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A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace, kissing. The man is on the left, leaning towards the woman on the right. They are both looking at each other. The background is a dark cityscape at night with some lights and a starry sky. The woman's hands are resting on the man's face and neck.

THE
HITMAN'S

FITZGERALD SAGAS

Vice

ALLEGRA GREY
EMILY SLOAN

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DEDICATION

For those who have supported us, grown with us, laughed and cried with us—with our whole hearts and deepest depths of gratitude, we dedicate this to you all.

THE HITMAN'S VICE

Fitzgerald Sagas, 1

Allegra Grey and Emily Sloan

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Prologue

DANE

Chicago, Illinois, May 16, Four Years Ago

I should've asked for more money on this job. I liked these shoes.

Neon, glow-stick guideposts and unsteady camera flashes punctuated the grimy darkness ahead and behind. Four giggling, yowling college brats traipsed through the graffiti-spattered tunnels, crunching their inebriated way toward a distant, pounding bass. Dane doubted even God knew what refuse littered the ground under their designer footsteps. He paused in their wake long enough to watch a rat scamper over a broken plastic table. If any of the brats knew what they were walking in, they'd have run screaming ten glow sticks back. *And if they knew who followed them in, they'd never have come at all.* The thought made him almost smile.

Clang! The sound rang like a dented bell as the lead idiot slammed his empty head into yet another fallen beam. Sober—and familiar with the terrain—Dane easily slipped around the toppled corpses of forgotten machines and furniture that kept interrupting the brats. He'd been down here often enough before, but not for a solid six months. Chicago's abandoned grain silos made a useful retreat for his business. Judging by the silo's faint stench—putrefied decades of industrial waste and pollution but without the sweet-rancid notes of rotting flesh—some urban explorer must've found that body.

Wonder if the coroner still has it? The thought made him pause. *Nah. They'd have to have buried it. Not like it still had fingers. Or teeth. DNA's the only chance, but I burned the shit out of it.* He ran through the list of precautions, all the ways he'd stripped identity from the target. *Adam would've told me*

by now if I fucked up and someone came sniffing around after him. The target had been his big test on wet work.

Most nineteen-year-olds he'd gone to school with—like the idiots he was following—continued to college where tests came on paper or keyboards, on regular schedules. His were more hands-on. With bullets and acid instead of pens and pointers. For a moment, watching two of the idiots banter about movies, he wondered what his life would've looked like if he'd followed their bullshit path. The daydream was fleeting. *Better to rule in Hell than pledge a fraternity. And more profitable.*

He'd made his choice official on his sixteenth birthday, after a middle school career of candy smuggling, black-market vape rings, and protection graduated to smuggling answer sheets and the odd spot of teacher intimidation. The deal his father set that day remained in play: either Dane aced every task set before him, or he'd be out. *And I'm not letting a party-boy junkie ruin my plans. If I could just get around the idiots...*

The drunks didn't notice his glare. Didn't even know he was there. *I could take them all down, and they wouldn't realize 'til the Reaper showed up.* Every time they navigated around a fallen pylon or climbed a rusted, century-old ladder, they giggled and posed for selfies like the decaying artifacts were props and not dangerous impediments.

After a precarious flight of metal stairs, the pulsing bass grew deeper, rattling and humming through the silo's crumbling bricks and spiny rebar ribs. Crouching under a final beam a carefully counted minute after the idiots, Dane stepped into another world. Dozens of similarly overdressed morons gathered in the remains of a factory floor, jumping and slithering to a grating house beat. Two floodlights glowed at the far corners of the building, but only glow sticks and phones bopped and flashed on the dance floor. The shoddy lighting created an infinite number of shadowy alcoves for doing whatever one wanted. And these idiots all wanted quite a lot of everything. Especially whatever they could shove up their plastic noses and into their blue-blooded veins.

There should've been police lights and angry megaphone-wielding officers bellowing orders to get the hell away from this death trap. But nobody was coming. There were different rules for people like this—too rich and too bored, with enough time and money to throw together an impromptu venue for one night's dangerous thrills. And at least one of them had the connections to make sure the cops didn't notice.

The small group he followed melded into the crowd's gyrating nucleus, but Dane remained at the outer edges. Waiting. Watching. He had a job, and the sooner he got it done, the sooner he could get home and burn his shoes.

There. A shiny, red leather jacket from a 1980s cocaine dream. *Jesus, he can't even dress himself. No wonder he's landed in this shithole.* Landon Kirke—junkie, gambling addict, dealer, who lost his grandfather's fortune—led other wasted idiots in pumping their fists to the beat, lost in the same coke-addled hallucination that led him to put on that ugly fucking jacket. He was even wearing sunglasses at night. *Oh, well. Easy payday on my end.*

Kirke probably couldn't see the person in front of him, never mind a man thirty feet away. He wasn't even dancing with the same piece of ass he'd brought into the silos. The last chick was a tall redhead, filled and tucked in all the trendy places. She was probably sitting somewhere weeping over her ruined Manolo's. Kirke's new partner was short, stacked for action, and brunette. Dane hoped she wouldn't get in the way. Nobody with an ass like that should get hurt for a broke scumbag who couldn't keep his nose out of his own wares.

Then again, if she was at this party, she was already playing against loaded dice. Enough girls had gone missing from these events lately that Dane knew he wasn't the only shark hunting in the drug-laced waters.

Dane's phone buzzed. He drew it from his pocket, holding it up like a camera to read the text while keeping the mark in sight.

Sawyer: **Done yet?**

He sighed and put the phone back. His partner could wait. Kirke was moving, the petite girl hanging on his arm. Dane's hand slid deeper into the pocket. His thumb rubbed along the worn texture of St. Michael's face in slow, calming circles as he threaded through the crowd in Kirke's wake. He had no faith left for saints, but the habit persisted.

The couple passed under an orange nylon rope hung with a handwritten caution sign and through an unmarked, lopsided doorway hacked into a corrugated wall and hung with plastic sheeting. Dane paused to pull his gloves from his belt and slowly tugged them on, adjusting each finger as he closed the distance. A few steps from the exit, the creaking floor shifted under his feet. He glanced down, grimacing. The beams were rotten as Kirke's luck.

Fucker must be desperate for pussy.

He risked a quick scan of the main party, where nearly a hundred other revelers bobbed and bounced like so much fleshy flotsam. *How long until they all fall through? Not that anything of value would be lost.*

Carefully, he followed his mark and the shapely soon-to-be collateral-damage statistic, ducking through the sheeting with only the smallest rustling sound—easily lost in the music. His eyes adjusted to the moonlight, but the wind whipped through shattered windows, slapping the stench of dilapidated sewer pipes right up his nostrils. Dane grunted and breathed through his mouth.

Holes in the wall and the ceiling illuminated footprints along the muck-covered floor. Dane's steps were light, all but silent. Voices drifted on the toxic breeze, though the words were hushed and difficult to hear with the music still screeching through the walls. Still, he was surprised.

Talking, huh? Guess the lady isn't as desperate as he hoped. Dane grinned, waiting for the man to speak again.

“Aw, c’mon baby, you know it’s—” Kirke’s speech broke off in a strangled yelp as Dane seized his throat from behind.

His other hand caught the man’s wrist. The girl screamed as Dane threw Kirke to the ground with his own momentum. He landed on Kirke’s chest hard enough to knock the wind out of his worthless lungs. Bloodshot eyes stared at him from above a gaping wet mouth. A fish out of water would’ve been more attractive.

“You knew it was coming, Kirke,” Dane’s voice grated just above a whisper. Kirke’s free hand grabbed Dane’s forearm, squeezing, nails digging hard enough to feel through his leather jacket. He didn’t release Kirke’s throat, and as Kirke struggled, Dane drew his pistol, casually setting it against the junkie’s forehead. “You going to make me kill you in front of the lady?” he asked with a lazy smile. The feminine scream had died off, he realized. *Damn it, she better not run...* Dane looked up. His smile vanished.

What. The. Fuck?

He nearly pulled the trigger. Snarling, he drew the pistol back and whipped it across Kirke’s face. Blood and spittle spurted with the blow, marring Dane’s light-gray shirt. He didn’t care. His attention remained on the girl frozen in front of him. The body he’d appreciated in that microscopic skirt was not supposed to be here. The fact he’d failed to recognize her was... *It’s a fucking crisis, that’s what.*

“D-Dane?” Zara Fitzgerald’s voice sounded no worse for all the screaming, but her delicate face was pale under what he now recognized as five pounds of makeup. It took that much to fool anyone with working eyes into thinking she was old enough to be at this goddamn party. “What are you doing here?”

Busting a skull for your dad. His jaw clenched. “I should be the one asking that,” he replied, releasing Kirke’s throat.

Her head lifted, a glimmer of defiance surfacing behind her shock. “I asked first.”

One more second of eye contact with Zara would lead to a hell of a lot more violence, among other things. He forced his attention back to his mark. “I took you to be a lot of things, but never this stupid.” He meant it as much for Zara as Kirke.

Kirke coughed and wheezed in futile protest. His tears mingled with the blood gushing from the new laceration over his eyebrow. “I-I’ll ... I told him ... I told him I’d have the money. Next week. I swear.”

“We’re past that. Sailed right by the second you touched *her*.”

“P-please ... I know. I know how this looks, but—” Another blow shut Kirke up. A fourth landed before Dane could stop himself. He had a pretty good idea of what Kirke had intended to do with her, and it wasn’t sex. There was one fast way to make money at this venue: procuring flesh for certain clientele who frequented these charnel pits.

And a pretty Fitzgerald princess would clear all his debts and then some.

Motherfucking son of a bitch. Just cut his throat.

But I can’t. Not with her watching.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Dane demanded, his gaze leveling on Zara again. Now she knew his identity, she wasn’t screaming or running for cover or having any of the usual reactions. That was nice. But then, he usually didn’t work in front of his childhood friends, let alone the boss’s kids.

“Having fun?” Zara crossed her arms, and her cleavage threatened to escape her scrap of a top.

“With this bastard?” He refrained from spitting on Kirke’s barely conscious, bloody face.

“Pre-graduation parties are a thing if you remember.”

Barely. “You’re still a junior, Zara.” Not to mention the twins wouldn’t be seventeen for a month.

“And?” She shrugged that fact off, her eyes cutting toward Kirke.

“You aren’t graduating.” Dane suddenly wondered if he was actually nineteen because, facing down Zara’s sullen frown, he felt forty-seven. “And this isn’t a high school party. Which you fucking know.”

“We thought about inviting you to come with us.” Her full lips thinned in a pretty pout that could launch a viral video. And had, if he remembered her freshman year right. “But I guess work’s keeping you super busy these days.”

“You know how it goes.” He rested the gun barrel on Kirke’s motionless cheek. “Shit hours, but I like my boss.”

“Liar.”

He sighed. “Is your sister in there, too?”

“Which one?”

“You know damn well.”

“It’s a little hard to remember specifics when you’re pointing a gun at the dude I was intending to—”

“Are you trying to convince me to shoot him?” Dane’s finger caressed the trigger. Kirke had no business touching any teenager, let alone Zara.

“Of course not! It’s messy and loud, and it’s not even two! The party’s set to go at least ‘til five. If the floor holds.”

Dane fought the urge to roll his eyes and lost. “Now you’re ruining *my* fun.” He brought the pistol down against Kirke’s jaw. Hard. A satisfying crunch told him he’d cracked a couple of teeth.

“Was that necessary?”

“Unless you want me to gut him in front of you, yes.” Satisfied the dumbass would stay comatose, Dane slid his

Beretta back in the holster and approached Zara. “Sorry to rain on your parade, princess. But at least now you’ll see the end of your party.”

“Yeah, cause I’m looking at it.” Zara’s mouth turned in a familiar, sullen line, and she pushed some of her tumbled, brunette hair over her shoulder. She had no idea she’d almost woken up in a black-market brothel.

“Not my fault you still have shit taste in fuck buddies,” he retorted. “It’s like broke motherfuckers have a radar for your ass.” He’d hated every single prick she’d picked for school dances. *Guess some shit never changes.*

Her face flushed. “And you wonder why I’m drinking.” She glanced down at Kirke, pity flashing on her expressive face before she turned away. “Have fun, Dane. I’m going to finish getting drunk and fucked by someone with a bigger dick.”

Dane grabbed her elbow, his grip bordering on too firm. Anyone else, he’d have held by any means necessary, but the idea of leaving marks on Zara was almost as disgusting as letting Kirke’s slimy paws touch her. “You were right. I can’t let you stay here, Z.” Her father was already raging about Kirke’s late payments, but if Dane turned a blind eye to Adam Fitzgerald’s sixteen-year-old twins rolling around a frat-fueled drug orgy? Dane’s head would land in the unmarked grave beside Kirke’s. Hell only knew where the rest of him would be.

Her unearthly gaze finally met his. He cursed whatever whim of the universe gave Zara Fitzgerald fairy-fucking-princess eyes: bright, blue rings around melted chocolate. Weird, impossible eyes meant to haunt your dreams at the worst moments. Tonight, her pupils were blown so wide the brown was almost invisible. When she spoke again, alarm bells sounded in Dane’s head: “I don’t suppose you mean you’re going to drop me off at the nearest all-night diner?”

“You always were the smart twin.”

“Come on, Dane. Just let us head out. You don’t have to get all responsible and tell Dad, do you?” She was suddenly all velvet and honey. “It’s just you and me. And nobody’s gonna believe him.” She pointed at Kirke. Her small hand brushed his sleeve and traced the seam, nails gleaming silver and black, inviting him into the void. Her touch burned through his leather coat and the ruined gray shirt. “I don’t want to go home yet.”

The routine might’ve worked if he hadn’t spent his entire life building up an immunity to the twins’ angelic faces. Or most of an immunity. Though his blood pressure was having trouble remembering that with Zara so close. Touching him.

“Zara? Have you concluded that my dick is bigger than Kirke’s?” He chuckled and squeezed her elbow a little harder. Her gaze flitted down to his belt, and a blush finally showed through the makeup. But she wasn’t struggling against his hold, either. Fuck if he didn’t get the faint impression that she liked it.

God, do not think about that. You fucking cannot think about holding Zara down and...

“I suspect your dick’s bigger than pretty much anyone’s.” That simple, lust-edged whisper almost broke his resistance. Zara never shied away from teasing him when she had the chance, but this was a new level. One he already felt haunting his future dreams.

“Fucking yikes. You’re drunk,” Dane laughed. He had to. If he took her seriously—even for a second—she’d be against the wall again. And if he touched her, he wouldn’t stop or let go. There’d be no cure besides her dad’s bullet in his brain.

And I’d still die happy.

Zara huffed and stepped into him, resting her head against his chest. Like there wasn’t blood all over his shirt. Or an unconscious cokehead drooling at their feet. Dane kept his

eyes on the ragged door and tried not to move or think about her warmth seeping through his clothes. Or that if he bent his head, he could bury his nose in her messy hair and breathe in her scent. “I may be somewhat very drunk,” Zara whispered. “That doesn’t mean I’m wrong.”

“Let’s collect your sister. I’ll call someone to come deal with Kirke.” He kept his voice calm, the words gentle. *She’s high as hell. You know she wouldn’t act like this if she wasn’t out of her mind.* Zara Fitzgerald was not the girl who felt you up at a party. She was the shy, sweet girl who volunteered at animal shelters and spent every spare moment in the dance studio. *Or she was two years ago. What is she now? Doesn’t matter. She’s still too good for you.*

He’d known the twins since their parents brought them home from the hospital when he and their older brother Ben were three—and daily playmates. Before Ben’s demons showed up. She’d always been kind. The one who found lost puppies and read stories to other kids. Had she even thrown a punch in her life?

She’s the only person who still smiles when she sees you. Don’t fuck that up.

Zara giggled, her breath kindling a wildfire in his chest. “Are you hoping Gia can protect your virtue?”

Before he could stop himself, his arm circled her with impossible, outrageous ease. Like it knew what it was doing. “Maybe I’m not the one who needs protecting,” he whispered. It was like holding onto a star, too hot and bright. Impossible. Certain to end in radiation poisoning.

“Oh, I’m pretty sure you are.” Zara’s head moved, and the flutter of her breath at his collar was all the warning he got before her lips touched the pulse point below his jaw. The ignition flash swept his entire body. He tightened his hold, drawing her soft curves closer. Her face gleamed in the filthy light as her head tilted up for him. She felt so good. Perfect. The kind of meant-to-be rightness he’d mocked in his mom’s old romances. *Fuck my life.*

“Zara.” He touched her cheek with his calloused palm before curling a finger beneath her chin. His lips were only a breath away from hers. “I still have to tell your dad.”

“Not about this part.” She leaned up, closing the last distance between them so her lips grazed his. “This is just for you.”

Damn it. Dane seized control of the kiss. He wedged his foot between hers, shoving her against the wall as he lifted her onto his thigh. Adam would kill him if he knew, but this was worth it. So many years, wondering what her lips would feel like, how she’d taste. Like Tequila and orange juice, apparently. And something else, forbidden and sweet. He deepened the kiss, pressing his leg against her, already aching at how hot and easy she fit against him. Zara whimpered, rocking against his thigh, ready. Willing...

Stop. The line between fun and suicide blurred, but Dane still saw it. *She’s sixteen. She’s out of her skull. Don’t be this asshole.*

Dane pushed himself away, breathing hard, licking his lips. “Our secret.” He grinned because he’d lose his mind if he didn’t laugh. “Now, let’s go get Gia.” He didn’t wait for her response. He knew how that game ended. Instead, he walked back toward the door and pulled the sheeting aside. Zara stood blinking at him for a second too long, confusion and something like pain on her face before her smile fell into place.

“All work and no play.”

“Something like that.”

“You used to be fun.”

“Uh-huh.” No way was he humoring that line of thinking. “I need to know how you got here. Who the hell let you in. And where the fake ID is. So, come on.” He dragged out his phone and texted Sawyer.

Dane: 911. Twins are here.

Sawyer: **FUCK. Target?**

Dane: **Isn't moving—he's off the east side, past the ghetto caution sign. Send M for him. Getting twins. Be ready.**

“And where is it you want me coming, Dane?” Zara sidled up too close for comfort with a come-fuck-me giggle until he nudged her through the door.

“Enough, Z.”

She glanced back at the still-unmoving Kirke. “Aren't you going to take him too? If you're ruining Gia's night, you should get paid for it.”

“If I walk back over there, I'll put two in his chest for drugging your cute little ass.”

“I'm not drugged! I just had, like, three shots.”

“Sure. I believe that. Now, where the fuck is Gia?”

She breezed past him into the ruins, wobbling ever so slightly, her phone appearing from her tiny clutch. “By the other bar. I think.”

Dane followed her. He wasn't too worried about Kirke. Even if he woke up, he had nowhere to crawl. And when Adam Fitzgerald found out his darling twins were in this shithole, someone would catch Hell and every one of its fires. Dane had a sickening suspicion about who that someone was, but he prayed he was wrong. *Not that prayers do fuck-all.* “Text her,” he said, swiping off another message to Sawyer. “The car's meeting us out of the south tunnel.” He let his hand settle against her lower back to guide her through the rotten mess of the outer room.

“Fuck. I'm way too drunk to go down the tunnels.”

“Should've stayed home, then.” He waited until she glanced up. “Seriously, why here? This *cannot* be your new scene.”

She cast him a smile as bright as a summer sky. “That’s what makes it perfect. Who would’ve thought to look here? Just bad luck about you...” Her gaze caught on his lips. Her attention flicked back to her phone. They’d gotten too close to the roaring party for much useful conversation anyway.

He took her hand to lead her through a knot of wiggling, grinding dancers. At the edge of the dance floor, he finally spotted Gia. Zara’s twin held a red cup in her brightly manicured talons and a neon-pink straw between her lips, her vapid, doe-eyes fixed on a slouching, slurring jackass with a man-bun and hoop earrings. Who was definitely not getting laid. Dane turned sharply to reach her, already angry at losing contact with Zara’s skin. He tapped Gia’s shimmery shoulder.

Gia cranked her head around, her flawlessly designed brows knitting together until she got a good look at his face. Her eyes rounded, and she cast a helpless stare at her twin. Man Bun opened his mouth, but Dane cut him off with a curt. “Leave.”

“Hey, bro, I—”

“Now.” Dane flicked his jacket showing the handle of his piece and the bulge of a switchblade in his pocket. “You’re gone.”

Man Bun scurried off into the dance floor melee. Dane watched him vanish with a satisfied smirk. Nobody in their right mind would fight for Gia. He let go of her glittery shoulder and wiped his hand on his shirt—it was already fucked up with Kirke’s blood, so why not add stripper glitter—before reaching for Zara. A smidge of tension left him when her fingers threaded through his.

“Shit.” Gia set her drink down on a handy stack of moldering pallets. “How’d you find out we were here?”

“Doesn’t matter. I’m taking you home,” Dane said, his voice frosty. He knew damn well Gia was the reason the twins were present in the first place. And the reason Zara was alone

with that scumbag. Gia was too selfish to give a single shit about her twin's welfare.

"If Dad's bugged our phones again, I'm setting the guesthouse on fire, I swear to God," Gia muttered, her brown gaze mutinous. Coming from her, it wasn't an idle threat.

The twins' near-identical exteriors fooled many people, but one of them was rotten to the core. He'd watched Gia wheedle, lie, and bully everyone around her by turns for years—whatever it took to get whatever she wanted. Dane reflexively tightened his hold on Zara as memories replayed—particularly the day Gia shoved Zara down the grand Fitzgerald Mansion staircase. He'd stopped Zara from moving until the butler and maids came running while Gia stood ten stairs above them, fake-crying about how sorry she was. All because she wanted the lead in a recital, and Zara got it. He'd known for a long time that Ben was tormenting his younger siblings—the same way he tortured anyone else and the occasional kitten. But until the moment Zara's right femur snapped, he'd never considered that Gia might torment the others with even less restraint.

"Just bad luck this time," Zara assured her twin with the same unflappable calm she'd shown that day on the staircase. Even with her leg broken, she hadn't panicked. He liked that about Zara. You could always reason with her. Gia was a human tornado fueled by vodka and spite.

"Whatever." Gia sniffed. "Let's go. This place is gross, anyway. I don't know why the fuck Ben picked this venue." *Ben.* That name dropped into Dane's gut like a stone. *So, he really is running this hunting ground.* Some last corner of Dane's soul hoped it wasn't true—that it was an associate or a coincidence—and Ben wasn't really the one pulling the strings. But if Gia said Ben chose this place...

And he's throwing a party where the Outfit drops bodies. Fuck. That was a message Dane didn't want to read.

