—hell, I thought I didn’t have a choice, not with my father being who he was. But your sister...Mark, your sister coming into my life has changed everything for me. She’s made me re-evaluate everything in my life. I know I couldn’t have done this without her, and I don’t want her to do this next part without me, either. I’m in this. For the long haul. And I hope you’ll be part of it, too.”

He spoke so eloquently and easily, with such confidence as though it had all been on the tip of his tongue all along. And hearing how much I had changed things for him, and how happy I made him enabled me to grip his hand tight, silently conveying that no matter how the rest of this conversation went, I appreciated everything he had to say. Every time he stood up for me and put me first, it made my heart sing, and my chest tighten with joy. I had picked the perfect man to do this all with, even if my brother might have wished it would be anyone else in the world.

Mark swung his gaze around to me. There was still doubt in his eyes, but it wasn’t as all-consuming as before.

“And you believe this, Thea?”

“I believe him,” I told him, and I looked over at Scott and smiled. “He wants to help us, Mark. Help us keep the hotel open, and help me carry on mom’s legacy.”

“What do you mean?” Mark asked, brow furrowed.

“I’m the new head of his charity division,” I explained, biting my lip excitedly. I was still getting used to saying that out loud. It was a huge responsibility, but after everything I’d learned, I knew I could handle it. I wanted to jump into it. I wanted to step up and do what I could to make sure I could help out with this city. My mother had done so much to make this world a better place for people to live in, and the best way I could keep her memory alive would be to do the same thing to the best of my ability.

“You didn’t mention a charity division before,” Mark remarked, and Scott shook his head.

“We just started it,” he replied. “I wanted Thea to run it for me. I know she understands what she’s doing and how important it was to your mom, too. I want to help her keep her work going in any way I can.”

I could see Mark’s eyes glistening with tears. He didn’t like to show his emotions much, preferring to push them down and play at being this big, tough guy after our parent’s death, but it had hurt him, badly. Even bringing up my mom was enough to stir up the feelings he had tried to ignore.

“I don’t want to forget her,” Mark murmured, shaking his head. “All of this—it’s just—she would be so happy, having a grandchild...”

He trailed off and glanced away from the two of us, gathering himself before he continued. I could tell he was struggling but didn’t want to let us see it. I reached across the table and took his hand.

“I know, Mark,” I told him softly. “I know how hard it is for you. I feel it, too. I do. You have to understand that. But we’re the only family we have left, and I don’t want to go into motherhood without you there by my side, you hear me?”

I meant it. Every word that came out of my mouth, I meant it. I wanted to carry on my mother’s legacy, of course, I did, but what good would it be if I wasn’t doing everything I could to maintain my relationship with the family I still had in my life? The last thing our parents would have wanted was for us to be pulled apart over something like this, and I could see from the look in his eyes he got that, too.

“I know we’re asking a lot for you to put aside everything you know about me, but I promise you I’ll do everything I can to make sure you don’t doubt my faith,” Scott added.

Mark nodded. Something in him had shifted, something moving to accept this version of reality.

“I’m going to be keeping my eye on you,” he told Scott, and Scott grinned.

“I won’t give you any reason to keep a lookout over me,” He replied. “It’s different now, Mark. The guy you met when we first started working together is not the man sitting in front of you right now. The man in front of you now wants to be a father. He wants to make a difference in Vegas.”

Mark’s eyes moved back over to me, and I could tell he had seen the light.

“A baby?” he murmured, as though he couldn’t quite believe it. He laughed, his voice so full of joy for a moment it caught me off-guard. It had been a long time since I had heard him like that, heard him so happy. He had been carrying the weight of the world, the weight of our family’s legacy and hotel on his shoulders for so long, but he didn’t have to. Not anymore. Not now that Scott was here to help us.

“A baby,” I repeated, a smile spreading over my face. “You’re going to be an uncle.”

“The best damn uncle this world has ever seen,” he corrected me, waving over a waiter. “I think this calls for a toast. Champagne?”

“I can’t drink, remember?” I reminded him, and he slapped his hand to his forehead like it had totally slipped his mind.

“Shit, of course,” he muttered. “Okay, so what do you drink when you’re pregnant and celebrating...?”

The rest of the evening, the three of us just talked—about the past, about the future, about everything we had planned now that he knew about the baby. It felt a little surreal to discuss this with Mark, and him not freak the hell out about all of it—but I wasn’t going to complain. No, as far as I was concerned, this was exactly where we needed to be, and I didn’t want to let anything ruin this moment.

Mark slipped off to the bathroom, leaving Scott and me alone for a moment as the meal ended.

“I think he’s taking it well,” he remarked, and I nodded.

“Way better than I thought he would,” I agreed. “He just needs to believe it, I think. Believe that you’ve really changed.”

Scott brought his lips to the back of my hand, planting a kiss on my ring finger.

“You believe it, don’t you?” He asked softly, and I nodded, smiling.

“Of course I do.”

“Then that’s all I care about,” he replied. And, as he smiled at me in the dim light of the restaurant, it was as though I was the only person in the room he could see.

And he was the only one I cared about.

Epiloge Thea

“Is Natalie ready to go?” I called out to Scott as I clipped in my earrings.

“Nearly!” He yelled back. “Just getting her bag ready and everything...”

I ducked into the bedroom and laughed when I saw the two of them together. Scott was lying with our daughter on the floor, playing with her favorite rattle, making her gurgle up at him delightedly.

“That doesn’t look like you’re getting ready,” I scolded him, but he knew I really didn’t mind. I crouched down beside them, and tickled under Natalie’s chin, making her wriggle happily, letting out a few more joyful gurgles.