Gia checked her phone and looked in the direction Man Bun had fled. "At least you look half-decent tonight, Ryan."

She used his surname like she was addressing one of the regular household employees. “Dad must’ve given you a raise.”

“You got it,” he said flatly. No matter how healthy his bank accounts were, he wasn’t rolling in the Fitzgerald billions and never would. *At least she isn’t fighting to stay. Yet.* He didn’t trust Gia’s convenient equanimity would last, so he pointed her toward the main entrance, surrounded by its fading glow-stick markers, and marched off, towing Zara at his side. Gia could make her own path or follow in their wake. He’d tase and haul her out the hard way if she made him turn around.

“Jesus Christ on a cracker.” Sawyer gaped as they walked out of the main tunnel. He stood beside an idling black sedan. Dane checked the long-vacant industrial park around them, noting the fresh tire tracks and a few scattered cars hidden in the shadows of the rotting outbuildings and silos. “I thought you were joking. But, uh, guess not.” Sawyer cleared his throat and pointed the twins toward the car, tactfully ignoring that Dane had one arm around Zara’s waist to support her. She’d thrown up twice in the last tunnel and every step was more unsteady than the last.

“Zara’s sick,” Dane said by way of explanation. “Someone gave her something.”

Sawyer ruffled his sandy hair and dragged a couple trash bags out of the trunk where they’d been intended to cover Kirke. “Right. Okay. That’s fine. I’ll get the car detailed again tomorrow. And the, uh, other guest is taken care of.”

“Shut up, Sawyer. I want tacos,” Gia announced without looking up from her phone. She stood beside the back driver’s side door, waiting for Sawyer to open it. “And give me an extra blanket. If she horks on this dress, I’ll have Daddy fire you.”

“Likely story,” Sawyer snorted. Gia finally looked up.

“Want to bet?” Her smile belonged to a crocodile. “You shouldn’t tempt fate, John. Or do you prefer Jay Jay? I can always ask Han—”

“Here.” Sawyer shoved a trash bag at Gia, looking like he’d rather have put it over her head. *If only her father would sign off on that.*

“Let Gia sit up front,” Dane said. He levered Zara against his side while he opened the door Gia was standing next to, none-too-gently edging her out of the way. “I’ve got Z. She’s already puked on my shoes.”

Sawyer scowled but didn’t argue as Gia scuttled to the passenger side, where he grudgingly opened the door for her. It wasn’t that long a trip to the Fitzgerald Mansion, but Dane just wanted to be sure they didn’t have to divert to an emergency room. Gia wouldn’t fucking notice, or care, if Zara choked. Or stopped breathing. *She’d probably celebrate getting a bigger trust fund.*

He helped Zara into the car and slid in after, keeping her upright by sheer force of will until he was safely next to her and could tuck her head against his shoulder. “I’ve got you,” he whispered. “It’s okay.” He spotted a McDonald’s bag on the floor, left over from Sawyer’s dinner, and scooped it up, setting it on her lap.

“Dane, I don’t feel good,” she whimpered against his jacket.

He smoothed her hair and pictured exactly how Kirke was going to die. If Adam let him survive tonight, Dane would fix it tomorrow. “I know, Z. It’ll pass.”

“When?”

“Soon. You’ll be fine. We’ll get you home.”

Zara clung to his sleeve, the way she would have when they were kids hiding from her bastard of an older brother. “Promise?”

“Yes. You’re going to be okay.” *Or I’ll go on a rampage. Either way.* He held her tighter, hoping some of his resolve would seep into her while he glared at the back of her twin’s empty head. “Anyone want to tell us why the fuck you two were at that party? And how you got in?”

Gia shrugged. “Ben told me about it. Even left the VIP bracelets.” She raised her left arm to flash a pink plastic band.

“And you went?” Sawyer sounded as confused as Dane felt. The twins’ older brother, Bennett, was the Fitzgerald clan’s problem child. It took a lot to be a problem in a mafia family— Bennett managed to blow all expectations out of the water. “Was he there?”

“I didn’t see him,” Gia answered, adding highlighter to her cheekbone. “I think he and Ashlyn got into it again. He’s probably drinking with the boys in a back room. I don’t know why he doesn’t break up with her.”

Sawyer snorted. “Because your dad likes her family’s connections.”

Dane ignored their hissing match. He cradled Zara’s head, whispering reassurance against her temple to keep from reaching up and strangling her mirror image. Bennett was dangerous, as Gia knew perfectly fucking well. And angry with their father. *If I hadn’t stumbled across her tonight... Was Kirke following orders? Fucking shit.* Normal men would go to war before they trafficked their little sisters, but Bennett Fitzgerald?

Sawyer continued, “Your dad’s been very clear about not interacting with Ben.”

Gia pouted. “We didn’t! He threw a party. We went. Along with a hundred other people. And then some.”

Dane meant to argue, but Zara chose the moment to lurch forward and empty her stomach into the McDonald’s bag. And then keep right on gagging. Sawyer had to stop at a gas station to grab water and extra puke bags.

“Should we take her to the ER?” he asked, handing them through the window.

Yes. Dane wanted to say it and knew they should. But the ER would ask questions. Her father might not want those answered. And would Zara be coherent enough to keep quiet if they pulled her away from Dane and Sawyer? They’d probably let Gia stay.

Jesus Christ, I’m not leaving Zara’s care to Gia’s psychotic whims.

“Call their dad. Let him decide.”

“Fuck. Hold on.” Sawyer stepped back from the car. Dane focused on holding Zara’s shivering shoulders, keeping her as tight to his chest as the sedan’s back seat would allow. He’d gotten her thick hair wrestled into a messy ponytail and kept one hand close to her throat, tracking her pulse and making sure she wasn’t about to choke. This wasn’t how he dreamed of touching Zara, and he knew Sawyer wanted him to let Gia handle her. He should’ve. It was a bad idea to be manhandling a wasted chick. But Gia would let her choke. The idea felt like razor wire twisting in his stomach, even as Zara poured hers into another trash bag.

The driver’s side door opened, and Sawyer slid back into place behind the wheel. “He gave me the address for a clinic. He’ll meet us there.”

This time, Gia made a choking sound. “Oh my God, what the hell did you tell him?” She looked as pale as Zara.

“That you prize geniuses lied your way into one of Ben’s parties, and now Zara’s having a bad reaction to some fuckface’s roofie-martini.” Sawyer eased the car into reverse, maneuvering back into the dark streets while Gia sputtered a dozen half-coherent insults.

The clinic proved to be a simple townhouse on a street full of them. Dane hauled Zara out of the back seat and hefted her into his arms. She didn’t resist, and her right arm dangled like she couldn’t remember how it worked.

“Dane? W-where are we? I feel ... so sick...”

“Going to the doctor, Z. You’re fine. Your dad’s coming.”

“He’s gonna be so mad.” She made a hiccupping sob, and her head thumped against his shoulder. “You’re mad too.”

“Only a little. Don’t puke on me, or I’ll drop you.” A threat he’d have meant if it were anyone else.

A harried woman with tousled red hair opened the door before he reached it. “Oh, hell. Come on in. I’ve got a table set up. Do you know what she took?”

“She’s been throwing up nonstop from whatever it was. I think someone roofied her and screwed up the dosage.”

“She never pays enough attention to her drinks,” Gia said helpfully behind him. “But it’s not like we were sniffing cocaine or anything.”

The woman—obviously the doctor—directed Dane through a foyer and into an old-fashioned dining room, now repurposed into a triage center. He settled Zara on the exam table while the doctor grabbed supplies from a fridge and cabinet.

“Let’s get everything else out of her stomach while she’s at it. You can stay and help maneuver her, Mister Dark-and-Scowling. Keep her rolled on her side for now. You other two, go across the hall. Then we’ll see about rehydrating and sobering her up.”

Time blurred. The doctor introduced herself as Melissa at some point and gave him rapid-fire instructions while administering emetics and then something to stop the puking. He took a few mental notes—forced puking might be an effective interrogation technique. Smelly, but so were piss and shit, and those happened all too often when people panicked. Or died. Or you nicked their intestines.

“P-please don’t go,” Zara whispered after the last shot. Her makeup was long-since ruined, black smudges trailing down her cheeks from red-rimmed eyes. He’d officially seen her throw up more than her body weight ... and still couldn’t help thinking she was cute.

“I’ll be right here,” Dane heard himself answer, like a perfect dumbass.

“Thanks.” Zara fell back against the paper pillow. If not for the fading scents of bile, she could’ve passed for a grunge-era rocker girl. He tucked a few strands of hair behind her right ear and imagined being able to lean down and kiss her head. Before he could give in to that suicidal idea, Sawyer knocked on the door.

“Not now,” Melissa started. “I—”

“He’s here.” Sawyer vanished before Melissa could finish berating him. The doctor heaved a sigh and looked their patient over. Zara blinked owlshly, obviously several steps behind everyone else for once.

“Guess I better help you clean up, honey,” Melissa muttered, eyeing the gown loosely tied over Zara’s clubbing getup. “Dane, you better step out.” She flashed him a smile. “Don’t worry. I’ll tell Adam you did good tonight.”

“Thanks, I think. I’ll be outside, Z. Don’t freak out on her.”

“Do I ever?”

“No, but I’ve seen you handle food poisoning better than whatever the fuck this is.” Granted, they’d been kids back then.

“Fair point,” she croaked with the ghost of a messy smile.

He nodded to Zara and left her with the doctor. Outside, a deathly silence ruled. Sawyer rocked on his feet, practically at attention in the hall, while Gia sniveled into a Victorian couch in the living-turned-waiting room. Two car doors

slammed outside, and Dane opened the townhouse door, letting in a blast of cold, lakeside wind. And the faint, oak-and-leather cologne of doom itself.

Adam Fitzgerald ascended the house's stone stairs slowly. He had a slight limp from an unlucky bullet ten years earlier but otherwise still sported the broad shoulders and thick build he'd had in his fighting days. Woe to any smart-mouthed idiot who thought he couldn't break jaws and skulls alike with his fists. Dane and Sawyer both knew damn well to keep their mouths shut as their boss ambled through the door carrying a Barbie-pink gym bag. His guard hung back by the door, clearly blocking the main escape route.

Dane stood to the side of the hall, back ramrod straight in a mirror reflection of Sawyer's position as the boss passed by. You did not want a pissed-off Adam Fitzgerald noticing your presence. *Let Gia take that heat for once. She's fucking earned it.*

To her credit, she stood up and squared her shoulders. She was still sniffling but didn't run away from her father's glare. "Daddy, I hope they didn't wake you up. It's only—"

"My sixteen-year-old daughters vanishing on a school night. And one of them turning up overdosed on Rohypnol. Only that." Adam's quiet voice rang with fury. In a better world, Broadway would've celebrated him for his ability to impress and terrorize with the subtlest inflection, the tiniest gesture. In this one, Gia shuddered but kept her back straight. She didn't cower. Grown-ass men fell to their knees hearing that tone, but not her. *Must be nice to be delusional.*

"We're seventeen next month," she said as if that changed a damn thing.

"After their brother stirs up a fucking hornet's nest down South, and the Russians start rattling cages," Adam continued as though Gia hadn't spoken. "But you think I'm in bed by midnight?" Adam snorted disdainfully, moving to kiss Gia's cheek and wrap her in a boa-constrictor hug. "Now, go wash your face, Gianna. You look like a pimp's nightmare. All the

money in your bank account, and you can't buy waterproof eyeliner? Jesus. Put these damn clothes on before you die of pneumonia and deprive your stepmother of delivering the righteous soliloquy on maturity that you so richly deserve." He shoved the glittery pink bag into her arms, giving her a look as sharp as a blow. She scurried off toward a set of doors Dane hadn't noticed before. Hopefully, it led to a bathroom and not a hidden escape hatch.

Adam's attention turned to Dane and Sawyer. "McCabe said you were out after the Kirke ticket."

"We were, sir," Sawyer answered. Adam's eyes narrowed.

"But you found the girls. At the silos."

Dane nodded. "Kirke was with Zara when I found him. I neutralized him, but she'd already gotten hit. Pretty sure he was the source."

"Dane extracted the twins instead of finishing Kirke's interview." Sawyer cleared his throat. "Didn't think you'd want them around for that, so I called McCabe."

Adam's wintry eyes swept over them, assessing and inscrutable. The moment stretched, their blood thinned. Then, like a charm from above, the clouds parted, and the boss chuckled. "Good lads. McCabe's making Kirke comfortable now. You fancy helping the hospitality room?"

Fucking yes! Dane's hand flexed into a fist. He nodded.

"Anytime, Boss." Sawyer's grin matched Dane's. The chance to work directly with Adam in a family matter didn't come around every day. "We can go now if you want."

We're in. This could be our chance! Bigger assignments, bigger cuts...

"Not yet. I need to check in with Zara." Adam's weathered features creased in a thoughtful frown. "But I think wringing some truth from his lying tongue will be an excellent celebration of your new positions."

What the hell? The celebratory plans in his head froze. Dane glanced at Sawyer before he spoke. They'd barely begun taking regular enforcement gigs. Even with his dad's extra tutorials and some independent work. "New positions, sir?"

"I've decided you two will be joining the guards," Adam said with a deceptively jovial smile. "The girls are getting older, after all. As tonight proves, old enough to make idiotic choices. They'll need more supervision this summer than the current staff can handle. Especially with this southern nonsense. Think you can handle it?"

Dane forced his spine a few millimeters straight, heart leaping into his throat. "Yes, sir," he said obediently. He'd be a fucking idiot to refuse. But then it hit.

A guard. For the twins.

For Zara.

His lips burned with the memory of hers. He almost felt that beautiful figure molding to his body, her heat against his thigh... *That shit cannot happen again. Never.*

"Sir, thank you." Sawyer was stumbling through his own acceptance. "We'll take real good care of Kirke, too," he added, a vicious gleam in his green eyes. "Right, Dane?"

Come to think of it, carving a pound of flesh off Kirke McAvoy would bury the memory of Zara's perfume in a wash of blood. *That'll get my head straight.* "Yes, sir."

"That's the spirit." Adam clapped Sawyer on the shoulder, then Dane. He paused, looking at Dane's bloodstained shirt and the vomit he hadn't quite managed to wipe off the ruined shoes, and let out a low whistle. "Looks like you've already been baptized by fire. Good." He tapped Dane's cheek fondly as any uncle and grinned. "Don't worry, kid. You won't be babysitting them forever. They've still got senior year. And college. If I don't lock them in the basement before then."

"I don't mind, sir. I'm glad to help." You didn't earn points in the Outfit by whining.

“Tell me that after a year of model shoots and teenage idiocy,” Adam chuckled. “But you two are young enough. Maybe that’ll help you survive them.” His mirth faded, and the hand on Dane’s shoulder tightened. “How is Zara?”

“Sick as dogshit.” He understood the question Adam wouldn’t ask. “But she’s okay.”

“You found her with Kirke.”

“Yes, sir. But I followed them straight off the dance floor.”

“He was going to have the money this week, wasn’t he? If you hadn’t found him tonight.” Adam’s jaw flexed, and a vein showed at his temple.

“Sir.” Dane swallowed. He didn’t want to be this close to a Fitzgerald eruption, and he already understood his boss’s path. The same one Dane saw laid out like the goddamn Yellow Brick Road the second he found Kirke with Zara. The one that led straight to Adam’s psychotic asshole of a son.

Adam stared at the hand still resting on Dane’s shoulder, especially the massive family signet ring on his third finger. “Jesus wept. We should have stopped at three kids. Fuckin’ priests and their big happy family bullshit. At least the twins are cute. But the other two little bastards... What the hell do you do with them?” It seemed a trifle unfair for Fitzgerald’s youngest son, Caleb, an enthusiastic freshman jock with all the malice of a horny golden retriever, to be lumped in with a sociopath like Ben. But Dane wasn’t about to risk Adam’s wrath by saying so.

“Sir?” Sawyer made a nervous not-quite-laugh sound.

“Oh, don’t worry. I won’t tell you to drop Caleb off a bridge, John.” Adam considered. “Yet. Ben, on the other hand...”

Dane’s heartbeat sped up. *Fucking yes. Say the word. I’ll do it for fucking free.* “He was at the party,” Dane volunteered. “Gia said he was in the back. Had a fight with his girlfriend. I could go see if he’s still there. If you want to see him.”

“See him?” Adam’s head inclined the barest fraction of an inch. “No. I don’t want to see him.”

“Dad?” Gia stood at the far side of the waiting room, now wearing sweats and a t-shirt. Bare of makeup, her face was inescapably, painfully young. And much more like her sister’s. She’d taken to using a hell of a lot of cosmetics to change that, Dane realized. “D-do you want me to take the other set to Zara?”

“Yes. Go.” The order was an ominous growl, and Gia ran to obey. Adam’s grip on Dane tightened to the point of pain, and their eyes met. “You and Ben are friends.”

“Were,” Dane reaffirmed. Not a good time for Adam to forget that. “Not been around that much since he headed off to college.”

“Take Sawyer. Find him, wherever he is. Kirke can wait.”

“Of course, sir.”

Adam’s voice lowered near a whisper: “And you tell him that if I hear he’s set one foot in this fucking state after tonight, I won’t intervene in the repercussions. He’s done.” The words hung in the air, and Dane fought back a smile. “He will get nothing else from us. Not money, not protection. He can stay on the other side of the river with the dogs and the bears. See how he likes it.”

The Lobos cartel and the Bratva? That’s a hell of a circus to run off with. “I’ll tell him, Boss.”

Adam released his shoulder with a heavy, apologetic pat before striding across the hall to the makeshift triage room. The muffled voices of the doctor and Gia resolved to silence as Adam knocked, then stepped inside.

Dane pulled the St. Michael coin from his pocket, twisting it between his fingers. Sawyer spoke first: “What the fuck just happened?”

“We made the boss like us.” Dane flipped the coin. *Heads. Let’s call that good.*

“Did we?”

“As much as he likes anybody tonight.” He slid the coin back into his pocket. “We should head out—the silo was still going strong. Let’s hope he stuck around. I don’t have his latest burner, and he never takes his real shit to the parties.”

Sawyer hesitated. “You sure we shouldn’t take a third body with us to give Ben, uh, this kind of news?”

“Nah.” Dane’s smirk became a laugh. “Let me handle Benny. He knows I don’t fuck around with his dad’s messages, but we’re cool.” *For now.* Unless Ben ever looked at his sisters again—even Gia didn’t deserve that. “He ought to thank me for stumbling into Kirke. If this had gone down differently, it wouldn’t be a banishment.”

Adam would have sliced him apart joint-by-joint for selling his sisters. The thought brought a sad twinge to Dane’s heart. He’d have loved to see that punishment play out. It would’ve been a goddamn masterclass. But Dane realized it was just a matter of time. Kansas City or Omaha would still be close enough for someone with Ben’s talents. And Ben was too fucking weak to try his luck in Vegas or the coasts. But, of course, if Adam pulled strings, Ben might not be welcome in those places either. *And that’ll make him worse.*

“Think that’s all it is for real? Just kicked out? No welcoming committee in Kansas City?” Sawyer quietly asked as they hurried out the door and down the steps.

“Nah. Adam loves his kids. He won’t pull the trigger ‘til Ben’s so fucked, it’s a mercy.”

“Christ. And we have to go back to that goddamn shithole for this message? Can’t you text him? Use his real phone.”

“Not for this.”

“Fuck.” Sawyer groaned, digging into his pocket for the keys. “Let’s get this shitshow over with.”

Dane nodded slowly, feeling his stomach twist. *If Adam finds out about that kiss... No. Zara wouldn’t tell.* For all her mischief and smart-ass remarks, she’d never been one who told on anyone. Not even when it would’ve saved her a world of tears. He glanced up one more time at the townhouse and then put it all out of his mind. He had a sociopath’s heart to break.

ZARA

Chicago, Illinois, May 19, Four Years Ago

“So, Dad wasn’t lying. You really are stuck babysitting, huh?” Zara hated herself for the quaver in her voice. She’d practiced this conversation a dozen times in the mirror, but talking to Dane Ryan was never as easy as she hoped. Not even in her own damn home where he was sprawled in the den with a cookie in one hand, a remote in the other, and not a single weapon in sight. It didn’t help that he looked like he belonged in one of Gia’s photo shoots, even in the most domestic scenes imaginable. He just had that Insta-level bone structure and the kind of body designers dreamed of dressing ever since his last growth spurt. Not that she’d been studying him intensely since seventh grade or anything.

“Hm?” He finished the cookie in one giant bite, same as he always did. She had more than one memory of sitters and nannies telling him to take smaller bites. He never listened. “Oh. Yeah.” He wiped his hands together and gave a faint laugh. “Get used to it. I’m getting paid to hang out and ruin your summer.”

Looking at him every day wouldn’t ruin anything except her sleep patterns. But she didn’t dare say that. Instead, Zara took a few steps into the room and tried remembering her speech. She’d had a very good one planned. It’d been very

nonchalant and mature. She opened her mouth, and a single question came out: “Is it true?”

“Is what true?” His midnight eyes swept over her, banishing every thought from her head for a full heartbeat. “You need to be more specific before I can deny all knowledge of whatever you’re asking about.” His luscious lips turned into a mocking smirk. She missed the days when he had softer smiles for her. Back when they were friends. Before he vanished into Outfit errands and graduated to being one more bobbing head whenever her father spoke.

“Dad cut Ben off. Told him to leave the state.” She cleared her throat, which still ached from *The Exorcist* reenactment she’d endured three days earlier, and sat on the couch a careful distance from Dane’s leg. “Hannah made us block him on all our accounts. After Cathy yelled at us for going out.” It still didn’t seem fair that their older sister and newest stepmother joined forces so easily.

“Good thinking on Hannah’s part.” He nodded, sitting up without moving away. “And yes. Ben’s out.” The TV’s volume went up a notch, and he set the remote aside. She watched his fingers bend, focused on the way he brushed something off his sleeve, and then realized belatedly that the same hand was reaching for hers. His palm was warm, the skin a little rough against hers. Somehow, her shoulders didn’t feel so tight. “This is a good thing, Z. You know that.”

“Yeah,” she echoed dully. She experimented with letting her fingertip press against his skin, just enough to be sure he was real. He’d held onto her the other night too, she remembered that. He’d been quiet, and hadn’t even yelled at her for ruining his shoes... “Until Dad forgives him.”

“That’s not going to happen this time.” Dane squeezed her hand. “He put you and Gia in harm’s way.”

“He didn’t, though.” She slid her fingers along Dane’s, wishing the touch felt as reassuring as it had when she was half-delirious on a back-alley exam table. “We went on our own.”

“And one of his guys fucked with you. That’s not an excusable mistake.”

Zara swallowed. “That’s, um, not exactly the truth. Not really. I mean, yeah, I think he meant to try something, but—”

“Jesus, don’t tell me you’re blaming yourself for this.” Dane’s face contorted as he obviously bit back a lot more curses. “Zara, this wasn’t your fault.”

She glanced at the door. “I ... I need to tell you something, okay? But it has to stay a secret.”

Dane let go of her and raked his hand through his hair before he turned to her, leaning in. “You know you can trust me.”

“Cross your heart and hope to die.” She repeated the words they’d used as kids because every other explanation sounded too real. Too heavy. It might shatter the moment. Dane blinked but gave a slow nod.

“Full playground mode, huh? Let’s hear it.”

“Swear first. You know the rules.”

Dane’s eyes rolled. “Cross my heart, hope to die. I’ll even raise you: stick a needle in my eye.”

She stared at the ceiling for a second, in case meeting his gaze dissolved her concentration. It usually did. “I, um, I was the one who roofied me.”

“What?” He managed to pack a whole ten minutes of shouting into one whispered syllable. *He’s really spending too much time around Dad.*

“I didn’t mean to!” Zara shrank into the couch cushions. “I must’ve mixed up the cups.”

“Jesus.” Dane’s expression iced over. “Tell me you’re kidding.”

“N-no, I’m not.”

He took a breath. Closed his eyes. Zara knew he was counting to ten, so she waited. “Fucking why?” he hissed. “What the hell were you doing?”

“D-does that matter? I—”

“Talk fast, before I shake your damn teeth out.”

“We wanted to figure out about Ben. And what Kirke was up to, and...”

“Fuck me.” This time it was Dane checking the doorway before he spoke. “You and Gia decided to play Nancy fuckin’ Drew for fun? With drugs you didn’t know how to fucking use.”

“Well, it would’ve been the right dose. If Kirke got it.”

“Or you got the wrong dose for him just like he got the wrong one for you.” He looked thoughtful. “That might explain why he didn’t move faster.”

“I triple-checked the dosage.” She heard the sulky note in her own voice but didn’t care. Admitting that she’d messed up was hard enough. He didn’t have to go questioning her research skills. Bad enough he dismissed all their work and recon as playing. Like they’d been tracking their brother’s trail of blood and broken souls for fun.

Dane rubbed his face and ruffled his hair even more. It didn’t make him any less hot, but her stung pride helped dull his usual distracting effects. “I’m not going to ask where you got Rohypnol. I don’t want to know.” He paused. “Why are you telling me this? Do you want him un-fucking banished? Because that’s not—”

“No.” She sighed. “It’s j-just ... if Dad believes him later ... forgives him...”

“The truth is too stupid, Z. Your dad will never buy it. You’re fine.” He frowned again. “I’m still not sure *I* buy it, to be honest. Leaving off how you got hold of that shit, why the hell were you playing detective? You know better.”

Every Outfit daughter did, officially. The patriarchy was alive and well, so their roles were set: obey, never notice anything around them, and don't ask questions. Zara slumped back, staring at the coffered ceiling and fancy plasterwork her great-grandfather chose when he built the mansion. "We needed the evidence. Something concrete. So he couldn't ever come back. We didn't really care what it was, just something big."

"Well, technically, you got that. And I don't think Kirke intended to let you out of there. Whatever you did to him didn't have the effect you intended, but he didn't need you in one piece if Ben meant for you or Gia to be an opening shot in his wars."

Was that even true? Was he planning to do... that? There wasn't any way to know now. She suspected Kirke wouldn't be speaking any truths or lies—or any words at all—ever again, and Ben would lie no matter what words came out of his mouth. He *always* lied. Always made himself sound like the victim. Even with Gia's blood still staining his shirt. "You really, truly think it doesn't matter? Dad's not going to back down?"

"No." Dane's jaw flexed. "I should kick Gia's ass for conning you into this. You had no business in that hellhole. Or fucking around with Ben's bullshit."

"She didn't con me. I volunteered. She would've done it, but Kirke wouldn't even talk to her."

"Nice to know he did have one single brain cell after all."

"Dane!" Zara sat up. "I know you don't get along with her, but—"

He threw his hands arms up. "She shoved you down the stairs. Now, she nearly got you sold into some dark web revenge porn shit. And you're defending her."

"I told you. I took over when Kirke wouldn't talk to her. It's not like we're professional at this. We were just trying

to...”

“Bite off more than you could chew? Success on that score.” His big hand caught her forearm, dragging her back into the couch, and he loomed over her, blocking the light. “What the hell did she have on you to blackmail you into this shit?”

“Nothing. It’s not like that.” Zara didn’t meet his eyes. She hated seeing how much he still loathed Gianna. It was only a stupid fight, and they shouldn’t have been arguing on the stairs. She wondered if he’d hate her so bitterly if she’d been the one standing, and Gia was the one with a broken leg.

“If you keep letting her fuck you over, it will be your fault for taking it.”

“I couldn’t keep doing nothing! Not after all the —” Zara’s mouth snapped shut, and Dane’s eyes glittered.

“After all the what?” His fingers dug into her arm, not enough to hurt but enough to say he wasn’t letting go anytime soon. “You swore you were telling the truth. So that means the whole truth. Spill it, or this goes to your dad after all.”

Her heart sped up, and the world spun. “You *promised*.”

“I’m not keeping full promises for half-truths. Talk.”

And what was there to say except the truth? If she didn’t want Dane going straight to their father? The couch felt suddenly as if it were teetering on a cliff. She could throw herself on the daggers in Dane’s eyes, or crash into her father’s full-force rage.

“Ben hurt her,” Zara choked. “He’s ... he’s always played rough. You know that. But this was...”

“More?” he prompted. Dane didn’t move, but his tone was gentler.

“He said he’d only hurt one of us to see if the other felt it. But he...” The words she needed fell apart inside her, coming out in a confused sob.

“The marks that showed up on her arm last summer.” Dane sat back with a calculating gleam in his eyes. “Those weren’t so self-inflicted, huh?”

Zara shook her head. “No. At least not all.” She hated explaining, but he’d demanded the whole truth, and she didn’t know what was safe to omit. “She has some bad days. But most of it’s always been Ben. Only nobody would ever believe her.”

“Because she lies, Zara.” He sounded like he was talking to a little kid who’d lost their mom at the airport.

“Not about this.” She swallowed. “I saw it. But I was afraid of...”

“Rightfully so.” His head tilted. “What did you see?”

“Little things. Nothing I understood. Until later. Except for the last time he was home? After you graduated...” She trailed off, shuddering, and glanced up into Dane’s black velvet eyes. “He cornered her in the wine cellar. I ran down to grab a bottle for Ethan, and he was...” The sentence fell apart again. She couldn’t make the words come out. Not even for Dane. His grip on her arm loosened, and his hand slid up her shoulder.

“Why didn’t you call me?”

“Because you’re in the game, right? You can’t do something Dad doesn’t want.”

“I could’ve done *something*.”

“And you’re Ben’s best friend.”

“Even I have limits.”

“I know. But you’re still his friend.”

“Only in the loosest definition.” A muscle at his right temple twitched. “Did he hurt you too?”

Zara shook her head but touched her throat. She didn’t want to explain about Gia being on the floor or Ben laughing about “no marks.”

“Didn’t need to. He was making Gia cry, and I ... I just begged him to stop. He thought it was funny.”

He reached for her hand again. “Listen to me, Z. Your dad needs to know about this. If you don’t want Ben coming back—if you’re worried the other night wasn’t enough, *tell him.*”

“Right, because he’ll believe me?”

“He will!”

“He’ll say I’m lying for Gia, like always. That’s halfway what you think, isn’t it?”

Dane’s head shook. “No. There’s no way you’d lie about this.”

“He didn’t notice the cigarette burns or all the extra bruises. Did all of you think ballet class was full-on jiu-jitsu?” Zara scoffed.

“It isn’t—”

“Oh, shut up! Stop pretending,” she snapped, glaring. “They never noticed *us* hiding from him either, did they? You’re his best friend, but you hid too. And nobody noticed.” She wrapped her arms around herself.

“I was hiding with you. I didn’t think he’d be stupid enough to do you any real harm.”

“And what is real?” she shot back. “Just that same old never-ending stream of excuses for poor, little Bennett. But you don’t see the rest of us torturing teachers or beating people into comas because Mom doesn’t love us.” She winced. It wasn’t true. Their mother loved them. But she had *troubles*. That was how Grandma always put it—an old-fashioned euphemism for postpartum psychosis and the encyclopedic list of Sophia Darmody-Fitzgerald’s many diagnoses.

“You’re right.” Dane’s hand moved up along her arm and back down in a slow, steady rhythm. “They should’ve put his ass down already. But I think if you take this to Adam, he’ll trust you. He’d listen.”

“He’d put me in freaking therapy.” Zara sniffed. “And you aren’t telling him either. We’ll just figure something else out. Maybe Ben will find somewhere he likes better than here anyway.”

“Maybe,” Dane echoed, his expression distant.

Zara pushed her hair away from her face and wiped at her cheek. “Can we turn on Netflix? There’s a new show I want to watch.”

“That’s a shit segue, Z.” Dane sighed.

“I know. But I ... I just can’t anymore. With any of it. Not tonight.” She put a hand to her throat for emphasis, and sympathy. “I’m tired, D. Everything hurts.”

“Don’t buy it. But I’ll let you have it.” He picked up the remote again and hit a button. Soothingly familiar red and black filled the massive screen in front of them.

For the next three hours, the world felt almost normal. Better than normal because a long-lost friend was beside her, amiably snarking at the dumb characters and bad wardrobe on the screen. Everything else blurred into nothing. Until her phone pinged with her nighttime alarm. Time to let the dogs out and get to bed for an early ballet practice. She left Dane entranced by a pirated DVD of some anime that her little brother loved and finished her nightly routine.

She’d just nudged Fallon and Dodger off to one side of the bed so she could sleep on it—how did one foxhound and one pit bull take up so much space?—when someone knocked on the bedroom door. Zara turned in time to meet her father’s bright cerulean eyes.

“Zara, love. I think we need to talk.” Adam Fitzgerald’s usually booming baritone voice was near a whisper, and his iron features creased with uncomfortable concern. Zara’s stomach sank while her heart tried to hammer its way out of her ribs. “Let’s have a seat—”

“What are we talking about?” she tried to ask it lightly as if she didn’t already know. As if broken promises weren’t

spurring his every step.

“Ben. Dane said—”

“Dane needs to learn to keep his mouth shut,” she cut in, her broken heart melting into anger. “There’s nothing to talk about.”

“Zara, please. Sit down.”

She didn’t mean to obey but found herself sitting on the edge of the bed anyway. Her father had that effect on most people. Dodger’s massive black head insinuated itself under her arm and settled on her leg. Zara patted him, running her fingers through the fur along his back, following his tuxedo-like markings. Fallon was busy wagging her tail and bounding toward Adam, who gave her a few absentminded pats. “If he said enough to drag you up here, I don’t know what else I’m supposed to say.” Zara focused on her dogs instead of her father.

“Nothing. Let me say a few things instead.” Adam cleared his throat. “I’m sorry, pumpkin. I had no idea what was happening under my own roof, and that’s un-fucking-excusable. Worse, I didn’t show that you could come to me with anything under the sun. You didn’t feel safe enough to trust me. And that’s a goddamn crime on my part.”

“You should be saying this to Gia.”

“I will. I love you. I need you to know, I love you both.”

Zara nodded because she didn’t trust her voice. Or the tears burning her cheeks. Her father retreated without another word, leaving her to cry into Dodger’s shoulder while Fallon whined and rubbed against her leg. Everyone always said the truth set you free. They never mentioned the absolute terror or the spiraling horror as endless, shadowy possibilities spun out before you. Or the bitter taste of a friend’s falsehood.

That was how Gia found her, eons later, when her twin crawled into the bed and cuddled up to Fallon. Zara would’ve usually yelled at her to get out, but tonight she didn’t mind. Especially since she’d expected Gia to walk in and set the bed

on fire. “That was stupid as fuck, Zara.” The words were hollow. Even Gia was too tired to muster any anger.

“I know.”

“He’s *made*. You can’t fucking trust anyone made.”

“I know.” *I just wanted the boy I loved back. That’s all.* She couldn’t say that, not even to Gigi, but her twin’s huffy sigh sounded like she’d heard it all the same.

“Bury it, Z. Before he buries you.”

A long, taut silence stretched between them. Gia rubbed Fallon’s silky ears and hummed a lullaby their grandmother had used.

“But it’s done, right? Dad won’t let Ben in the front door again.”

“Or any other, from what he said.” Gia didn’t sound any more excited than Zara felt. They both knew their brother wasn’t going to lay back and accept being cut off. “Maybe having bodyguards for a while isn’t so bad.”

“If Dad would hire someone new.” Zara rubbed her cheek along Dodger’s coat, trying to forget Dane’s touch. “I’m going to die next time I have to see Dane.”

“Spend a lot of time reading in the library. That’ll keep him in a different room.”

“Hah. Hah.” Zara rolled onto her back and flung one arm over her eyes. “How are you so calm about this?”

“I think I hit some kind of event horizon. I’m so freaked out I’ve turned calm. Like I’ve just accepted I’m going to drink myself stupid and eat my bodyweight in Adderall tomorrow. Or something. I don’t know.” Gia groaned. “Mostly, I’m still too panicked about what the fuck Ben is going to do to us to really give a shit about Dad and his sudden attack of parental sentiment.”

The silence returned, broken this time by Fallon scratching her ears and Dodger’s tail thumping the mattress.

Finally, Zara's disoriented thoughts organized themselves into something like a line, and she grasped at a single thread. "What if we go to France?" Their first, and closest, stepmother had a best friend who owned some kind of vineyard or chateau or something. Convincing Darla to take them for an extended holiday wouldn't be hard. She loved traveling and had almost no interest in her current husband.

"Worth a shot," Gia admitted with a trace of a smile.

She was right. Dad probably wouldn't pay to ship Dane and Sawyer overseas. He'd hire locals or send someone from the East Coast. That would take care of the summer. If she auditioned for every performance at the studio, took up every club at school, and filled in every remaining hour working at the shelter or running the dogs around the lake house, that sorted the school year.

Then I'll go to college and never come home. Yes. This is a good plan.

Zara smiled back at her twin and relaxed into the pillow. "Want to do facials?" Beauty routines always cheered Gia up. "You're still going out for that audition tomorrow, right? Need to make sure your complexion leaves the photog crying."

Gia nodded. "Still have those masks you ordered from South Korea?" She got up without waiting for a reply. Of course, Zara had them. She didn't manage the same routine as Gia, even on a good week. "I'll have to walk for every half-assed designer and catalog I can find for the next year if I ever want to leave the house again. Apparently, Dad doesn't count work as socializing, thank fuck."

Zara watched Fallon stretch into Gia's vacant spot, rubbing her face across the coverlet. The only bad part of going to France would be leaving the dogs. But they'd be okay. Ben couldn't come home, and Dad liked them. *Maybe his guilt would extend to paying for them to go too?* That thought felt better than most of her others, so she sat up to rub Fallon's belly while Gia padded back across the hardwood floor and Persian rugs with an armload of beauty products.

“Where’d you get all that? Did you ninja yourself to your room?”

“All those gift baskets Mom sends that you shove in the back cabinet.” Gia said it so easily. As if she didn’t care that their mother only communicated with expensive presents, arriving irregularly from whatever luxury spot she’d landed in long enough to remember any of her seven kids.

“And you don’t?”

“I re-gift them. You can do that when all your friends aren’t covered in fur.”

“And you hate their non-furry faces enough to give them presents with bad juju.”

Gia’s eyes rolled. “Jesus, Zaza. Have Marta burn some sage over the swag if you’re that freaked out. But stop being ridiculous about your skin. The way you act, I’ll be looking fifteen years younger instead of fifteen minutes older soon.”

“Shut up and give me the green tea mask.” Zara snatched the mask from Gia’s bundle, then grabbed an eye cream as her twin laughed. Maybe the world wouldn’t look as bleak through a few layers of moisturizer.

Chapter One

DANE

Chicago, Illinois, August 20, Present Day

Another night, another overpowered bass speaker and bad club music in a blurry summer full of them. *Just get through this week, and you're done 'til winter break.* If he kept reminding himself, he might make it to closing time without committing assault. No matter how much Zara's latest fuck-buddy deserved it.

Cade Barton looked like an asshole. *Same as all the others. Zara and her prize fucking pigs.* She'd spent four years falling into the arms of every trashy rich kid with a working dick and just enough brains to amuse her. The man sitting beside her, with an expensively brightened smile, fake tan, and flashy jewelry proved the trend. His designer suit fit a little too loose, and nobody with that many fake-ass rings deserved to be taken seriously. The bastard hadn't even taken a second sip of his overpriced brandy after the first one set off a coughing fit. *Another weak motherfucker.*

Zara could do better. Deserved better. *Needed* better. If only he could tell her so—but she wouldn't listen. He'd shut that door himself the night he betrayed her confidence. Didn't matter that he'd done the right thing. Zara didn't see it that way. Never would.

Dane allowed himself to look at her—fifteen seconds max, then away. It felt like rationing water in the desert. She sat beside the asshole wearing a barely there dress as black as Dane's dreams and six-inch heels that made her shapely legs look good enough to eat. She leaned over the bar, her cheek resting on one delicate hand while slowly stirring her drink with a red straw. She'd eaten the cherry from it. He hadn't watched. He'd seen the trick once before and nearly broke her

date's arm right after. That was a bad night. He didn't intend to let this be another one.

At least today, all she could do was distract him with cleavage. He was half-sure she knew precisely how far to angle her torso so he saw down the gap from yards away. She hit that angle as often as possible to torture him—as if she wasn't doing that in a hundred other ways. *It could be worse*, he reminded himself. Two summers ago, she'd worn a dress that showed her actual nipples every time she bent forward. He'd let it catch in the car door before getting to the second club, so she had to send for an emergency wardrobe change.

He never stopped cursing the night she'd drunkenly confided her bondage kinks to a friend right where he could overhear, because he spent terrible weeks privately dreaming of turning her over his knee until she begged forgiveness. The fantasies varied from there. Sometimes, he forgave her and licked her pussy until she forgave him for being rough, and sometimes he kept punishing her until she broke. Though the image of a shivering Zara needing her Dom's reassurance was enough to make his cock harden in the middle of a job. *Fuck. Looked too long.*

He focused instead on her sister. It was a relief. Turning disdain into indifference where Gia was concerned wasn't easy, but after four years and three months on watch, he'd managed. Granted, he'd not been assigned to her much these days—he had other shit to do. But whenever Zara came home on breaks from college to join her evil twin's nonstop partying, Dane and Sawyer always got tapped for shifts. The boss knew anyone else might get confused about who was who. Or lose track of one.

As often as Dane wished he could let himself lose Gia off the side of a cliff, it never happened. Not even last summer when she punched him with a diamond ring. He still had a small scar under his left eye. He'd turned around and sliced off half her brand-new extensions. Sawyer stopped him before he could do the other side. Gia'd been fucking ecstatic, sure Dane was about to get fired. But Adam had looked at them both and

laughed it off. Then doubled Dane's Gia-duty hours for two hellish months. Apparently, she'd cost Adam four private guards before that episode.

Sometimes being good at what you do is a fucking curse.

Gia slid into a booth, draping herself around another rich boy with more hair than sense. Aside from the amount of hair, he was nearly identical to Zara's milquetoast playmate—made in the same fucking Ivy League factory—but Dane didn't remember that one's name.

Doesn't matter. There'll be a new dipshit next week. The thought didn't cheer him up. The twins had turned twenty-one in June, but they'd been tearing their way through every trust fund frat pledge from Chicago to Miami since their senior year. Dane had watched the story spin out more times than he could count: the girls sampled a new flavor of dipshit, dragged them to bar after bar after society party, then discarded them. Nobody lasted more than a few months with Gia's claws raking them from cock to wallet. Zara's prey escaped with lower credit card balances but just as dazed by her indifference as anyone else was by Gia's sadism.

After four years, most of the usual Chicago-area playgrounds felt familiar—Adam didn't care if they used fake IDs as long as their guards didn't let things get too stupid—so Dane knew this particular bar damn well. The staff recognized him and kept their distance. He had his place, standing at the threshold separating the VIP area from the main floor. Even the interactions he watched were routine. They arrived, the twins set up court at a booth, and the dancing began. Zara would invite him and Sawyer to relax and have a drink. They never accepted, and the twins never argued.

Zara would've argued once. When they'd been friends. Before he broke a promise and went to her father with the damning truths that kept her psychotic older brother locked out of the family nest. The resulting rift was good, though. It kept things clearer. Not to mention that one drop of booze around

Zara was too goddamn much. If he drank, he'd forget to look away. He'd learned the hard way what looking too long at Zara Fitzgerald caused. She was a walking, talking, addictive substance. The purest cocaine didn't have shit on her smile. The real one. The one he hadn't gotten to see in four years.

Leaning back against the doorframe, Dane reached into his pocket, playing with his St. Michael coin, flipping it in circles until his cell vibrated. Across the room, Sawyer pushed open his jacket and produced his phone too. *Another alert?* They'd gotten too damn many the last few days. The whole Outfit was on edge thanks to a string of low-level pushes from the Bratva, plus one of the major cartels having a minor civil war among themselves. Nobody liked it when cartel fuckheads got weird. They had no sense of proportion. In Chicago, your mafia-backed violence came from guns and suspicious fires, as the Godfathers intended. Not psychos cutting an entire family's guts open to make a point.

Though I can think of one or two families that might be useful for. Fuck. Dane's phone vibrated. Again. He pulled it out of his pocket far enough to see the screen. *Dad? But he's on the clock? Shit, if I have to take the twins in early...* Putting the phone to his ear, he scanned the club. Sawyer was making his way closer, dodging twerking, gyrating dancers.

"What's up?" It had to be bad. Michael Ryan never stopped mid-job to call his son.

"This is Connor." *And Dad doesn't hand his phone off to anyone. Ever.*

"Where is he? How bad?" he asked as Sawyer drew closer. His partner's slumped shoulders were message enough. He didn't need Connor's following words.

"Ambulance crew picked him up."

"Where to?"

"UChicago. Dane ... it doesn't look good."

His free hand balled into a fist. His right leg twitched with the need to bolt out the door. “What happened?”

Connor exhaled past the speaker, loud as any woofer-rattling note from the club’s sound system. “Nothing I can say here. Hell of a case of lead poisoning.”