“Yeah, well, Mark’ll understand if we’re a little late,” Scott replied. “How can you blame us? She’s so cute.”

“She really is,” I agreed as I smoothed back Natalie’s little puff of dark hair. She was getting so big now. It would be her first birthday in just a few months, and I could hardly believe

she was going to be a whole year old. This first year of her life had gone so fast—but with everything happening, maybe it shouldn't have been a surprise.

It had been a crazy eighteen months, honestly—the kind that I knew I would remember forever as the start of the life I had always wanted to live, even if I hadn't known it for a long time. I'd spent most of my pregnancy working my ass off to get the charity division of Scott's new business up and running. He was now the proud head of an investment firm focused on cultivating business talent around the city. We had already invested in a couple of small businesses that were flourishing now, and the shift in his reputation had been huge—people viewed him as a positive force these days, as opposed to some mobster who was out for whatever he could get.

And the kindness he had shown me over the course of my pregnancy—I would never in a million years have thought someone like him could have been capable of something like that, something as sweet and as gentle and as loving as he gave to me. Every chance he got, he went out of his way to take care of me, to do everything for me. He bought us a house and helped me every step of the way as we renovated it and turned it into the perfect little home for our daughter. Even before we knew her gender, he was certain we were having a girl, and he had picked out the name Natalie from the drop.

“It's beautiful, just like she's going to be,” he had told me, and the smile on his face had me convinced. Natalie, it was.

Mark had been a big help, too—even though it had taken him a little longer to come around to the thought of having another generation of the family, it seemed to be healing in some way for him. Losing our parents had wounded us both so deeply that the only way to make it better was to raise a new part of our family and help my little girl flourish and bloom in the world. It was bittersweet doing this without my mom and dad at my side, but I knew we didn't have a choice—and I knew I wasn't going to let it get in the way of giving my daughter the best life she could have.

“Mom would be so proud of you,” Mark told me once when I came by the hotel to catch up for a coffee.

“You think?” I asked, brightening at that. I had been putting all my energy into trying to get this new women's shelter off the ground and open, donating as much as possible and offering my support in terms of organization as well. It was a tough job, but I knew how many people would be helped by this—people always needed an escape, somewhere to go where they knew they could be safe and comfortable while they figured out what to do next. More than that, they deserved it, and I wanted to do my part in providing it. He nodded.

“Yeah, she would,” he replied. “This is exactly what she would have done if she'd had the money. You're using it right. It's what she would have wanted.”

I smiled at him. It meant a whole lot, coming from him—knowing how hard it had been to wrap his head around Scott and me together, around Scott being part of the family now.

But, as Scott had promised, he had done all he could to make sure my brother had no reason to doubt him, and it seemed to have worked.

“Thanks, Mark.”

In fact, Mark was one of the only people we invited to our wedding ceremony a few weeks after Natalie was born. As soon as I was back on my feet and in a haze of hormones and love for our new little family, I told Scott I wanted to marry him.

“You don’t want to have some big ceremony?” He asked, and I shook my head.

“I just want to be able to call you my husband,” I told him, and he looked down at Natalie, who was resting peacefully in his arms as we spoke. He grinned, and I could see the love in his eyes for his little daughter.

“I think I’d like that, too.”

And so, we got married as soon as we could, a matter of weeks after we had Natalie. Shelby was there, Mark, along with a couple of other friends, but it was really just about the two of us sharing this day and the beautiful moment where I got to look into his eyes and pledge myself to him for the rest of my life.

It was perfect, everything I wanted it to be, and when we lay in bed together that night, he wrapped his arms around me, brushing his fingers through my hair so I could feel the coolness of his new ring against my skin.

“I love you, Thea,” he murmured. “And I’m going to spend the rest of my life trying to show you just how much I mean that.”

I closed my eyes and nuzzled into him happily. This was it—what I’d wanted. I might have lost my parents, but I had found a family all of my own, a family I knew would be with me for the rest of my life.

A family I was currently trying to get to the restaurant on time so we could go to our monthly dinner with Mark. He always doted over Natalie—just like he had told me he would do. He was the best uncle in the world.

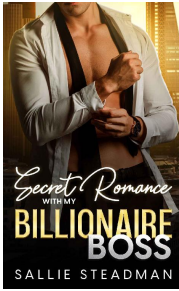
But the best uncle would have to wait a hot minute before we got to him because the three of us were having way too much fun here right now. I planted a kiss on the corner of Scott’s mouth as he lifted Natalie into his arms.

“Love you,” I murmured to him.

“Love you too,” he replied. And as I watched him kiss our daughter on the head, I felt a flutter in my chest. My man—my husband, father of my child. Everything I’d ever wanted—my good bad boy.

I hope you enjoyed “The Good Bad Boy” and I can’t wait for you to read the next book in this series coming soon!!

While you wait try my first book “Secret Romance with my Billionaire Boss” <https://a.co/d/8D8Sv52>



I'm having a secret romance with my billionaire boss.

My billionaire boss is a big-time publisher. I intern at his company.

He refuses to listen to any literary suggestions I have. No, no, no is all I hear.

“Seduce him” my friend all but dares me. He is one fine-looking silver fox.

Could one little dare help me get ahead in this business? At a weekend conference in Scotland, I decide to go for it.

One night won't hurt.

But, our chemistry is mind-blowing and intense.

He couldn't get enough of me and I couldn't get enough of him.

And it didn't stop at one night. Now we are having secret rendezvous in the copy room, bathroom, parking lot.....

But his ground rules are clear “No one can know about us.”

Until the pregnancy test shows two pink lines....