“You fucking better—”

“Hey, hey! Not here, bro.” Sawyer reached for the phone, prying it away from Dane. “Sending backup?” he asked into the black plastic. He paused. “Nah, fuck that. I’ll take him myself if I have to.” He hung up. Gia’s booth was only three steps away, and Sawyer crossed the distance in seconds. “Sorry, sweetheart. We’re leaving.” He spoke loud enough for Gia and her chew toy to hear over the music.

Dane took a deep breath, but the air didn’t help. The club’s music faded out. He jerked his gaze away from Zara’s wide eyes and parted lips. “I’m fine. It’s fine. We don’t have to ___”

“Yes. We do.” Sawyer snapped his fingers. “Come on. Gia! Get up. Chop, chop.”

“Fuck off, Sawyer. You’re in charge of security, not schedule.” Gia’s eyes held less warmth than the North Pole. She stayed curled in the booth with her toy—*his name is Dex, right? Or was that the last one?*—who raised one brow and draped his arm more securely around Gia’s shoulders. Gia didn’t lean into him, but she sure as hell wasn’t getting up.

“And Security says tonight is over. Move it.” Sawyer stalked closer.

“Touch me, and I’ll scream the roof down just to make sure Daddy fires you.”

Sawyer’s gray eyes blazed, and he leaned down in Gia’s picture-perfect face. “It’s Dane’s dad. Now is not the time for your bullshit, Gianna.”

“Sounds like a ‘you’ problem.” Gia sniffed. Dex chortled into his Scotch. “Get your backup in here or get out of

my light and do your job.”

“Backup’s busy.”

“Sucks to be the help.” Gia waved Sawyer off. “I’m sure you can find someone on the phone tree.”

“You little—”

“What’s going on?” Zara materialized through the crowd, her face bearing the faintest sheen of perspiration, her cheeks flushed. *Has she been dancing?* Dane’s spinning head focused on Cade Malcom’s hand half an inch too low on her hip. Her plunging neckline wasn’t quite where it was at the bar. Dane’s nails bit into his palm and his fist ached to feel Cade’s septum crunch. *Can’t fix Dad, but I could sure as fuck fix this...*

“Sawyer’s got delusions of grandeur,” Gia answered, pointing at his angry face.

Sawyer’s jaw twitched. “Dane’s dad is headed for the fucking ICU, and your twin’s being a cunt.”

“Your failure to have a big enough security detail isn’t my fucking problem.” Gia leaned into Dex’s arm. “Why don’t you two just go onto the hospital? Z and I can handle ourselves. Dex won’t let us be too wild, will you, baby?”

“Yeah, bro. We’ll get the girls back.” Cade’s hand slid forward and back on Zara’s hip. Dane pictured each of those fingers snapping under a boot. It helped. “Go on,” Cade added, unaware of his imminent danger. “Deal with your stuff.”

“How about if Sawyer stays with you, Gigi? I’ll go with Dane.” Everyone stared at Zara. The back of Dane’s neck pricked at using Gia’s old nickname. *That must be some kind of private twin signal.* “It happens when we split up anyway, right?”

“I guess,” Gia said, frowning.

“And if anything else explodes, you can help Sawyer.” She fixed big, worried eyes on Cade, pulling his hand off her hip to hold it between hers.

“What?” Cade blinked.

Zara gave him a familiar sunny, do-what-I-want-because-I’m-too-cute-to-argue-with smile. “I don’t want her alone. Please?”

“What am I, a Faberge egg?” Dex’s chuckle didn’t match his eyes, and Gia’s half-hearted pat on his arm didn’t help. Clearly, someone just realized the twins’ actual opinion of him.

“No offense, Dex. But Cade knows how to fight.” *A generous assessment*, but Dane kept that to himself. “You know how to record on Live.” Zara grinned, her sweet features somehow softening the critique. “And you know I’m right.”

“Fine. But you’re all being fucking dramatic,” Gia huffed. “It’s probably a heart attack, not a terrorist. He’s ancient.”

“Well, after what happened with Ben…” Zara trailed off, but the mention was enough to shut Gia’s mouth. Dex’s too. Nobody who liked having a tongue dared bring up Adam Fitzgerald’s third son. Bennett’s banishment from the family and their territories remained in play despite his recent release from prison. He’d lasted a whole year on his own before nearly killing his well-bred fiancée on a meth-fueled bender, which her family agreed to finesse into a different story, while Adam agreed not to lift one finger for Ben’s defense. Dane suspected Ben’s newly restored freedom was directly related to the amount of bullshit going wrong lately. No parole officer in the world was a match for Ben’s stashes of blood diamonds and cash.

“Be careful, babe.” Cade’s dull-brown eyes creased at the corners before he tried to kiss her. Zara dodged, and his lips landed on her cheek.

He won’t last the week.

“Of course,” Zara said with another honeyed smile. “You’re the best.”

Dane found himself walking out the club's front door with Zara's arm on his. A valet pressed Gia's Maserati keys into his hand. "How...?"

"Don't ask," Zara cut in, grimacing. "Just smile and take the win."

She's right. It'll get us to UC faster than a cab. He followed her advice and stayed on autopilot. When his mind finally caught up with his body, he was already on I-94, doing thirty over the limit. Poppy bubblegum bullshit blared from the radio. He slapped the "mute" button. "Sorry," he said, not sure what for. "I mean, thank you. For, uh ... thank you."

"I'm sorry there weren't any Ubers available." She tapped her phone and cast an unreadable look his way at the next stoplight. "Is there anything else I can do? Anyone to call?"

He released a shaky breath, flexing his fingers against the steering wheel. "No. It's only Dad and me."

"Still?" She sounded so shocked.

"He's not been too family minded since Mom..." He didn't like remembering his mother. Cancer burned through her so fast he'd barely understood she was sick before he lost most of freshman year to rage and grief.

"Oh," Zara murmured. "I thought maybe, um, he'd have somebody new. Or something."

"I'm sure a couple of local hookers will notice their incomes take a hit." Dane slammed the gas pedal, swerving around a banged-up Hyundai going too slow. "He was supposed to be kicking around with one of them tonight. Not working. He ... must have been called in."

That happened a lot lately since the Bratva started kicking up in the southside of all fucking spots. Between that, the Lobos cartel having a private civil war, and the Fitzgeralds and Donohues continuing their eternal stare-down across the Outfit tables, there was too much goddam work to go around.

It really does suck to be the help. But Dad's a fucking beast. Always has been. Always is a long time, isn't it? And he's gotten older. Slower after that knee injury. No retirement for enforcers, remember?

“That’s dark, Dane. Even for you.” But she was smiling when she said it. Even if the smile was slight and sad. It took him a second to remember what he’d said out loud.

“Well, your boyfriend can pick up his slack.” The irritation he’d sat on all month cracked the words out before he caught himself. *Fuck.*

“Dane!”

“What?”

“Don’t be rude. I know you don’t like Cade but—”

“I figured by now you’d be aiming higher.” Not exactly where he planned to take the conversation, but it was easier than thinking about Dad bleeding in an ambulance, laying there with a surgeon’s knife in him.

An indignant sound escaped Zara—something between a laugh and a protest—that turned into her clearing her throat. “Really? You pick right now to bitch about who I hang out with?”

“Yes, now,” Dane snapped. “Not like I get many chances to say anything without your evil twin around.” She hadn’t let them be alone in four years. And he hadn’t pushed the issue. *Fuck me, why didn't I push it?* In the moment, he couldn’t remember why. The space between them felt so fucking wrong.

Zara huffed. “Cade’s fine! It isn’t his fault you hate everyone. You’ve been a pro-level dick since forever. So don’t take it out on him.”

Since you stopped talking to me. Dane expected silence, fury, and tears back then. Instead, a stranger stepped off the private jet that fall, all cool politeness and torturous hemlines.

And then she spent the next four summers fucking around like he wasn't right there watching.

"I don't hate everyone." Dane sounded calmer than he felt. "Ninety-nine percent isn't all."

Zara sniffed. "Anyway, he's not trying to get Dad's money or Gia's social media contacts. Shouldn't that give him a passing grade from you?"

He lifted his foot to slow down, swearing under his breath at the traffic building up. "You're so wrapped up in whether they care about Daddy. The fact they don't have a personality or any redeeming quality doesn't register. Just a bank account."

"That doesn't—"

"You're better than that. At least, I thought you were."

"I ought to slap you." Zara's lips thinned. "But since you're having a major life crisis *and* driving, I'm going to pretend this is grief and adrenaline, not you being a raging asshole."

"It could be both," he pointed out with a wry chuckle. Zara didn't join in.

"The Dane I thought you were, has a functional brain and could fucking figure out that I'm going out with those guys to make everyone happy."

Not me. Sure as shit not any of the older Fitzgerald kids, either. And Adam didn't make any overtures to any of the twins' boy toys. "I'd like to know who you classify as everyone, Z."

"But it does look good on the society page, doesn't it?" She twisted a lock of her glossy dark hair around her finger. "That's all that matters."

"That's fucking insane."

"And we all know the score. I don't get the luxury of dating someone just because I like them. So, I don't like

them.” She exhaled. “Take the next right.”

“Fuck.” *She isn't wrong.* Following her direction, he turned down the off-ramp. He took a deep breath before hitting his palm against the wheel. He had to hit something. “I’m sorry, Zara.”

“About the directions? Or reality in general?”

Both. Dane stopped the car, waiting for the light to turn green. “I just need him to be okay.”

“He’s tough as nails.” Her hand rested on his shoulder and squeezed.

“It’s no excuse to unload on you.”

“It’s fine, Dane.”

“It’s not. We aren’t... This isn’t old times, is it?” He couldn’t help looking at her. *Does she have to be so goddamn pretty?* Even here, with the jagged streetlights and high beams, he couldn’t miss her beauty. She belonged in the studio of some old master painter, draped in silks and reading handwritten love poems. She sure as shit didn’t belong here, with a comforting hand on an enforcer.

“I ... I think we’re friends.” Zara stared at the console. “I mean, if Sawyer said any of this shit, I’d shoot him in the balls. But you’re different. Even now.”

He let his head fall back against the seat and covered her hand with his. Her skin was frighteningly soft. “I can’t be different, Zara.” The light turned green, and he yanked his hand away to deal with the wheel and the next section of road construction.

“Should’ve thought of that before you gave me chicken pox in kindergarten. Or let me have all your Laffy Taffy at Halloween. Should I go on?”

Remembering their childhood history didn’t help. If anything, it made the ache sink deeper in his chest. “I still hate your fuck-boy. Knowing you’re miserable with him isn’t helping.”

“I’m not miserable.”

“Liar.”

“I’m just bored. There’s a subtle difference.”

He snorted. “Could’ve fooled me.”

“Turn here.” She waited until he made the turn and began the slow process of navigating the parking garage. “I wish you’d take your own advice, by the way. I’ve seen the last three girls you dated. Talk about not being good enough.”

Jesus. I don’t even want to ask how she knows my dating history. “That’s different.” He didn’t dare look her way. His last three relationships lasted two months apiece. Work always got in the way, and he never cared enough to make up for it. Eventually, the women asked why they never met his family or saw his apartment. He’d used a staged penthouse with one of them, but she’d figured it out after the second or third night when she swung by to “surprise” him, and the doorman let slip it was a company property.

He realized with a jolt that his steadiest partners were call girls. They didn’t give a shit if you were fucking them in a hotel or a boardroom, so long as the money was right. The very same existence he’d credited to his dad. *Fuck.*

Zara seemed to be following his thoughts because her skeptical, half-pitying expression spoke several volumes he didn’t want to read. “If you say so. I think we need those elevators over there.” She didn’t say anything else as he parked the car. They silently walked through the parking garage and navigated the bright-white hospital hallways with only directions passing between them. Her hand slipped into his while the second elevator rose. And somehow, he kept forgetting to let go.

The doctor found them in the waiting room minutes later, and everything else fell through the void opening in Dane’s chest. He knew Zara was talking to the doctor and to him. He saw her blue-and-brown eyes swimming in tears and

ordered her to call someone for a ride. He was sure he'd said that part out loud, but she didn't answer or move.

She didn't leave his side until the paperwork was finished and her latest stepmother showed up, dragging them out of the hospital. Nobody—no matter how grief-stricken or professional—argued with the reigning Mrs. Fitzgerald.

It felt like a second and an eternity when they arrived at the Fitzgerald Mansion. Dane stared at the front door, the stairs leading up to it seeming higher than before. He shuffled backward, and somewhere in his mind, he was convinced there'd be no going back if he walked over the threshold. His dad wasn't dead ... not yet. Again, a small, guiding hand found his, and he found Zara's gaze locked on him—glassy and scared, but grounding. His brow furrowed, and a sharp pain settled at the base of his throat, but he followed. One foot in front of the other.

Somehow, he was sitting on the foyer's polished marble floor, a frantic Zara crouching beside him. Tears streamed down her face as somebody—he didn't see who, probably the head of security—dragged Dane to lean against the wall. His eyes clenched shut as though blocking out everything around him meant nobody would see the tears. His dad's voice echoed in his ears: *“Never let them see your vulnerabilities. They'll only use them against you.”*

“Dane?” A new pair of hands found his arms. Larger than Zara's. The grip harder than the guard would dare. Dane's head shot up. Adam's broad, stony face swam into focus. Dane realized he wasn't the only one crying.

“You saw it?” The words came out thick, confused. Like his tongue forgot how to shape them.

Adam glanced toward his wife and daughter. “Come with me, son.”

Dane didn't argue. Adam led him to the parlor, sat him in a red velvet chair, and closed the door. Hard. The sound

shook Dane, and he pressed his fingers against his palm, where Zara's had been moments before. "What happened?"

"We were ambushed." Adam collapsed into the chair beside Dane's. "He got in front of me."

He was your shield. He always said so.

Dane cleared his throat. "Where? Who did it? How—"

"Listen to me." Adam's hand caught Dane's wrist. "The people who did this? They will be held to account. And you will help."

"Then tell me—"

"We'll know more in the morning."

"Sir—"

"Adam. I'm not your boss tonight, son." He sat back, the chair groaning with the shifting weight. "Michael was a brother to me. I hope you've always known that, but I realize some shit we never make clear enough to our kids."

Dane wiped his face with the back of his hand. "If it wasn't for you, Mom's cancer would've killed him, too. Nobody meant more to him than you did."

Adam's expression twisted, silent tears falling into his beard. He shook his head. "No, Dane. The person who meant the most to him is sitting right here beside me. Don't you ever fucking doubt that."

Dane bit his lip, using the pain to focus. Keep some kind of calm. "I don't know what to do. Our place? All of his stuff ... the funeral..."

"You don't do what we do without explicit instructions. I've known your father's wishes since you were born. Not much has changed."

"Oh." *Why didn't we ever talk about that? Seems like he should've brought it up.* The flash of irritation only deepened the cut—his dad wouldn't be there to snap at tomorrow. Or any tomorrow.

“Jesus, this is a fuckin’ disaster.” Adam heaved a sigh. “I’ll have a room made up for you tonight. Tomorrow, we’ll get started on arrangements.”

“No, I really should go home. Start going through—”

“Not tonight, son. You don’t do anything tonight.” Adam stood up. “And that’s an order.”

Dane looked up at him. “I thought you weren’t my boss tonight.”

Adam managed to crack a smile. “Uncles can still give orders.”

Getting to his feet, Dane shoved his hand into his pocket, his thumb stroking the St. Michael coin. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. Let’s get some drinks.”

Chapter Two

DANE

Chicago, Illinois, August 25

Home bittersweet home. He eased the ancient metal door shut, but the latch's soft click practically echoed throughout the apartment. Habit drove his movements: unloading his keys and wallet on the small table to the right, kicking off his shoes, and heading straight into the kitchen, gun and holster set carefully on the counter within reach. He grabbed a Guinness from the refrigerator before he looked around, his gaze landing on a gray sweatshirt that wasn't his hanging over the black easy chair. That also wasn't his. *How does this feel so much bigger and more cluttered at the same goddamn time?*

He hadn't come home much since everything went to hell—for the last five nights, the room at the Fitzgerald Mansion, a hotel, or Sawyer's couch had just been easier. But now, he'd left Sawyer and his other assorted cousins to handle his extremely drunk Uncle Patrick at the penthouse apartment they'd used to host the post-funeral reception. Dane couldn't take five more minutes of other people's guilt. But standing in their—*oh, fuck, it's mine*—too-big, too-empty apartment, his uncle's overblown speeches, the Fitzgerald kids' offers from their hidden flasks, and his cousins' bottomless bags of weed didn't seem so annoying.

Dane stared at the furniture like artifacts from someone else's tomb. Things he'd lived with his whole life felt alien. It wasn't a grand space, unlike the commandeered penthouse. This was a *home*. Michael Ryan always made that clear. This was the place you came back to. As such, his dad never asked him to move out, and Dane never felt like going. Not much point. No girlfriend lasted long enough, and once he'd fully joined the firm, it wasn't like he had much downtime. When he wasn't glued to the twins or Caleb, he was hopping the States—and occasionally the Atlantic Ocean—on Fitzgerald

errands. The job never ended. Not to mention the massive amount of time he'd have to sink into finding somewhere new.

And that's still gonna be a problem, isn't it? So get your head out of your ass and handle whatever the fuck is going wrong in your brain. Swearing, he tugged at his tie, leaving it to hang around his neck like a half-forgotten noose. All he wanted was sleep. Sleep and alcohol and maybe to gut someone. Nice and slow. But he didn't have a target yet. Once he had names, he'd go hunting. For now, all he could do was wait.

Dad's stuff can do the same for another week. Or three. He fell onto the too-soft brown sofa and propped one foot up on the battered coffee table. He had offered to replace it, and many other pieces, countless times, but Dad always laughed it off. *"That thing got me through bachelorhood, kid! It'll survive the goddamn nuclear winter someday.* He all but heard his father's gravelly voice and felt the increasingly familiar heartache.

His father had been a tough, mean bastard on the job, but he'd drawn a hard line on that facade at the front door. Michael Ryan might've spent the day teaching his son to break kneecaps and torch houses or disposing of an enemy one piece at a time. But that didn't mean they sat around the dinner table talking shop. He wasn't a monster lurking around to beat up his kid or terrorize a hooker. Instead, he'd preached violence as a tool and fear as a weapon. And looking at the goddamn ugly table brought those lessons back. *Fuck. Now I'm never gonna have the balls to toss any of it.*

Popping the cap off the beer, Dane glared at the remote next to his foot. Television would provide noise, but ... *screw it.* He eased further into the cushion, closing his eyes, and taking a swig. *Just drink and relax. Get a nap. You can do this. You survive stakeouts all the time. This is just another kind of wait.*

The door rattled with a soft knock.

They'd go away if he didn't move or make a sound. Probably kids selling the old subscription scams. Sometimes the building's guard let them up for fun. They knocked again. He took another drink and considered whether he'd have to knock the guard's face into a wall.

"Dane? Dane, I know you're home. I checked with Sawyer!"

His eyes shot open, and his feet hit the tile floor. Three seconds later, he reached the door and swung it open without checking the peephole. Zara stood in the hall, her blue-and-brown gaze locking with his. *Am I hallucinating?* He forgot to breathe. Or speak. Instead, he stepped back, motioning for her to enter. *The fuck am I doing? The fuck is she doing? Tell her to get the hell out of here. Say it! Just—*

"Mrs. MacPherson sent food," Zara said with determined cheerfulness as if she guessed his thoughts. The Fitzgerald's long-time housekeeper had a rigorous sense of obligation to all the staff, seeing them as a dysfunctional extended family.

I should've known I wasn't getting out of this without ten tons of cake and cabbage.

"Cathy was going to bring it but, um, I volunteered." She shifted uncomfortably, as if her heels hurt. Dane glanced down, finally able to look away from her cheekbones, to find Zara's arms loaded with a large red box like a supersized pizza delivery. A second tote sat beside her. "I figured you might not want a lecture on how to clean the closets right now. Plus, someone had to take the other half to your uncle, and I already knew how to get here."

"It's been ages." His voice sounded thick, emotional. He cleared his throat. "How the hell did you remember?"

Zara sighed. "Honestly? No idea. I forget what I had for dinner yesterday, but not this." A helpless shrug, and she lifted the box. "I hope you have a freezer. Otherwise, Mrs. Mac might have one delivered."

How'd she get this much crap up here? Dane glanced suspiciously behind Zara but saw no sign of further Fitzgerald offspring or other interlopers. He grabbed the tote from the floor. "I'll take care of it." The plastic was still warm, so he set it on the counter. "Who's with you?" he asked, heading back to check the hall. *There's no way Adam let her out on her own.* He glanced both ways with increasing anxiety. *Nobody? Not a single fucking soul?* He closed it and turned a wary stare on Zara.

"No one, technically." She'd followed him into the kitchen and was busy pulling food out of the cases.

"Christ, Zara! You can't screw around right now. I know your dad doesn't tell you fuck-all, but even you ought to guess —"

"D! Chill." Zara smiled. "Vince has my phone tracker on, and I had to check in when I got here. Dad's got half the known world occupied with other stuff, including that raging party they're calling a funeral. You might remember it from right before you snuck out?"

"How'd you—"

"Sawyer, of course." She reached into her purse and held up her phone. "When I head out, I've got to call Vince again." She grimaced. "I'm almost looking forward to classes."

"It'll be nice to get back to normal." *Whatever the hell that's going to be.* With that thought, he finally let himself look at her because she would be gone soon. He wouldn't see her in anything but social media posts until winter break. She still wore her modest black dress from the funeral, her dark, wavy hair corralled into a perfect ponytail. Not a strand out of place. He wished he could tell her to let it down. She watched him back, waiting for something, but he had no idea what. "How'd you really get here?"

Zara's head tilted like he'd said something stupid. "I did live here, once upon a time."

"For six weeks. When you were five."

“They were good weeks.”

He couldn't argue. He'd been almost eight when his best friend's least-annoying sibling had to stay with them for obscure adult reasons while her other siblings got shuffled off among relatives and friends. He knew now it was a flare-up among the Irish families with some Albanians in the mix for shits and giggles, and there'd been threats against Adam's kids.

At the time, Zara turned out to be fun for a kindergartner—when Ben wasn't making her cry—capable of keeping up with him to sneak episodes of *Futurama* when they thought the adults were safely asleep. Years later, his dad had laughed at the memory. “*You two were trying so hard to be stealthy. We didn't have the heart to interrupt.*” The memory drew blood. “Fuck.” He turned his back to her. *Tears. Fucking tears. Jesus.*

“Hey.” Her fingers pressed into his palm, and he felt the heat of her body at his side. If he breathed in, he'd catch her flowery, vanilla perfume. “Go sit down,” she whispered. “I'll make you up a plate and get the rest of this stuff put away.” She wasn't commenting about the tears. *Is that better or worse? Shit. The fridge's a disaster.* He had a rebuttal, an argument, and sixteen reasons for her to let him handle everything.

And then he was sitting on the couch with a bottle of Jones soda he knew didn't come from his fridge, plus a plate of Mrs. Mac's fried chicken and mashed potatoes. Zara was still in the fucking kitchen.

“Please. Stop.” He scooted to the edge of the couch to glare at her.

“Why? Someone has to clear this fridge out. The milk looks like it's been here since Frank Nitti owned the building.”

“Seriously, Zara. You don't have to do ... whatever you're doing.” He set the soda down next to the plate and

wiped his cheeks. “I’ll take care of it.” It seemed wrong. Everything seemed wrong, but with the world turned upside down, he couldn’t handle the paradigm shift of Zara helping him. She’d done it twice, and it felt like grinding glass into a wound. One he didn’t want to admit was there.

“It’s taken care of,” she called back. “Your freezer’s stuffed to the brim, but the fridge’s cleaned out, and you have food for a month. Or you can throw a massive party for a week. Either way.” Zara stepped out from behind the island that separated the two spaces, holding a bottle of soda and a smaller plate. “I’m claiming some of the chicken as tribute for dealing with that milk.” Her nose wrinkled. “Did you forget it for a whole year?”

Dane slumped back and shook his head. “It was Dad’s. He needed it for his Cocoa Puffs.” He surprised himself by chuckling and grabbed his drink.

“Uh-huh. His Cocoa Puffs. I believe you, Count Chocula.”

“In my defense, I haven’t been home much. Work’s been brutal all summer. These two clients keep dragging my ass all over the goddamn city.”

“How else would you learn the best party spots? If it weren’t for those clients, you’d be moldering in a library somewhere.” Zara settled on the other side of the couch. The gap between them felt wrong. Probably because he’d gotten used to being in crowded SUVs or packed clubs with her. *Yep, that’s it.* He tried not to breathe too deep—he’d only catch another whiff of that damned perfume. She’d been wearing it since she came home from France, and started looking right through him.

She didn’t ask permission to flip the TV on or to turn the channel. “If I miss the next episode of *Ghosts*, Brenna will shoot me via text,” she explained. *Her roommate*, he remembered, picturing a cute redhead who’d accompanied Zara and Gia out during previous college breaks. “She says sitcoms must be viewed weekly, not binged. Or streamed. It’s

very retro, apparently.” Zara rolled her eyes. Dane stared at the television like it’d materialized out of nothing.

“We don’t normally watch anything but ESPN. I almost forgot other channels exist.”

“That tracks with the general feral bachelor vibe.”

He listened to the show’s opening, absently picking at his plate. He didn’t feel hungry, but keeping his hands busy seemed like a good idea. “Can I, uh, ask you a question?”

That startled her into turning his direction. She looked like he’d spoken Greek. “Of course? Ask whatever you want.”

The question hovered on his tongue, but he didn’t speak. It was a bad idea, but he could blame the grief if she called him out later. And the half bottle of bourbon he’d downed before getting in the taxi. *But if you say it, it’ll be out there. You’ll never unhear it.* “Never mind.” He focused on the food.

“Oh, no, you don’t. Come on!” Zara leaned toward him, oblivious to the effect the angle had on the V-shaped neckline of her black dress. “You never ask me things! Don’t chicken out now.” She pouted.

“It wasn’t important. Watch your show. It looks interesting.” He set the bottle down again and pretended to care about the mashed potato-to-chicken distribution on his plate.

“Dane!” She sounded exactly like she had when they were in grade school, and somebody called her Gia. “If you don’t ask, I will start asking *you* everything under the sun.”

“You’ll get bored.”

“Do you remember that road trip to St. Louis?” Her voice was steely. Dane couldn’t hide his laugh or his involuntary recoil. The summer after the twins’ senior year, they’d insisted on a real American road trip, so Adam ordered Dane and Sawyer along with them. Gia and Zara started playing Ask Anything, a game they’d made up to torture

Sawyer. It'd taken a fortune in weed to keep him from killing the pair of them before they hit Springfield.

He remembered something else from that trip: the icy politeness from Zara. At first, he'd been stupidly grateful she wasn't being a brat. By St. Louis, he was scoring as much weed as Sawyer. Fortunately, the twins got bored with driving by the end of the week and flew home.

"Shit. Okay. Fine. I was just going to ask how you were enjoying the fried chicken? I can't remember the last time Mrs. Mac made it." Judging by Zara's stormy expression, she wasn't buying his ploy. Not even out of charity.

"Why are you lying?"

"Am I?" *Fuck. The game is on.* He kept his face neutral.

Zara raised a brow. "Are you afraid of my answer? Or just talking to me? Are you always this timid?"

Dane tilted his head to her, the corner of his lips twitching. "Yes. No. And No." He took a bite of potatoes. He caught the second of calculation in Zara's gaze.

"What kind of question could possibly scare the terrifying Dane Ryan?"

"That why you're grilling me like a two-bit street cop trying to make Detective? Cause I'm scary?"

"Mm." She patted him on the back. "Of course, I know you're a teddy bear. But most other people have bizarre reactions to you that I can only explain as terror. Especially when you're holding a gun. And you're always holding a damn gun."

He didn't know which insulted him more. Terrifying or teddy bear? Neither sat well. "Guns do have that effect."

Zara's nose wrinkled. "Just tell me the problem before I annoy you into aiming one at me."

Which will never fucking happen. Dane leaned forward, rested his elbows on his knees, and pulled his tie off over his

head. Now wasn't a good time to keep a noose handy. "I'm not good at personal, intrusive questions. Especially ones that open doors that are better left shut."

"That sounds ominous as hell. Which sinister family secrets are you worried about? Because if it's about Caleb's porn collection..."

"Christ. That boy needs a new hobby." Dane shuddered.

"Tell that to the maids. They've walked in on him like five times. I'm starting to worry he doesn't understand how doors work."

"The maids," he echoed dully. Something heavy settled in his head. This wasn't a good plan, but the ball kept rolling down the hill. "Jesus. We really live in different worlds."

"Oh, whatever. We do not."

"But we—"

"You practically live at our house! You got expelled with Ben like five times."

"We grew up together, but we're not equal. You'll always be up here," Dane said, holding his hand up level with his head. "And I'll always be the help."

"That displays a shocking lack of imagination. Not to mention ambition. Neither of which I thought you lacked." Zara's two-toned eyes studied him without their usual haze of humor or alcohol. "But to address the main issue: we don't live in Downton-fucking-Abbey. Employment status doesn't equate to societal caste."

Dane scoffed. "You know that's not entirely true."

"Well, if you're going to be obnoxiously technical, you're still Dad's employee. Not mine. On my best day, I'm one argument with Daddy away from working in McDonald's."

"Now who's lying?" She didn't get it. But how could she? It wasn't her fault. The Outfit didn't tell their women how

the business worked. He took a long breath, seeing the argument in her tensing shoulders. *Fine. Roll the dice.* “I was going to ask if you ever thought of that night?”

“Which?”

“Four years ago. In May.”

“Oh. That.” Zara blinked and turned away to pick at her food. *Like it’s nothing. Just one more guy stealing a kiss. One more friendship fucked up...* He swallowed a sarcastic retort with sugary, blue soda. “I’ve got two very sharp memories around that time frame.”

“The first one.” Because he wasn’t brave enough to face the second. He’d done the right thing—but doing the right thing felt worse than doing a lifetime of bad ones if it cost you your heart.

“Figured you’d forgotten all of it,” she said after three more heartbeats.

“I’ve tried.”

She pulled her ponytail forward, toying with the ends of her hair. “You did an excellent impression of succeeding.”

“So did you.”

Her cheeks colored. “Maybe I was waiting for you to explain how promises to me didn’t mean as much as a promotion.”

She might as well have hit him. “That’s not what fucking happened.”

“Whatever.” She twisted a lock of hair around her finger. “If you’re about to lecture me on how I behaved, please skip it. I think I’ve proved I learned my lessons since. Watch my drinks, don’t go out without you guys, and don’t expect anyone to choose—”

“What?” It was his turn to look at her like she’d started speaking a foreign language. “The hell are you talking about?” He snagged the remote off the sofa and switched the TV off.

The silence roared around them. “You have to know why it went down that way, Zara.”

“Because you were disappointed and pissed off at me? Because you couldn’t believe I’d been that stupid? You made that perfectly clear when you went running to Dad.”

“Because I understood why you’d run that risk, Z! And I was damn sure not about to let Ben keep—”

“And you absolutely hated that I kissed you on top of all that.” Zara pursed her lips and glanced at him, half over her shoulder as if she couldn’t quite make herself turn toward him.

“That’s not true.” *Okay, it’s a little true.* But not the way she thought.

“Regardless, I was too busy sulking about your disinterest and being an absolute brat to thank you properly. Which probably didn’t help.” She exhaled. “I do understand why you told Dad. Now, at least. But it took a couple years. And by that time, I figured you liked the not-so-friends routine.”

“I hated it.” The truth tore itself out of his heart. Zara wiped her cheek.

“So did I.” Just like that, three little syllables sucked all the air out of his lungs. So did the tears glittering in her eyelashes.

And look where this shitty conversation leads. Now she’s upset. He rose from the couch, pushed the plates out of the way, and sat on the coffee table in front of her. The movement startled her into raising her eyes, and he took his chance, seizing her left hand with both of his and lifting it to his lips. Zara didn’t pull away.

Damn her. Damn me. Fuck.

“I’d wanted to kiss you for fucking ages.” The confession blurted itself past his lips. Zara’s eyes flared, and her jaw fell. “When you came in to talk to me that night, I thought you’d decided to push my buttons again. I didn’t know

what I'd do but I damn sure wanted to kiss you again." Her lips parted, and he waited but she didn't say anything else, so he continued. "And then, when you explained ... I couldn't do anything else, Z. I *had* to take it to your dad. If I'd known what that choice would cost, I'd still—"

"Have to make the grade, right?"

"Have to make sure you were safe." He swallowed. "I should've just killed Ben. Kept your secret and killed him. I'm sorry for that."

Her silky fingertips touched his lips. "Don't. I think you mean it, and I don't want you to kill anyone for me." He couldn't remember what they'd been talking about. All his thoughts zeroed in on her hand, the tingling warmth her touch left behind, and why wasn't he already touching her lips?

"Zara, I'd kill anyone for you." He tightened his hold. He'd gone this far into Hell, might as well finish the trip. "Haven't you noticed?"

"No." Her expression softened. "But, hey, I wanted you to kiss me since I was twelve, and you never noticed. I'd say we're even."

Fuck, that hurts. And looking at Zara, with so much emotion shining in her impossible eyes, Dane couldn't stop the bleeding in his heart any more than he could undo the last four years. "Do you know what your father would do if he found out?"

"Do you seriously think I'd care what he thought?" Her voice caught as more tears welled up in her eyes, and she shook her head sharply.

"I mean it, Z. You think he'd ever approve of you being with a grunt?"

"You aren't..."

"Compared to the associates he *would* approve of? I fucking am."

“Is that why what I wanted didn’t matter? Not even to you?” One single tear rolled down her cheek and drove a knife into his soul.

“It mattered,” he rasped. “But it’s my job to protect you. No matter what. In every way I can.”

She glared through the waterworks. “What the hell are you protecting me from in this scenario, Dane? An orgasm? Dad formally admitting I’m not the favorite? What?”

He could’ve ignored a smile, could have resisted a pretty laugh. But tears? Those always shorted his brain out. He reached for her before he understood what he was about to do and pressed his lips against hers. “I’m sorry.” He cradled the back of her head, threading his fingers into that perfect ponytail, and held her as he deepened the kiss.

“You better be,” she answered when they parted for the barest breath. Then she was on his lap, her hands tangling in his hair. The ancient coffee table didn’t even groan beneath the added weight, but Dane did. She was so damn warm. And she tasted like candy. “Don’t stop this time.”

“Not this time.” That line between sanity and suicide blurred with every heartbeat, every soft exhale she made against his mouth. Years of fantasies and endless hunger blazed through his last brain cell. Circling an arm around her, he stood and turned, laying her on the couch. He lowered himself on top of her, reveling in those sweet curves fitting against him. “Not unless you want me to.”

“Don’t you dare.” Zara’s nails dug into his arms.

“I won’t.” He pushed her flowy dress up to her waist, groaning at the glimpse of black silk against her pale skin, and settled his hips between her thighs. He sighed as he rocked against her, letting her feel his erection. She always had that effect—he had no idea how many guard shifts ended with a cold shower or a frantic jerk-off—but feeling her heat so close, he was throbbing like a teenager who just got his first up-close look at cleavage.

Zara moaned his name, her legs wrapping around his hips as she freed his shirt from his pants. “Won’t what?” she challenged between increasingly ragged kisses. “Drop me off at the house aching for you? Because I’m freaking tired of that game, D.” But her voice had that familiar laughing edge, even if it was a little at odds with how she whimpered when he ground his cock against her panties.

“I’ll make it up to you.” Pushing himself onto his knees, Dane unbuttoned his shirt and slipped it off, letting it hang over the back of the couch. His undershirt went next, tossed somewhere. He was too mesmerized by the look in her eyes to care.

“How, exactly?”

He put both hands on her hips and pushed her dress even higher. *God, she’s tiny. How the fuck is this gonna work?* The doubts blossomed in his mind, but her bare thigh, warm and taut under his palm, shorted everything else out. “Patience, baby girl. You’re so fucking beautiful,” he whispered as his fingers hooked under the band of her panties, pulling them down her smooth legs. “I’m not rushing this.”

“Says the hottest man in the world,” she answered, grinning as she dragged the dress over her head. The black panties fell away, leaving her in a black lace bra meant to be ripped off. The teasing glimpse of her peachy nipples beneath nearly snapped his control. Zara’s legs parted as she sat up enough to reach for him, her fingers tracing a scar along his left side. “Is this where you go full alpha male and drag me into a sex dungeon?”

“How’d you know?” He got his arm around her and lifted, firmly gripping her ass, holding her in place against him as he walked to his bedroom. Thankfully, he’d left the blinds slatted open far enough that he didn’t need to fumble for the switch to see her creamy skin and rising blush.

“Thank God. I was worried I’d have to play teacher.” She giggled until he dropped her on the bed. He stood with his

knees between her legs—fuck if he was letting her shut them anytime soon—and unfastened his belt.

“I’d rather you played something else.”

“Oh?” Zara’s eyes fixed on his, and she pushed his hands away from his belt to finish dragging it free. “I promise to be very submissive after you’re naked.”

“Do you?” He grated the question out between jaws almost locked with tension. If she kept talking about submission, he would lose his mind.

She flicked his zipper down, shoved his pants over his hips, then pressed her hand against the bulge in his briefs. Her eyebrows flew up. “Okay, maybe I’ll be submissive now? Fuck, Dane. I didn’t know I was supposed to be practicing with porn stars.”

“Hush.” Dane laughed and bent down, cupping her cheeks as he kissed her. He let his fingers glide gently over her neck, her shoulders, along her back to the fastenings of her bra, which gave way easily. He let out a heavy breath, ghosting his fingers over her left nipple with a featherlight touch. *Perfect. She’s so fucking perfect.* “Don’t I always take care of you?”

“Yeah. You do.” Zara’s amusement flickered, something far more vulnerable showing for a split-second.

“Then lay back for me. And close your eyes.”

Her unearthly gaze met his again before she obeyed. Her head met the mattress, and her eyes closed, but she brought one arm up across her breasts. “I swear if you hop into a furry suit or bust out a bunch of alien sex toys...”

“Don’t worry. I never get that out before the third date.”

“Then what am I doing?”

“Being a good girl.” Dane held back, letting her anticipation and nerves build her tension. He waited for that crease between her brow, the subtle pout of her gorgeous lips, and then his hands were on her, exploring. Slowly. He took

extra care when he got to her breasts, kneading and massaging, teasing her nipples to a peak before bending over her to take one between his lips. His moan matched hers. He'd dreamed of her like this too much, too desperately. He drank in every inch of her like he'd been starving for years.

I have. I did. Every night I wasn't coming home to her was fucking wasted.

He nipped lightly with his teeth, reveling in her moans, and stroked her with his tongue, savoring every noise she made. He kissed a deliberate path to the valley between her breasts, but instead of giving equal attention to the other, he began moving down her abdomen, kissing and licking her velvet-soft skin until he knelt on the floor, teasing her trembling thighs, breathing in her scent. She'd gone Brazilian, and his brain blanked out at his first glimpse of her bare, glistening folds.

His erection ached, and it cost every ounce of control he had not to just stand up and drive into her. "Tell me." He pressed a kiss just above her pussy. "Did you ever think about me here? Like this?"

It was gratifying how many gasping breaths Zara took before an actual sentence escaped her lips. "I ... I ... don't, um. I don't know."

"You're lying." He nuzzled her thigh and left a gentle nip that made her twitch. "How many times?"

Her eyes were so dark he could only see the blue outer ring. "How many is almost every night since freshman homecoming?" The flush on her cheeks deepened.

"That's terribly specific. What did... Oh. Yeah..." He grinned, knowing she couldn't see it. "Right," he breathed the word against her outer lips. "What part of that night was so inspiring?"

"I s-saw you kiss Stephanie."

"I hope you enjoyed the show." He remembered. He'd made out with Steph, who wasn't even his date, because Zara

was watching. In hindsight, it was a dick move. But he'd caught Zara with some football player behind the bleachers that week and hadn't been in a very considerate mood.

"I may have died of jealousy. Just a little."

"That was the point." Not that his teenage self would've admitted to giving a shit what Zara did with anyone, but Dane had gotten four years to reflect on their history. He hooked one of her knees over his shoulder, watching her reaction as he explored her most sensitive places. "But I promise I never kissed Steph like this." He bowed his head closer, spreading her with his tongue before tracing her clit. Zara let out a sharp, sweet gasp, and her hand gripped his on her thigh while the other reached for his hair. Her hips twitched with each movement he made as if she was either too sensitive or too nervous to hold still.

The cream slicking his tongue after a few gentle strokes confirmed the reason, even as Zara moaned his name again. He sighed against her heat, his tongue delving, thrusting, tasting. He worked two fingers into her tight depths and returned his attention to her clit. *Should've known she'd be fucking tiny everywhere.* "That's it, Z. Relax for me. I got you."

His other hand went to his briefs, pushing them down so he could stroke himself. It gave just enough relief to let him focus as Zara came apart on his tongue and fingers. He kept going, pushing her, sliding a third finger into her bewitching body, and making her writhe until she sobbed his name.

"Dane, please! I c-can't ... I need you... Please. Please!"

He couldn't deny her. Quickly crawling onto the bed, he settled over her. He waited for her to arch, then gripped the back of her head and lifted her to meet his lips. "What is it you want, baby girl?"

Her fingers dug into his hips. "You. I want you." She kissed him desperately, her tongue tracing his lips.

“Is that all?”

“Please, fuck me?” The question was a calculated, breathy plea he’d heard her use to get other men to do things for her. Never him. Never anything so intimate, either. “Please let me come on your cock, Dane.”

“And if I do?” He pulled his head back, keeping his lips just out of her reach, his cock rubbing against her drenched cunt but not where she needed it. “What do I get, Zara? What will you do for me?” He knew he was playing with fire, but if he just gave her what she wanted, that’d make him no different than any other man.

I’m not them, Zara. He looked into her eyes, willing her to accept that fact.

Recognition, amusement, and lust flashed across her expressive features before her fingernails trailed lightly down his side, over the scar she’d touched earlier. “I’ll be yours, Dane,” she whispered, with their lips all but touching. She laid her head back, her hair splayed across his pillow. Her hips tilted again, pushing up against his throbbing cock. “I know you want me screaming your name with that monster dick buried to the hilt.”

“I do.” He slid a hand into her hair again, holding tighter this time. “Does that worry you?”

“No. I like begging. I want you holding me in place while you make me take another stroke, make me come one more time, make me scream for you.” Zara’s hand touched his cheek, her thumb just on the edge of the scar there. Like she already knew where to touch. “I’m yours, love.”

“Say it again,” he commanded, shifting, pressing the head of his cock at her entrance.

“I’m your—” He snapped his hips forward, relishing in her scream. He didn’t give her time to adjust either. He’d meant to, but when he felt her pussy grip him, he forgot everything else. In his dreams, he imagined taking her slow as he learned every inch of her body. Now that he had her, he

fucked her hard, speeding up with each thrust. It wasn't gentle. He needed her too badly.

“Fuck. You're perfect,” Dane moaned.

Her hips met his, and her fingernails dug into his sides and back as her body clamped down. Her orgasm came with another scream she muffled against his shoulder and keening moans that were almost his name, almost a plea. He rode the storm until her next climax hit. “Dane, God, don't stop. Come, please ... I'm yours. God, I'm yours, please, please...” The words broke into desperate, incoherent sounds. For him.

His lips crashed against hers, silencing her words but not her moans. Or his. He curled desperate fingers into her hair, tugging her head back as he buried his face against her throat, whispering her name with his release. His body shook, his hips pistoned with a frenzied pace as he filled her pussy, and her shuddering body pulled more cum from him.

She was killing him, taking everything.

He was giving it.

The pulses eventually stopped, and he could breathe. A second or ten passed before he realized he'd settled his full weight on top of her. He rolled onto his back, his legs still entwined with hers. “Holy shit.” He'd have laughed if he had enough air in his lungs.

“Mm.” Zara sighed and curled into his side, her face hidden against his chest, covered by the tangled curls. He couldn't remember pulling her ponytail loose, but damn if he cared now. Her limbs were shaking, her breaths as uneven as his own. He liked that. *But it might be even better if she was completely exhausted... I ... fuck!* His gaze caught her thigh and a smear of liquid along her skin.

“Oh, shit. I forgot to wrap up. Are you—”

“Don't worry. I've got an implant.” Zara raised a brow. “Unless you're about to say you just gave me the clap.”

Dane laughed. “Not likely. I’d have to fuck someone bareback for that.”

“Is that your way of saying this isn’t your usual style?” She gestured at the wet spot.

“It isn’t. Jesus, it’s not...” Was seeing his own cum getting him hard again? *What the unholy hell?* He kept looking at her wet thighs, and something unhinged in the back of his head remained fucking enthralled.

Zara giggled, blissfully unaware that he was discovering a new kink, while she nuzzled his throat. “I’m sorry it’s over, but I think I’d have died of pleasure if you lasted another minute.”

He pressed a kiss to her forehead, drawing her closer. “Who said it’s over?” Sure, his limbs screamed with exhaustion now, but he’d kick himself his whole damn life for wasting even one second with Zara in his bed, naked and drunk on orgasms.

She raised her head finally, letting him see the effect of their fucking. Her cheeks were pink, her lips swollen, her hair a tangled halo. She looked like his wildest wet dreams come to life. And somehow, she still smelled like candy. “It isn’t?” she whispered, so heart-wrenchingly hopeful. “I thought you didn’t ever let anyone stay after...” the sentence trailed off, her thick lashes shielding her eyes.

“After I fucked them?” He waited for her nod before grunting in disbelief. “Well, that’s some insider information, isn’t it? I’m starting to wonder just who your sources are.” His fingers casually brushed over her hip as if he could touch her whenever he wanted. *Fuck. Maybe I am dreaming.* “How do you know so much about what happens in my bed, sweetheart?”

“You know your one-night stands exist after they exit the bed, right? And they talk, too.” Zara settled onto the pillow. Without his finger on her clit blowing her mind, he could see the honey-and-whiskey ring inside the sky-blue rims

of her eyes. He'd never understood how anyone mixed up the twins when Gia's eyes didn't look like a whole fucking planet, just plain brown circles around black.

"And they just talk to you by chance? Out of every woman in the city?"

"Chicago isn't as big as it seems. Especially not in our circles."

"You've been spying." He should've been pissed, but he kept looking at the semen on her leg and thinking how much more he should fuck into her. Besides, it was oddly gratifying to know she'd been keeping tabs on him too.

"It so happens I was a sympathetic ear sometimes," Zara said primly. "Since you frequently piss me off too."

"Aw, hell," he said and laughed. "Is this the part where they march out of the closet single-file to tell me all the shit I've done wrong? Because I'm not going to lie to you, today's a terrible day for that."

She combed his hair from his face, and her lips replaced her fingers on his shoulder. "If anyone pops out of that closet, I'll kill them myself. I'm not in the mood to share."

Don't look too much into that, a whisper of sanity urged. "Glad to hear it. So, while we are on the topic, I'm happy to have you stay the night."

"Really?" Her expression looked so surprised, and hopeful.

"Except that a few people might notice if you don't make it home."

"Mm. But I'm with you, and you're terribly responsible." She trailed her right hand along his ribs. "And you hate me. So, they won't worry too much."

"I'm pretty sure nobody thinks I hate you."

"Everyone knows you hate guard duty. Especially for us."

Dane kissed her temple, tightening his hold on her. “I hate Gianna’s attitude and watching your parade of asshole fuck-buddies. I never mind guarding just you.”

Zara’s expression softened. “But anyway, there are more important Fitzgeralds for everyone to watch. Bet you anything that if you call Vince right now to bitch about my presence here, he’ll offer you extra money to keep me under wraps because Gia’s being an utter bitch in some club, Caleb’s got two men on him for a debate event, and Daddy has every spare man crawling all over Hannah’s concert.”

He did the mental calculations and realized she was probably right. “You got it all figured out, don’t you, princess?” He smirked and then rolled her onto her back. He was on top of her again in the same fluid motion, taking her mouth in a rough kiss. “Looks like you’re all mine tonight.”

“Say that again,” she urged, hooking her right leg over his hip. “I’m starting to like when you get all growly and territorial and bossy.”

He laughed despite himself, even though he was busy pinning her wrists. “That’s a switch.”

“Mm. I think the orgasm made the difference. Makes me want to do what you say.”

“I can think of a few other things that’ll make you do what I say.” He smiled. “If you want to play...”

Zara’s eyes lit up, and she didn’t so much as test his hold on her wrists. “I do. Play with me, please?” The request ignited a thousand fantasies. Dane growled and nipped her full lower lip before he tore himself away from her and flipped her onto her stomach.

“Guess you’re here until you beg for mercy, princess.”

Zara’s muffled giggle was permission enough, even before she wiggled her heart-shaped ass against him. She yelped as his hand cracked against the right cheek, then wiggled again. “Not begging yet.”

Dane made sure to see to that. By the time they fell asleep, they'd both done their share of pleading for mercy. And pleasure.

DANE

Chicago, Illinois, August 26

As a kid, he hated the smell of blood. Puked his guts out every time he got a whiff. Dad always said it'd get better—that he'd stop noticing it. Michael Ryan was always right in the end. Standing amid crimson puddles spreading across the pockmarked concrete floor, Dane barely noticed the thick, fetid copper tang in the air. If anything, it brought a smile to his face. Every spilled drop felt like justice.

Good thing I wore black today.

Brandon slumped forward in the chair, held up only by the ropes binding his hands to the back legs, and let out a low, animalistic groan. He shivered as icy water dripped from his shoulders and gray hair onto the concrete, joining a puddle of piss and blood the power-washer hadn't washed away yet. Served the fucker right for trying to pass out.

Dane viewed him critically, remembering the proud Brandon Farrell who'd spent the last fifteen years standing behind Adam Fitzgerald. Keeping him safe. Carrying his most guarded secrets. He'd been untouchable. Respected. The next family underboss. Now he wept like a child, his Saville Row trousers stained with urine and gore. *For this fuckface, I lost my father. I left Zara alone in my bed. I broke my favorite switchblade. I should feed him his own balls.* If Dane wasn't still riding the high of fucking Zara in the dawn hours before the call came, he'd probably already have shot Brandon in the gut and walked out, orders be damned. But he was in a good mood, with every reason to keep Adam happy, so Brandon's heart would keep beating until they got his story.

"P-please. Stop." Brandon's appeal came through split lips and the ragged hole where a tooth had broken off.

“I want to stop,” Sawyer told him, crouching low enough to be level with his eyes. “But I can’t. Not until you talk. You know how this works, Bran.” He stood to his full height and pulled at his gloves before wiping a streak of blood off Brandon’s face as carefully as a lover. Dane leaned back against the wall, examined the bloody knife in his hand, and wiped the blade on his pants.

“Why talk?” Brandon whispered, blood dripping from his mouth.

Sawyer’s expression was all sympathy. “Because it’s the smart way out.”

“Ryan’s kid puts a bullet between my eyes no matter what.”

Sliding the knife back into its sheath at his waist, Dane stepped up behind Brandon and grabbed his shoulders, yanking him back against the chair. “True. Nothing would bring me greater pleasure than gutting you. But if you give us the truth, I’ll have to settle for a few of your toes. Maybe an ear.” He bent to whisper in Brandon’s mangled ear: “Boss’s orders. You remember those, right?”

Sawyer crossed his arms over his chest. “Were they threatening you? You had the boss’s ear. You know that. Why’d you do it?”

Yes, Brandon. What did they offer you that meant more than my father’s life? Dane let his hands drop to his side to keep himself from shaking the bastard’s remaining teeth out. For now, he had to content himself with the fact that he’d just spent the last two hours carving into his worthless hide. It was nothing compared to what he wanted to do.

“Why?” Brandon echoed, his voice edged with desperation. “Because trust don’t buy protection, does it? You think the De Luccas are the only other fish in the tank? Fuck no, Saw. There are other fish. Bigger fish. And some of those fish aren’t fucking done with the Fitzgeralds.”

Dane's eyes narrowed, and his fingers twitched against the knife. "The fuck did you do, Brandon?"

"I didn't do shit."

"You opened your damned mouth is what you did," Sawyer snapped. "Let me guess. You mouthed off to the wrong fucking people, threw out the Fitzgerald name as clout, and the fucking Russians appeared?" It wasn't an outlandish guess—one backed up by what they'd scrounged from the grapevine over the last week.

Dane walked around the chair to stand beside Sawyer, his hands balling into fists. Brandon loved dropping cash in underground gambling clubs. Sawyer helped bail his big mouth and sorry ass out of trouble before—whenever Brandon's fat mouth wrote a check his ass couldn't cash. *Only this time, Dad paid with his life.*

"No, not—"

"Bullshit," Dane hissed.

Brandon coughed, pink spittle spattering his chest. "Not like that! I fucked up, right? A long time ago. I was settling my debts, but they knew who I worked for. Wasn't a fucking problem. Then Adam's fuck-up son goes and screws them down in Missouri, and suddenly they want names. Dirt. Never asked before..."

"And you just gave it to them?" Dane started forward until Sawyer's arm shot out in front of him.

"Do you know what they would have done to me—to my family—if I didn't give them what they wanted?"

"Do you know what *I'm* going to do to you?" Dane smiled, flipping the knife between his fingers. "You're gonna tell us everything you gave them. So I won't mail your skin back to your wife."

"I wouldn—"

"Your kids will get those sticky fingers in their lunch boxes."

“John!” Brandon’s panicked eyes sought out Sawyer, who clicked his tongue and turned, putting his hand on the center of Dane’s chest. He didn’t speak, but he didn’t have to. Lowering the knife, Dane’s eyes narrowed to slits, but he took a step back, relenting. For now. Sawyer cracked his knuckles, took a deep breath, and crouched in front of Brandon again.

“I’ll keep him away from the kids, but you gotta talk.”

“What do you need?” Brandon asked, his shoulders sinking.

“Names, Bran. Let’s start with who the fuck ‘they’ are.”

Fitzgerald Mansion, Three Hours Later

He thought he’d feel better. When Sawyer told him they found the rat and wanted to bring Dane in on the extraction, he’d been ecstatic. The thought of making someone—anyone—pay, felt like a way out. A path out of the hole in his chest.

Too bad it didn’t work.

No matter how much blood I spill, Dad isn’t coming home.

Dane kicked at the gravel beneath his feet and fell back onto one of the carved wooden benches along the path, staring out over the Fitzgerald Mansion’s immaculate gardens. He didn’t usually get to sit here these days. Gia would have him or Sawyer standing by the koi pond while she posed for pictures, unconvincingly pretending she was comfortable and “living her best life.” *God, I hate that woman.* The fact that she shared the same genetic code as Zara had to be some cosmic curse.

Thinking of Zara, Dane finally smiled. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and checked the messages. *Nothing from her. Yet. Probably still asleep.*

“Checking your fucking messages? Wonders never cease,” Sawyer said from behind him. Dane turned, watching Sawyer’s unhurried approach.

“Just worried about the schedule this week.”

“Sure.” Sawyer wore a tight, forced smile, and when he sat down, he kept a peculiar amount of distance between them. Dane lifted an inquisitive brow and didn’t say anything, but he didn’t need to ask. Sawyer was shit about keeping anything from him. And sure enough, ten seconds later: “I’m sorry Brandon turned out to be a gutless piece of shit.” Sawyer reached into his jacket and drew out a pack of Camels. “Here. I owe you one.” He handed Dane a cigarette. “But at least he told us what we needed to know. And now he has to deal with Fitzgerald.”

Adam was likely to have even less mercy than Dane, but knowing Brandon’s fate didn’t warm Dane’s heart. “Can’t resurrect the dead.”

Sawyer lit the cigarette and held his lighter out. “Doesn’t mean Brandon shouldn’t pay. He dug his grave, and now we gotta deal with the bed he shit on. No matter how ugly it gets.”

Dane’s spine went rigid. “You’re doing that thing where you dance around the point.”

Sawyer’s smile vanished, and his light-gray eyes focused on the pond without giving the impression of seeing it. “How long we been working together?”

“Six years? Seven?” Dane shrugged. “Why? Getting nostalgic? ‘Cause if you bring up retirement—”

“Oh, fuck that. I’m trying to be...” He exhaled. “Fuck. I don’t know. We don’t talk about serious shit much.” Sawyer’s frown lines deepened. “Look, when you told me about, you know, last night? I was fucking thrilled for you. I know what that meant to you. What she means to you. But here’s the thing. The honest-to-God truth because if anybody knows it, it’s me—”

“You’re rambling.”

“Fine. She isn’t gonna stick around, Dane.” Sawyer sounded so damn earnest. Dane sighed, ready to blow Sawyer’s Mother Hen routine off, but Sawyer held up a hand.

“Not because she doesn’t want to. Not because she’s a bitch. But because she’s not gonna have a choice. So maybe, uh, I don’t know. Maybe you shouldn’t expect too much from her. That’s all I’m saying.”

Dane twisted the cigarette between his fingers, his jaw clenching to keep from saying the first words that came to mind. When he’d talked to Sawyer that morning, he was all chuckles and sunshine about it. Now, the tune changed, and it made zero fucking sense. *Unless...* “She isn’t Hannah.”

Sawyer snarled, ripping his barely smoked cigarette from his lips and tossing it onto the ground. “You’re right! Because Hannah *chose* someone else. She *chose* money over me, and it’s a good thing she did in the end. It let me see where I stood. But Zara? It ain’t a choice, Dane. Adam can’t afford to fuck around with the Russians and De Lucca. So how the hell do you think he will make peace with them?”

Dane dropped the cigarette into his pocket. Nicotine wasn’t gonna do shit to burn the bile out of his throat. “What have you heard?”

“That he’s already in talks to arrange a marriage between Zara and one of De Lucca’s boys. When I got here this morning, I stopped by the kitchens for a coffee, and that’s all they were talking about.”

No fucking way Adam does that without talking to Zara. Gia was the Fitzgerald to barter with. The known sum. The one people recognized and knew. And after all the bullshit with Ben, would Adam really toss either twin into a marriage of alliances?

Zara wouldn’t stand for it. He tried and failed to picture Zara accepting her father’s edict. She was the quiet one, sure, but she’d stood up for herself to go to school outside the approved list. She surely wouldn’t fight back less about her entire fucking future, would she? *And if she did stand for it, she would never have fucked me. And if... No. Stop.*

Dane licked the back of his teeth, his gaze not sharp enough to be a glare. Rumors were always flying about the twins and their fuck toys. Sawyer usually knew better than to believe them. But he couldn't blame Sawyer. Not after Sawyer spent a whole goddamn year climbing out of the bottle that losing Hannah spun him into.

"Until it's coming from Vince or Adam himself, I'd take it with a grain of salt."

Sawyer sniffed, his hands fastening to his hips. "Hey, man. You're a grown-ass human. When shit hits the fan, I'll even keep the 'I told you so' to myself."

Dane rolled his eyes. "How generous." With a frown, he looked toward the garden's exit. There was still a day or two before Zara went back to school. She'd tell him if there was even a hint of truth to any of that bullshit. *But it wasn't true. It couldn't be.*

ZARA

Chicago, Illinois, Later That Day

Something isn't right. Maybe it's my nerves? It's got to be. I should've taken something.

Waking up from a night of earth-shattering orgasms to an empty space on the bed really shook one's confidence for the day. Especially when the bed was someone else's.

He could have woken me. But he did leave a note. Which I didn't even find until I was looking for my bra. Dane could have just...

Zara shook her head to ward off the circular thoughts. It was ridiculous. Dane couldn't stop being a made man because he finally made her come. *So many times.* She shivered, biting back a smile that faded quickly as her gaze landed on Dane. He was busy scowling at all the traffic from the driver's seat, exuding an ominous silence. He'd barely said three words

since he picked her up. *We did talk last night. I think. Didn't we? Did the orgasms scramble my brain?*

But I'm not talking either, am I? Shit. Okay ... you can do this. You texted just fine. Speech isn't that much harder.

She turned the radio down and cleared her throat. "Thanks for driving. I didn't want to ask to borrow one of Dad's cars." Her own was still in Peoria because her father didn't like her driving back and forth by herself for the break.

Dane's lips moved in the barest upward tilt. A fraction of a fraction of a smile. His dark gaze slid across to meet hers, pinning her in place without a word. His shoulders relaxed, and he gave a short, single nod. "I don't mind," he said, his tone weary but relaxed. "I've only done it for half a decade, Z."

"Not quite. And that was work. This isn't, is it? Not really." Nobody even knew what they were driving around for. The last time they'd snuck off together under a pretext, she wasn't sure they had even hit puberty.

"I don't know." His attention switched back to the traffic. "Don't think I've ever met anyone who's more work than you are."

She didn't quite hold back a laugh. "Have you somehow blacked out Gianna's entire existence today?" He finally smiled.

"I guess I have a lot on my mind. Didn't have room for her."

"Uh-huh." Her eyes rolled. She knew all too well which twin people forgot—and it was never Gia. "So that means it was a good day, right?"

Dane's nose wrinkled. "Mostly."

That didn't sound convincing, but she knew better than to ask. "It might've been better if you'd started it by waking me up. I'd probably have been in a better mood at those stupid fittings too."

She'd woken up alone to a phone call reminding her she had an appointment across town. The scramble to get dressed—she'd borrowed one of Dane's t-shirts and worn it as a tunic so her stepmother wouldn't see the state of her dress—and to the dressmaker had been highly unpleasant. On the bright side, they'd gotten Zara's dresses put together for winter society nonsense—at least what nonsense was left these days. The family's invitations took a massive hit when Ben pissed off his ex-fiancée's family (and their many, many friends), proving all the snobs right: Fitzgeralds were rabid, psychopathic thugs.

"Trust me, Z," Dane began, checking the rearview mirror before switching to the right lane to take the exit. "If I'd woken you up that early, you would not have been in a better mood."

"I don't believe you."

He reached over and took her hand, gently bringing it up to his lips. "I promise I'll make it up to you."

"I hope so..." Her voice caught because the sudden buzz in her bloodstream didn't leave much room for things like breathing. Or thinking. If he'd pulled the car over right then she might've jumped the console.

"Do I ever let you down?" *Only once.* He released her hand, but she didn't pull back. She laid her palm on his leg, gratified to feel him tense beneath it. She didn't want to talk about the worst night of her life again.

"I don't think I've been to Schmitt's before." A family-run diner, it'd probably seen the Chicago Fire, but her father didn't frequent it, and Gia despised the smell of grease, so Zara hadn't really been in *any* diner until she got to college. Between ballet, chorus, debate team, volunteer work, and a half-dozen other activities, she'd barely had time to sleep until college, either. Now she only had classwork, any charity Cathy asked her to help with during breaks, and all the bar crawls she and her roommate's livers could handle.

“I figured. Less chance of interruptions this way. I don’t think anybody we know will be there.” He almost smiled again, and she nodded. He probably meant Gia and her other siblings. Ethan, Derek, and Hannah had flown back for his father’s funeral, but Hannah had already retreated east for some gala event with her husband. Luckily, her two oldest brothers’ presence distracted everyone enough to lighten surveillance on Zara and Gia. At least enough that nobody argued when Zara claimed a research paper emergency and told her father Dane said he’d take her to the library, so nobody else needed to be rearranged.

She squeezed his leg, and as he turned the car into a small parking lot, she trailed it slightly higher. His left hand dropped from the wheel, covering hers and pressing down to stop her explorations. Probably for the best. She meant it as a tease, but they’d be in trouble if he’d let her touch him where she wanted.

Dane eased the car into a parking space and shut off the engine. Then, slowly, he turned toward her. His lips drew hers like magnets. They met over the console, the kiss not nearly long enough to settle the boiling heat inside her. “Not here, sweetheart.”

“Why not? I can’t think of a place more romantic than this,” she joked. She waved vaguely toward the neon lights and rows of cars, pitted pavement, and sullen late afternoon skies.

“Just wait ‘til you see the 7-Eleven across the street. You’ll feel like a fucking Kardashian.” He unbuckled and opened the door. She followed suit, looking at him over the top of the black Mercedes AMG-GT, staring at her as though surprised. “Oh. I was ... never mind.”

“What?” Zara closed the door, a brown eyebrow stretching up to her hairline.

“Nothing.”

Right. Dane almost always opens the doors for us. But these aren't work hours, are they? She narrowed her gaze, about to press him about it when a piercing shriek echoed off the asphalt.

“Gia? Oh my God, it’s Gia!”

Oh, hell. Zara turned, smiling out of habit, already sliding into the default explanation. Being nearly identical twins had led to an entire lifetime of these interactions, even before Gia’s modeling and social media went viral. Zara’s own presence wasn’t invisible, thanks to that and the inevitable society page pics relating to her dating life. “Sorry, wrong twin,” she explained to the gasping teenage fashionistas rushing toward her.

“Crap!” The lead one—a tall redhead—blushed and caught her friend’s arm. “But then, you’re Zara, right? I follow you too.”

“I told you Gia posted about that weird Southie art installation thing today,” the friend grumbled. But she didn’t look too disappointed either. She pushed a dreadlock over her shoulder and fidgeted with the phone already in her hand. “You dated Rylan Buckley, right? God, I love his band. I saw them, like, five times last summer.”

“Yeah, Island is fun for sure,” Zara agreed, apologetically looking at Dane. She didn’t want him to put on his bodyguard face right now. Nor did she wish to talk about dating the lead singer of Island of Misfit Sex Toys. It was hardly her best relationship, and she’d mostly done it as an excuse to follow Rylan on tour.

“They had a pop-up at Burning Man,” Redhead gushed. “Did you get to go?”

“No. I, uh, figured he wouldn’t need his ex at a show.” Zara smiled, and the girls laughed. “Not that we’re bitter or anything. I just don’t want to throw him off his game. Especially at a festival. They’re his favorite gigs.”

“That’s, like, super chill of you. Can we get a selfie with you?” Dreadlocks asked.

“Yeah, of course. No problem.” Zara knew she agreed too readily but didn’t know what else to do. It would end up online, of course, but she could tell her dad they’d gone to a nearby museum or library. Chicago had plenty of history. There had to be something useful close by.

Redhead didn’t even ask Dane to take it. She pulled a retractable selfie stick from her purse and set up the shot with the kind of professional ease that made Zara cringe. *I got discovered by an actual influencer? Great.*

The girls took their leave with hugs and an exchange of account names, and she even promised to follow the redhead’s. Finally, they retreated into the night, leaving Zara shell-shocked and off-balance as she turned to Dane, who’d kept his own professional level of discretion through the whole interlude. “I’m, um, I’m so sorry. I never know what to do when that happens. I wish Gia would just, you know, step back on the social media.”

His jaw tensed, a sign that he’d just bitten back a nastier retort about her sister. Instead, he shrugged and held out his hand for her. She took it gratefully, and he led her toward the diner. Literally. He walked slightly ahead, not next to her. He kept his shoulders square, back rigid, and his eyes roved nonstop over the interior as they entered.

Can’t turn it off for even a second, can he? It’s not even a big place! The restaurant was tiny, crammed into its old storefront, having occupied a couple extra spaces inside over the decades and run up against its maximum space. Dane pointed to a table at the far side, well away from the windows and not too far from the kitchen’s side entrance. *Of course, he’s flagged all the doors. Of. Course.*

A cheerful waitress bopped over and took their orders, smiling extra hard at Dane. Zara didn’t blame her—Dane was a walking, talking problem. She found herself almost disappointed he didn’t flirt back. She could have faked some

jealousy and started a fight if he'd done that. Maybe he'd spit out what he was really snippy about. Unfortunately, he continued being tall, dark, and polite, so their burgers came, and they ate in relative silence. Not an unusual state, but far less comfortable than it had been twenty-four hours earlier. Whatever he was holding back, he was keeping tight to his chest. And Zara wasn't sure she wanted to know.

Before she could intervene, he'd signaled for the check. She offered to pay for her meal, but he either ignored her on purpose or genuinely didn't hear. *If this is how communicative he is on dates, no wonder his girlfriends always bail.* Zara kept a pleasant expression, despite her increasingly sulky feelings.

"You ready?" he asked, adjusting the collar of his black jacket, which was way too heavy for the muggy summer night and the diner's antique AC. She suspected he wore it out of habit, to hide a gun. Or three. "There's somewhere I want to take you."

Zara nodded, wishing the Coke she ordered had rum in it. Why hadn't they gone somewhere with a bar? Talking would be so much easier after a couple of shots. With a mai tai or two, she probably wouldn't even care if he said something awful, as long as he kissed her after. Regretting her sobriety, she stood and picked up her purse. "Does this somewhere serve drinks?"

"No." His warm hand found the small of her back, with just enough pressure to be reassuring. "But I'll make *that* up to you, too."

"You're building up one heck of a tab." The retort would've sounded more flippant if she hadn't met his eyes right then and her heart hadn't slammed against her ribs. Even with the weird, awkward vibe between them, she still wanted him. *Whoever invented pheromones can fuck right off.* Sighing, she followed him out, bracing for further electricity when he opened the car door and handed her in. Which was still irritatingly "bodyguard mode" of him, but also made her

think way too much about dragging him down into the seat with her. So what if he didn't fit? They'd figure it out.

He stayed quiet as he steered the car out of the lot and onto the city streets. Zara turned the music up to drown out her own inquisitive instincts. She'd probably just annoy him more if she kept asking about their destination.

The sun was already sinking when Dane pulled the car into a narrow slit of parking spots nestled against a dimly lit wooded area with a dumpster to the right and a relatively well-kept public restroom to the left. Zara squinted at the sign on the iron fence.

“A walking trail? Really, Dane?”

“It's not far.”

“That's not the point. I'm not wearing the right shoes!”

Dane chuckled. “I could give you a piggyback ride.”

Zara glanced theatrically down at her ballet flats. “Laugh now, but you might have to actually do that. I'm not walking barefoot in a random park.”

“You weigh seven pounds. I think I'll survive.”

“A hundred and twenty,” she muttered. She'd gained a little once she abandoned ballet for anything beyond workouts. Dane only rolled his eyes and got out of the car, pocketing the keys as he waited for her. The breeze picked up enough to displace his previously well-combed hair, black strands falling in front of his likewise dark eyes. Anybody sane would run like the wind if Dane “The Butcher” Ryan invited them for a walk in the woods. She knew that, but her racing heartbeat wasn't from fear.

She didn't hide the sulk as she straightened her blue sundress and checked her hair in the passenger mirror. She rifled through her purse for a scrunchie and urged her hair into a messy bun before smiling at Dane and joining him on the curb. “You really should have said to wear tennis shoes. And

maybe jeans, too. If I get poison ivy everywhere, I'm blaming you. Forever."

He took her hand, threading his fingers through hers, the amusement in his eyes growing. "Trust me, Z. You're dressed perfectly."

"You're pretty when you lie."

They followed the trail a few minutes before he nudged her off the manicured path, between massive old-growth trunks and tangled roots, their passage apparently unnoticed by the evening bird and bug and whatever other songs racketing around them. True to his word, Dane did help her over the roots and uneven ground, careful of her dress the whole time and laughing when she reminded him of when he'd damn near ripped one off her with a limo door.

"You knew you were driving everyone insane in that goddamn thing."

"If it helps, I wore it for your benefit."

Dane's eyes darkened. "Mission accomplished, Z. Ten more minutes of watching you in that outfit would've gotten me fired. And beat to hell."

"You should've said something."

"You weren't talking to me, remember?"

"I might've talked if you'd tried doing that thing with your tongue—"

"Zara." He chuckled. "Come on, before I forget where we're going."

A few turns of the not-quite-a-path later, they reached a small pond filled with a family of ducks settling for the night. The trail lights didn't entirely extend into the tiny clearing, and the orange hues of the descending sun were fading fast. Still, she could see there were long, weathered stones spaced around the pond, perfect for sitting, and the August heat hadn't killed the grass.

“This is beautiful. How’d you even find it?” She had only the vaguest idea where they were. If she’d ever been to this park, she’d never come by this entrance or gone this far off the paths.

“My dad.” He let go of her hand to crouch by the pond’s edge, looking over the water’s calm surface. “He used to bring me here every Sunday when his schedule allowed. Forced me to meditate. I fucking hated it. Until I didn’t.” A faint shrug lifted his shoulders. “Guess it was his version of going to church.”

“I like it a lot more than St. Patrick’s,” Zara said softly, following him toward the water. “Don’t tell Father Brown.”

“He’s still alive?” Dane snickered. “I have a feeling if that old bastard saw me again, he’d excommunicate me on the spot.”

Zara settled onto the nearest stone seat, kicking her legs out. As usual, it was built for someone taller than her. “Don’t worry. Gia’s higher on his priority list than you.”

His head snapped toward her. “Why do you do that?” He rose, slowly moving to stand in front of her. “Why do you always bring her up?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” She stared at him, completely baffled. “She’s my twin. And it’s not like I can talk about all my school friends. You don’t know them.”

He rolled his eyes. “I don’t think we’ve ever had a single conversation where you didn’t bring her up. Sharing a womb and a room doesn’t make her your other goddamn half.”

No, that was the DNA. And everything else. She stared across the pond, fixing her eyes on a particularly twisted tree silhouetted in the fading light. How did he not understand? After everything. All the years watching her and Gia? Knowing the secrets... “Because I wouldn’t be me without her. And even when we hate each other, we know that. I know you can’t stand her, D. But she’s always there.”

“I do hate her. Do you want to know why?” If he expected her to answer, he certainly didn’t give her the time. “Because she *isn’t* always there, Z.”

“She is.” Zara couldn’t understand Dane’s vehemence.

“Not for *you*. She’s there for herself.”

I’m sure it looks that way. She opened her mouth to explain and stopped. How the hell could she coalesce all the layers of guilt and heartache and love and resentment into words? Not to mention the fact she also knew perfectly well she hid behind Gia. She always had.

It wasn’t about Gia wanting the spotlight all the time—her twin loved it, but it was more habit than interest at this point. And then there were the times when Gia was Zara and vice versa. Most people couldn’t tell the difference, and if Zara put on brown contacts, the list of people who’d figure it out fell to Dane, Dad, and Mrs. Mac. She didn’t really want Dane to know about that little magic act, either. And anyway, the more Zara tried explaining Gia to Dane, she made things worse. It had always been that way. *I guess four years sparring with her on guard duty didn’t help, either.*

“Fuck.” He abandoned the pond to kneel before her, his hands going to her knees. “I didn’t mean...” He looked up at her, his gaze locking with hers. “I’m sorry, Z. I didn’t think.”

“It’s okay. It’s complicated. I know you’ve probably been holding a few sharp remarks over the eons.” She met his eyes, trying not to think too hard about his warm, rough palms and how they would feel if they moved upward just a few inches.

“A few thousand, maybe.”

“You know, I think I even missed arguing with you,” she said with a soft laugh. “It’s been four years of staying polite. We’re bound to have some awkward conversations come due.”

“I think I’d have missed arguing if I managed to win more often.” His hands moved up her legs as if he’d read her

mind. “Even when I’m right, I still lose. How do you do that?”

“No idea.” She touched his hair, sliding her fingers through the soft, dark strands. “If it helps, I don’t think I won either. Let’s call it a tie.”

Dane’s brows rose. “If nobody won, how can we kiss and make up?”

“Like this.” She closed the distance between them. He didn’t move until their lips touched. Zara ran her hands over his broad shoulders, tracking the strap of his holster, the seams of his jacket, and wishing it would all evaporate.

His fingers curled around her legs, hooking behind her knees to drag her closer. Her sundress was long enough to keep her skin from scraping on the stone, but he pushed it higher once he got her on the edge. She moaned into his mouth when he ground against her. “Something like this. Maybe more...” His hands roamed higher, his fingers teased the edge of her panties. Zara trembled, biting her lip to keep from crying out when a single finger stroked the center of the damp silk.

“Dane, are you seriously... here?” Zara kept her fingers busy tracing his shirt collar and threading his hair. She might forget herself and reach for his belt if she didn’t.

“I know this doesn’t have the allure of a diner or drive-thru.” He stroked her again, then withdrew his hand, leaning forward to kiss her lips softly. “I can stop if you want.”

“I don’t ever want you to stop. I just also don’t want to get arrested.” She reached down to keep his hand where it was.

“You think I’d let that happen?”

Zara giggled, as much from amusement as nerves, but she tilted her hips to move her body against his stilled hand. “Okay. I don’t want my orgasm to lead to multiple homicides?”

“Multiple, huh?”

“You know what I mean.”

“Mm. I do.” His fingers returned to life, pushing her panties to one side as he laid a slow line of kisses down her shoulder. “If you saw yourself orgasm, Z, you’d know it’d be worth taking a few lives.” His finger circled her opening, the silk no longer a barrier between them. “I don’t think it’ll come to that. Not if you can stay quiet.”

The heat on her cheeks flared. This time she did squirm against Dane’s teasing, though still not pulling away. “What if I can’t...?”

“Then we watch the sun finish setting. Go back to the car. I’ll take you home. You write that paper you lied about.” He chuckled, flicking her clit, making her jump and bite back a yelp. “Or we can find something to keep your mouth busy.”

Bastard. This was the problem with playing with someone who knew you—he knew exactly which images popped into her head, and they were all about his damn dick. Zara leaned into him, sighing against his throat as his thumb did some explosive magic trick with her clit. “Now who’s winning arguments?” Finally, she gave in and reached for his belt.

“No.” He jerked his hips back, leaving her baffled for a split-second before thrusting his long finger inside her. “You first, Zara.”

That order earned a whimper and a full-body shiver. “O-okay...” Zara kept her gaze locked on Dane’s face, like she would in any tense moment, though this was admittedly a lot more fun. His hard jaw, dark stubble framing sinfully soft lips ... she caught his shoulder to steady herself as her body rocked under his touch. It didn’t take long.

“That’s it, baby girl,” he whispered. He timed the encouragement with faster movements before he captured her lips to swallow the sound she didn’t catch.

Dane was terrifyingly good with his hands, and those long, clever fingers found every tingling nerve ending,

ratcheting up the tension inside her. His thumb circled her clit—lighter, then rougher to push her higher, varying his pattern to tease her to the edge. Zara clenched her jaw, covered her mouth in one hand, and collapsed into Dane's chest. For all her good intentions, she couldn't quite stop the soft, desperate moans she tried to hide with his jacket. "Please, Dane..."

"Shh. I've got you. Give it to me, Z."

The orgasm washed over her, leaving her shaky, breathless, and so very wet. "Dane, s-stop, I can't ... one more of that and ... I'll be screaming."

He rocked back on his heels, pulling his hand away. The last dregs of sunlight allowed Zara to see the playful grin on his face just as he lifted his slick fingers to his mouth, licking them as his eyes fixed on hers. Her body warmed again—she knew exactly what that tongue could do. "Come here." His other hand wrapped gently around her wrist, pulling her to the grass with him. He guided her palm to cover the bulge at the front of his pants, his breath hitching when she squeezed him instinctively.

"Mm. You really are hot when you're bossy." The attitude generally pissed her off and had ended more than a few intimate encounters. With Dane, she didn't have to worry he'd get too wrapped up in the role or cause pain he didn't intend.

Zara worked his zipper down, freeing his erection to the open air for barely a second before she went down on him. They'd ended up splayed on the grass, mostly hidden from the path by the stone bench and the angle of the hills, but she imagined how they would look on camera and promptly brought her legs closer together to fend off a throb of arousal. Not helped by the thick cock in her mouth and most of her airway.

Right. Concentrate. This is going to require focus. She wrapped a hand around the inches that wouldn't fit into her throat—now was not the moment to get brave about attempting deep-throat hijinks—and started working Dane's

cock with fingers, tongue, and lips, trying to keep her teeth as polite as possible. *Jesus, now would be an excellent time to have a trick jaw...*

“Zara...” She felt his hand settle on the back of her head, his fingers pressing against her scalp as they curled in her hair, gripping without pulling. He wobbled, catching himself on the stone bench, but it wasn’t enough to throw off her rhythm. He made the sweetest, softest moaning sounds, and she kept trying to get more of them, licking and sucking even as her jaw began aching. She also wondered what it would take to get him to lose control. To scream for her. “Gonna cum, sweetheart. I—”

“Mmm.” She’d guessed as much but didn’t care. She turned her eyes upward to see his tense, desperate features before pushing her mouth ever so slightly further down his shaft until the tip hit the back of her throat. Not enough to gag, but a silent statement of intent. He cursed—or made noises that sounded like they were meant to be curses—and his broad hand already tangled in her hair tightened. His hips rose, and she felt the telltale pulse at the base. She squeezed him, sucking harder until his cum jetted into her throat.

“Fucking perfect, Z. Fucking ... yes...”

She swallowed quickly, moaning approval while he whispered her name and a half-coherent string of praises. With everything finished, Zara released him and raised her head to check his mood.

His eyes were closed, and his lips parted as he took a deep breath. His chest heaved, and he ran a shaky hand through his hair, pushing the wayward strands out of his face, off his sweat-dampened forehead. Then, after a few more breaths, he opened his eyes, and even in the barest of lights, they still managed to twinkle with something. Pleasure? Delight? She hoped so.

“That, uh, wasn’t how I saw that going,” he admitted breathlessly. “But your idea was better.”

“Was it?” She beamed, relaxing with the praise. He wasn’t likely to say something to make her feel better.

“Christ, Z. I just...” Their eyes met, and his expression softened. “Yeah.”

“I figured it was time to return the favor, that’s all. I’m, um, glad it wasn’t terrible. You’re, you know, a little oversized.”

“Am I?” His hands caught her arms, drawing her close.

“Don’t fake modesty now, babe. It’s like fifteen years too late.” She set her cheek on his chest, listening to his heartbeat as it evened out.

“I should get you back to the car. We stay out here much longer, and I’ll have you on your back. Then Sawyer really will have to bail us out in the morning.”

“There’s the swagger.” Zara sniffed disdainfully while Dane grinned.

“You know I’m right.”

“Hm.” *But he is right as hell. Dammit.* “It wouldn’t be so bad if he wouldn’t tell Vince. And Dad was safely vacationing in, uh, Nepal. That might be far enough.” His answering laugh sounded deeper with her head against his chest, and she clung to him, watching the fading light beyond the trees. Why did this feel so good? Almost better than orgasms.

“Saw wouldn’t say shit.” His lips touched her hair. “But with your dad this far west of the Himalayas, it’s best not to risk it.”

He steadied her as they got to their feet. She busied herself with straightening her dress and wiping the worst of the dirt from her knees, listening to the rustle of his pants as he adjusted them and fastened his belt, tucking his shirt in. If she watched him get dressed, she’d just want to undo all his work.

Without saying anything, he held his hand out for her, and she took it without hesitation, letting him help her back to

the car. She managed not to dissolve into a puddle of goo when his fingers slid through hers.

Zara settled into the leather seat, watching the streetlights drift past as Dane took her home. They had so much still to talk about, but she just wanted to feel his hand steady on hers. *We'll figure it out later. We're together now. It'll be okay.*

Chapter Three

DANE

Chicago, Illinois, August 27

“Boss will see you now.”

Dane nodded at the announcement from the head of security, turning away from the bookshelf he’d been pretending to browse. As if he hadn’t had time to memorize most of the Fitzgeralds’ library catalog. “Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me yet. I’m not sending you in with a flak jacket,” Vince grumbled.

“I’ll be fine.” *Probably.* Dane spent half his life getting called into the boss’s office. As a kid, it was always with Ben standing beside him and Adam and Michael behind the desk playing their own good-boss, bad-enforcer game. That changed in his late teens. As a new recruit, Vince gave him his assignments at the door—or any other convenient location in the city—and sent him on his way. These days, he was back to being an office guest so Adam could brief him directly. Dane took it as a good sign. One day he might take his father’s place beside whichever Fitzgerald assumed Adam’s.

Please let it be a job today. Don’t let this be about Dad.

He didn’t want to process it anymore. If he willed himself to forget Michael was *dead*, he could almost convince himself it was one more long, out-of-town contract. Dane wasn’t sure he was up to facing it more directly than that.

He heard Vince close the door behind him, so he stopped in the center of the room, waiting for Adam to say something. The older man sat at a massive, gleaming wood desk that might’ve come from some old country villa. Fresh air flitted through the tall, open windows, stirring the filmy silk curtains. Adam closed the green folder he’d been flipping through and turned in his high-backed leather chair to face Dane fully.

“Drink, son?”

Dane followed Adam’s gesture to the crystal decanter at the far side of the room, then slowly shook his head. “No, thank you, sir.”

Adam tapped the chair arm before sitting up and adjusting his dark-gray coat. “Then have a seat.”

Dane unbuttoned his suit jacket as he obeyed, sitting in one of the smaller chairs opposite Adam’s desk. “Is this about Brandon?”

“No.” He pushed a folder across the polished wooden expanse. “I’ve got something else that needs your attention.”

Thank fuck. Not Dad.

He reached for the folder and flipped it open. His eyes narrowed on the photograph staring back at him. Familiar cruel eyes, and a wide, cold smile. *Never mind. Maybe I’d rather talk about Dad...* “I don’t understand,” Dane said, meeting Adam’s penetrating gaze, the same color as the one in the photo. “You’re putting me on Ben?” He already knew after an early release from prison, the wayward Fitzgerald sociopath slithered right back to his old tricks. Dane had gotten several invitations to join the shitshow. He’d ignored them all.

“I don’t want you to kill him. Not yet, anyway.” Adam reached for his whiskey, taking a generous sip.

“Then what do you want me to do with him?”

“Watch him. I hesitated to assign this to you, given your history. But ultimately, it makes you ideal. You didn’t burn the bridge. He’ll believe it if you tell him you’re there because you want to be. You can say it’s about your dad, or some general bullshit. He’ll buy it.”

“If he’s really running in the same circles, he knows what I’ve been doing for you since he left.” Dane turned the page to skim over the next. *Yep. Same circles. Drew fucking Duro? And that Albanian fuckface too? Jesus. Ben’s the only asshole to come out of prison with no new tricks.* “So, I

convince him I've turned on you." He sighed because Adam had to know what a batshit insane concept this was. "And if he doesn't buy the act?"

"You'll make him."

"Why now?" Dane sat back, his jaw tense. The boss lounged in his massive chair, cool and relaxed as ever. "Why not after his last mess with the Davis girl?" Ben nearly killing his fiancée had cost the Fitzgerald family a fortune in society acceptance and capital, and he'd come out of prison and gone right back on his bullshit.

Adam's eyes narrowed. "Ben's been poking hornet nests since his release. He's forcing me to react to the swarms. So, I am." He cleared his throat and stood up, grabbing his glass as he rounded the desk and crossed to the bar. "I understand you may be reluctant. You were his friend, after all. Maybe you still are."

"That was a long time ago, sir." Dane watched his boss drop ice into a second snifter.

"The thing is, Ben won't trust anyone else. Let alone a stranger."

"Unless he's figured out the exact reason he got banished. And who you heard it from."

"No one knows that but you, me, and the twins. Gia asked me not to talk to the others about it, and I didn't want to push her." Adam sighed, opening the crystal decanter and pouring a measure into both glasses. "This has to happen, kid. He's fucked around with people he shouldn't have. And he's not the one who's paid for it. So far." He came back, setting the new glass in front of Dane before leaning against the desk and raising his own. "This is the only path left."

Dane dug his nails into his palm, turning his head to stare out the window. "All this bullshit with the Bratva really tracks back to Ben's bullshit temper-tantrum. That's what you mean, isn't it?" Adam's silence was answer enough. "*Dad* would—"

“Let’s just say we all wouldn’t have as many targets on our heads if Ben was still locked up.”

The muscles in Dane’s arms tightened. “But I can’t kill him?”

Adam’s lip quirked. “Not until I know just how many hornets are buzzing. It isn’t just the Bratva and Lobos. Ben’s fucked with the Storm Crows, too.”

The Russian mob, a major cartel, and the scariest biker gang in the Midwest? Jesus, Benny. You always liked playing with fire. Dane whistled. “This is sounding as desperate as it is annoying. Ben’s grasping at Big Bads to see who makes the biggest explosion.”

“Something like that. My guess? He thinks his best chance at building something comes from chaos.”

“He’s not altogether wrong about that, is he?” Dane took a drink.

“Mm.” Adam grimaced. “And I suspect the Crows and the Lobos might be making a truce, which Ben’s obviously not fucking considered. I do not need that alliance declaring war on us...” He trailed off, which didn’t happen much. Forehead creasing, Adam rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Which means making some allies of our own. And that hasn’t come cheap.”

“What do you mean?” Dane knew he’d regret asking.

“De Lucca.”

Fuck! Sawyer’s words replayed in his head. *This ... no, this isn’t the fucking 1800s. Adam wouldn’t do that to Zara.* “I assume since the house isn’t on fire, you haven’t told Gia yet?”

Adam chuckled, but the humor didn’t reach his eyes. He was somber as a funeral. “If I send Gia, De Lucca’s gonna take it as an act of war, and we all know it. Hannah’s married, De Lucca doesn’t have any granddaughters, and none of his grandsons are gay enough to marry Caleb, I suspect. Which leaves one option.” *Don’t say it. Please don’t say it.* He rubbed

his temple again. “Christ, I wish I could trust Gia. But only one of the twins has the temperament to build alliances instead of nuking them from orbit.” A long, exhausted sigh escaped Adam while Dane’s heart plummeted to earth.

I knew I should have killed him. Why the fuck didn’t I? If he’d put a bullet between Ben’s eyes four years ago, this wouldn’t have happened. Dad wouldn’t be dead. Zara would be with me. It wasn’t a mistake he’d make twice. He took a deep breath, his eyes not meeting Adam’s. “When do I leave?”

“Tomorrow. But there’s another sticking point you need to be aware of.” *Of fucking course.* Adam drew a set of paper plane tickets and a pile of cash from a desk drawer—they always cut electronic footprints where they could— and pushed them toward Dane, with another photograph tucked into the band on the cash.

“Boss?” Dane leaned forward to examine the picture closer. “Are you sending Ethan with me?” He tilted his head. *Wait. When the fuck did Ethan get tattoos? Two whole fucking sleeves of them?*

Adam’s smile was genuine this time. “Common mistake. That’s not Ethan.”

“You sure?”

The boss chuckled. “It’s Ryan. Your father’s godson and my, ah, eldest. It’s a long story, but he’s in the Storm Crows’ motherhouse, or whatever they call it. And he’s in Kansas City, too, hunting Ben.”

“Well, shit.” Dane didn’t know how else he could have responded. He thought back over his entire life, and came up blank for any passing remark about his dad having a godson. Let alone a Fitzgerald one. “Dad never mentioned him.”

“Ryan’s mother is not a fan of our family.”

“Ah. Does, uh, Ryan know he’s hunting his little brother?”

“No,” Adam answered quickly. “And I prefer he not find out unless absolutely necessary. His mother didn’t want me involved with Ryan or his sister, and I kept my distance.”

“She afraid he’s going to fall in with the wrong crowd? Because I got some bad news for her about the Storm Crows.”

“She considers us the worst option.”

“That’s a fucking joke, right?” Dane couldn’t keep the disbelief off his face.

Adam shrugged. “The devil you know, Dane. She’s from down South, their home territory. We’re the wicked Chicago bogeymen.”

Dane shrugged. “Okay. That’s fair.”

“Is it?” Adam’s electric blue eyes rolled skyward. “I mostly call it annoying as hell. But that’s an old fight. And it goes without saying I don’t want Ryan hurt. I’m already losing one son in this godforsaken disaster. If it’s possible, steer Ben clear of him.”

Would be easier if somebody told their kids the truth. Dane caught himself before saying it. He liked being alive. Not that Ryan was still a kid if he was Adam’s eldest—that put him over Ethan, who was almost thirty—and he was running point for an outlaw club’s board of directors. *Damn. One more piece of homework.* He’d need a proper dossier on the guy’s current movements. That meant calling his contacts before he walked into an unknown shitshow. “I’ll keep an eye on him, Boss. Nobody will touch him.”

“With a Crow patch on his back, I doubt that.” Adam’s smile held a sardonic edge. “But maimed is better than dead.” He paused, picking up another piece of paper and glancing over its contents before refocusing on Dane. “That same caution goes for you too, kid. I know I’m being a fucking bastard with this.”

“Like you said. He’s forced your hand.” Dane wouldn’t go as far as to say it wasn’t Adam’s fault. They’d both played a role in Ben’s madness. The whole collective Family had

fucked up by not dropping Ben to the bottom of the lake years ago.

“I’m putting Sawyer on call—if you need backup or figure out your emotions are too deep with this, you get a one-time exit. No harm, no foul. If I had anybody else Ben wouldn’t gut on sight, I wouldn’t send you. But whatever shit he’s stirring, Ben’s running a silent ship to do it. We need eyes on him. Fast.”

“If I need backup, it won’t be for my emotions. And Duro...” Dane clicked his tongue and straightened his shoulders. “I’ve never failed to finish a job.”

“True.” Adam nodded. “I won’t keep you. There’s a hell of a lot to get done and no time to lose.”

Dane gathered up the papers and cash. Adam tossed him a nondescript black bag for them. “I’ll be gone in a couple days. I’ll need to butter the bread and make sure my exit here gets back to Ben the right way.”

“I trust you.” Adam spread his weathered hands, sighing. “Try to have some fun, will you? You look almost worse than me.”

Dane smirked. “If the Mississippi turns red, you’ll know I really let loose, Boss.”

“Good man.” Adam’s chuckle followed him out the door.

Dane waved to Vince on his way by, not stopping until he reached sunlight. He turned, staring at the mansion’s familiar, ridiculously ornate facade, his eyes catching on a particular window. But it was dark, the curtains drawn. *She’s already gone.* He hefted the bag and headed for his Mercedes GT.

Peoria, Illinois, Later That Day

“You finally got Hot Bodyguard to notice you? And you do it when I can’t even witness the morning-after meltdown in person?” Brenna all but tackled her at the front door of their house, laughing at Zara’s wincing deflection.

“There wasn’t much of a meltdown.” The ride down had been relaxing, mostly because she’d spent the three hours catching up on Netflix dramas. Since Dad demanded her presence over breaks, he had the courtesy to provide transportation. She’d been so wrapped up in making sure all her bags made it to the porch she’d been stupidly unprepared to get accosted at the front door.

“Lying hussy.” Brenna seized her arm. “Come on.”

Zara half-turned back, but her father’s driver was already hightailing it down the street. “The bags.”

“Fine. Wouldn’t want to risk whatever Balenciaga bullshit your stepmom weighed you down with this time, huh?” Brenna let go, grabbing two bags while Zara wheeled the remaining two. Her roommate’s bright-green eyes danced as lightly as her dainty feet along the house’s hardwood flooring.

Living with Brenna was like sharing a tree with a manic, often tipsy Tinkerbell. Except instead of pixie dust, Brenna trailed paint chips and clay. Zara tried not to feel a stab of envy when she saw Brenna’s latest ruined sweatshirt piled in a corner by the hamper at the end of the hall. She’d wanted to study fashion and design at the School of Art in Chicago. Instead, here she was, a disinterested marketing major with a studio art minor, dreaming away semesters in Peoria because her father didn’t want her further from home. She might’ve been allowed for an Ivy League placement, like Ethan or Derek, but she’d never had those grades and wasn’t sharp enough in ballet to go pro. *One more boring, disappointing middle child in a family full of them.* The thought weighed her steps down, so she focused on Brenna’s questions.

“Also, he’s security. Not like my personal guard or something,” Zara muttered, but it was impossible not to join the laughter. Brenna dragged her toward the kitchen-slash-living room of the open-concept house a Fitzgerald-picked realtor chose for Zara freshman year.

“Security that follows you around bars. What’s that if not a bodyguard?”

“Dad’s paranoia personified?”

“Whatever he is, you’ve been drooling over him since I met you.” Brenna smirked. “And don’t look at me like I haven’t heard those tequila-soaked confessions about all the things you wanted him to do to you. Which I admit, after seeing him in person, I fully sympathize with. In fact, you might have been a little unimaginative because if someone with those lips got me in bed—”

“Stop!” Zara held up her own unremarkable hands. “I surrender. Let me make a drink, and then I’ll tell you everything.”

“So, he didn’t disappoint?” Brenna hopped onto a seat at the breakfast bar. “I just opened the wine in the fridge if you want some. It’s sweet.”

“That works.” Zara grabbed a glass, and Brenna slid her own across the counter for a refill. “Anyway, he was amazing. Perfect? I need a thesaurus because he destroyed most of my brain cells. I’m gonna be relearning English all week.”

“Just in time to go home and fuck your brains out again?” Brenna sighed, leaning her head on her arm. “Does he have any friends with similar skill sets?”

“Sawyer, probably.” Zara breezed around the bar and into the living area so she could flop down on the worn, oversized Craigslist couch. Brenna didn’t believe in casual consumption, and Zara liked not asking Dad for furniture money. She traced a flaw in the upholstery, picturing one of the scars on Dane’s right side. “Hannah snuck around with him

for two years. Maybe longer. He must've been doing *something* right.”

“What?” Brenna hopped off the stool and bounced over the sofa, landing next to Zara. “Miss Perfect herself? the Immortal Paragon? *Hannah Fitzgerald* was getting down pre-marriage? And you didn't sell that shit to the tabloids?”

“Sometimes it's more fun to gloat than win.”

Brenna frowned. “How'd you even find out? She had to be doing that shit so far undercover...”

Zara shrugged. “She probably thinks we didn't notice, but Gia is queen of details, and Hannah kept borrowing our clothes. We figured we had a right to find out why.” Plus, they both loved any excuse to sneak out of the house, and getting busted for going MIA was even sweeter when you came back with dirt on your insufferably perfect sibling.

They'd filed their proof away for a rainy day, but before they needed it, Hannah broke off the relationship. She'd quietly told the family's head of Security she didn't want Sawyer as an escort anymore, and that was that. It hadn't taken long to figure out why: Hannah angled a date with Karl van der Linde, the up-and-coming Washington power player (and son of a stock market legend). Now it was all Hamptons holidays and private islands in-between her celebrated piano concerts. *Oh, to be the most perfect society heiress Chicago had seen since the Gilded Age, instead of a matched set of scandalous little sisters...* They'd never managed to follow through on using their blackmail. After taking so many hits from Hannah's bruising perfection, it felt wrong to weaponize it against Sawyer. No matter how much he pissed off Gia.

“Does your dad know his daughters are bangin' the help on the regular?” Brenna giggled, but Zara's amusement faded.

“It-it's not like that. Hannah just...” She paused, taking a moment to get the explanation in line. It was always hard to explain anything about her older sister without throwing in a frustrated insult or ten. “Anybody she dated, she snuck around

with. She didn't want to end up in the papers like Gia and me do."

"Hm. But she didn't marry Hot Security Sawyer, did she?" Brenna raised a brow before her eyes focused on Zara. "Oh, shit. Sweetie, I'm not commenting on you and Dane. Just on the materialistic bitch sister. Cause you're not sneaking, are you?" She coughed. "You already told your dad about this, right?"

"I didn't plan on it happening this week! Or ever. His dad just died! And I went over because Mrs. Mac was sending an army's worth of food and—"

"Things happened," Brenna finished. "That's normal. I hooked up with my ex when my dad died."

"But you're right." Zara downed the entire glass of wine in one go and got up to refill. "Oh my God, I'm just like Hannah. He had a weak moment, and I pounced. And now I'm in danger of screwing up his job, his life..."

"Hey!" Brenna stopped her with a hug. "You are *not* like her. Do you think she even considered the fallout of dating an employee? And she probably didn't start on a weird grief-fucked-up altered state. You are not Hannah!"

"But I really could be. I just let things slide under the radar and let Dad sort everything out and..." Zara trailed off and hugged Brenna back. "I need to call Gia."

"What's she going to do? Initiate a threesome?" Brenna gestured to the wine. "Did you have something stronger than that on your way here?"

"She's better at handling Dad. If there's some way to talk to him and not have him get pissed off at Dane—"

"So, you're gonna take him on? Adam Fitzgerald, uncrowned king of Chicago?" Brenna's animated features smoothed into something far more serious. "You better talk to Dane before that. You know, in case..."

"In case what?"

Brenna led her back to the sofa. “Okay, I need you to sit down. Clearly, that boy did one hell of a brain-spin on you. Here, let me get you that refill.”

“In case what? Brenna!” Zara stared blankly, her already riled stomach clenching unpleasantly. Brenna didn’t answer until she returned with the promised glass of wine, her own, and the bottle. She put it on the coffee table and settled beside Zara.

“Your messages and our little voice chat didn’t actually say anything about him talking future, Z.” She said it in the voice a nanny would’ve used to tell them the dog died. “Did you guys say anything else to one another about where this was going? Besides back to the handiest horizontal surface.”

“I...” The words died on her lips. She remembered every second of the night together. They ate chocolate cake from the fridge after, then more kisses. So many kisses. They went to sleep, she woke up, and he was gone. Then everything ran nonstop with summer wardrobe fittings, their clandestine date, and everything else. No future talk, though. “I said I’d see him this weekend? H-he said he’d miss me?” It sounded lame even to her.

“Has he texted?”

“Not really. But he doesn’t.”

“Yeah, well, he never had sex with you before either, so don’t use previous behavior as holy writ.” Brenna squeezed Zara’s hand. Zara downed another glass of wine.

“Should I call him?”

“Probably. At least before you make any life-rearranging moves.”

Zara slumped against the couch. “Can we go back to the part where I had awesome sex, and I don’t ever want to have sex with anyone else, and I can pretend he felt that same thing, and nothing else matters?”

“Oh, hell, yes.” Brenna popped up and scampered back with a plate of chocolate chip cookies. She plonked them down by the wine bottle. “You know we always celebrate excellent sex in this household, Miss! Everything else is incidental.”

Zara bit her lip and nodded. She checked her phone and fired off a quick text to Dane.

Zara: Miss you tons. Can't wait for this weekend.

There. That wasn't too much pressure. She didn't even add emojis. Not that much sappier than anything she would've sent to anyone else. *Maybe?* Maybe she shouldn't have sent it. Maybe she could blame the wine if he asked what the hell she was doing? *Or just talk to him...*

“Brenna, I'm skipping class tomorrow.” She announced the decision after the fourth glass of wine.

“Gonna try catching him in person?” Brenna bit into a cookie. “I mean, worst case scenario, you get an orgasm on a Monday, right?”

“Right.” Dane had gotten her through senior prom meltdowns, dodgy Southside clubs, drive-by shootings, and bad boyfriends. Talking about whatever was going on between them couldn't be much weirder than anything else in their shared history.

Could it?

ZARA

Chicago, Illinois, August 28

Zara didn't bother with excuses to her professors. What could they do? Flunk her? She didn't really care. She might later, she supposed. If she and Dane did run off for some reason, she'd probably have to rely on a good GPA and friends posing as bosses to get a job. She realized she had no idea about Dane's finances or legal employment history beyond working for her dad as a guard and driver. *Might have to make*

up some references for him too. Frantic planning against imaginary what-ifs kept her from turning her car around and hiding back in Peoria.

Almost three hours later, she reached Dane's building with a half-decent marketing pitch for their lives together somewhere far, far away. Australia? France? Indonesia? Wherever. As long as he wanted to go. That part she didn't really want to think about. She managed to not-think about it all the way into the building, where a nice, older lady held the door open for her, chattering about forgetting her keys all the time. It was close to noon, and she figured with working late hours, Dane was probably just getting up.

Her ability to not think sputtered out in the elevator, two floors shy of his level. He'd know she was here if he checked the cameras. It was too late to go back.

God, what if he's with another girl? The thoughts spun in stifling circles around her skull as she exited the elevator and started down the hall. *It's fine. He'll just tell me to get lost and ... yeah, it'll be over. It's fine.*

Zara's hand wouldn't make contact with his door. She tried to grab the handle twice, but the image of him with some unknown girl kept shorting out her brain. Finally, she breathed and pulled her phone out of her purse. And hit his number. The phone rang twice. She could hear his ringtone on the other side of the door, so he was definitely home. Maybe this would've been easier in the parking lot. What if she heard a female voice in there too?

What if? The phone picked up.

"Hey." She swallowed. "Um. What are you doing?"

"Getting dressed. Is everything all right?"

"Well, why don't you skip getting dressed? And open the door."

She heard a sudden shuffling and a thud. "Shit, Zara, what are you doing here?" But before she could answer, the door swung, and he was standing in front of her wearing black

jeans, a thin leather belt, a dark undershirt, and nothing else. Zara's mouth went dry.

“Um.” Very eloquent. He's bound to throw away his whole life for someone so erudite.

Slipping his phone into his pocket, he caught her shoulder with his other hand. “Jesus, you're pale as hell. Are you okay?” He urged her over the threshold and into his arms.

“I told you I couldn't wait for the weekend.” Zara relaxed for the first time since she'd woken up and pressed her face against his chest, breathing in the scents of soap and aftershave. Why did he always smell so good, no matter what fragrance he picked? “You don't mind, do you? I needed to see you.”

“Of course not. I just wasn't expecting you.” His lips brushed the top of her head. “How did you get here? Did you drive? Shit. You shouldn't—”

“It's not that long a drive. Three hours max, if the traffic sucks.” Going up on her toes, she kissed his jaw, ignoring the scratchy fuzz of his whiskers and reveling in the slow slide of his hand up her back. “Don't worry, I didn't park in your lot. And nobody tried to kill me on the very short walk over.”

He smiled and tilted her head up for a shockingly gentle kiss. “Did you not have class today?” He met her eyes, his dark gaze clearly looking into the depths of her soul. Did he know she was freaking out on the inside? Of course he did. Dane somehow knew everything about everyone.

“I skipped.” When he opened his mouth with an obvious reproach, she put her hand over his lips. “Don't worry. They won't expel me. Nobody's going to call Dad about it. Unless you do.”

“Don't tempt me. You shouldn't miss classes, Z.”

“Not even to see you?”

“Especially not.” His smile softened the words almost as much as the hand he curved along her back. Her body lit up

when he held her, and she wanted more. Needed it. Needed his hands on every inch of her skin and his heartbeat against hers.

But it can't be all about my needs.

“I w-won't make a habit of it.” She bit her traitorous lip, which wasn't wanting to shape what she needed to say. “But I left before we ... I figured waiting a whole week to talk about, um, about what happened with us. What's going to happen...” She edged back, letting go of him to stare into his eyes, begging him to understand everything without her dragging it all out. *He must already know. He's always two steps ahead.*

“Oh.” The warmth in his eyes faded, and his shoulders straightened ever so slightly. As if he knew what she was thinking and didn't want to have the conversation either. But it had to be said.

“I don't know if I did ... take advantage. Of you. The timing and your dad. And everything.” He didn't interrupt, so she rushed out the next garbled thought, already hating every word. “If this wasn't something you'd have done normally. If you're regretting things. I didn't mean to push you. Only I was already planning this whole future for us in my head afterward, and I never asked you, and I realized that's what you meant about who I am mattering. But it doesn't have to. We can figure it out. I know we can. If you want to.”

His expression didn't change. He didn't look away. But, damn it, why couldn't she read him like he read her? Why wasn't he saying anything? Then, without warning, he turned away and sauntered into the kitchen. She watched him grab a water bottle and a takeout box like she'd ceased to exist. “Dane?” she prompted him, unsure if she should follow. It seemed like a weird time to start lunch prep, but maybe he'd skipped breakfast.

When he faced her, his lips were drawn in a thin, severe line, and his eyes seemed far away and terribly hollow. She felt her stomach lurch. *I said something wrong. What the fuck did I say?*

“It’s out of our hands, Zara. It doesn’t matter. And you know that.”

“It does. It’s all that matters.” She pressed a hand to her stomach as a wave of nerves turned to nausea. *He’s being diplomatic, isn’t he? I did the thing. Stage Five Cling Wrap—that’s how Gia puts it.* Zara fought for a breath around the knot forming in her throat.

He took a few steps closer, but just as she thought he would reach for her again, he stopped and relaxed against the breakfast bar, long, elegant fingers slowly tapping the plastic bottle. “Let’s say, for a second, that it does. What then? We paint targets on our backs? Live in hiding? Because that’s what outlaws get, Z. Shitty motel rooms, always on the run, ducking out the next door and running for cover. It’s not worth that.”

Translation: You’re not worth that. Which wasn’t a revelation, just a confirmation.

She stared at him, memorizing the casual angle of his arm, the movement of his fingers. The roaring pulse in her ears quieted. Stopped. Her breath returned. Her chest felt like a bullet just tore through it, but that wasn’t new. She’d felt that before when he kissed another girl or spun someone else around a dance floor at one of the “gatherings” her dad pretended were just parties. And on occasion, when other men she dared to like inevitably stared at Gia all night. Though, in retrospect, that hurt less than this all-consuming agony.

Zara pushed her hair behind her ear. “Yeah. You’re right. There’s no point. I wouldn’t want to jeopardize things for you. Again.” She managed a nod and something like a smile. “So, I’ll just get out of your hair. I know you’re busy right now.” She didn’t let herself pause, just grabbed the door like a lifeline. *Out. Get out. Run. Maybe don’t stop ‘til you get to the Pacific.*

A beam of light from outside streamed across the floor—a beacon to welcome her to safe harbor. But as quickly as it stabbed through the darkness of the apartment, it was gone,

and her hand jerked back as the door slammed shut. Confused, she stared at the doorknob, trying to figure out why the door wouldn't open. Then she saw Dane's hand pressed hard against the metal. He'd followed without her hearing and stopped her escape.

"You don't get it, Zara. This isn't about me. It's never been about me." The resentment in that sentence could've stripped the paint off the apartment walls. "It's *you* I won't jeopardize. I don't know how to make that any clearer."

"You've made plenty of things clear. I shouldn't have gotten so emotional about a one-night stand." Hurt was turning to anger, and God help her, she was fine with that. Zara shoved his arm to get him to let go of the door. "I got the picture, Dane."

He stepped back to keep his balance, his expression shifting from emptiness to fury in a breath. "What do you expect? For me to fall to my knees and thank you for taking a break from the carousel of men you've thrown in my face since high school? You've made things plenty clear for me, too, Zara. Up until you decided a pity fuck was the best option."

She couldn't keep track of all the wrong things he said. It was all razor-edged nonsense. "Pity fuck?" she echoed dully. "No. I didn't..."

"You caught me at a vulnerable moment. Which has passed and—" Dane seemed to catch himself before reaching in front of her to twist the doorknob. "You know? Maybe leaving is a great idea."

She stopped halfway through the door and looked back, fixing her eyes on him with a force of will she didn't know she had. "Just so you know, I tried every way I could to get your attention. To get one minute where you didn't look at me like a kid or a problem."

His lips curled in a pained sneer. "Bullshit."

“I know that now. Thanks for the one minute, Dane. I won’t bother you for another.” She was turning before she finished talking, not caring if he heard. The elevator door was open, and she wasn’t wasting time. She darted inside, the doors whooshing shut as he called out something she didn’t want to hear.

She practically ran out of the building and all the way to her car. Only once she was inside, she stared blankly at the GPS screen. *Where the fuck do I go from here?*

She couldn’t face the three hours back to classes she didn’t want to be in. Her former stepmother, Darla, was the usual choice for emergency shelter and guidance—but Darla was in Italy for another month, and while Zara had the security codes for her house, the idea of being entirely alone felt like a bad idea. She needed noise. She needed people, even if only in the background...

“I have to go home, don’t I? Fuck. I’m a fucking walking cliché,” she raged at the computer while typing in the address. She didn’t trust herself to make the right turns without assistance and maxed out the volume just in case. “If I don’t listen to you, we’ll end up in Canada. Or Mexico. And honestly, right now, I’m okay with that too. Wouldn’t matter anyway, right? Nobody really gives a shit.” Or just not the person she wanted to.

She made it home. Not to Peoria, but the Fitzgerald compound nestled in Lincoln Park. Coming up from the garage, she met Vince, the head of Security. Which meant Stepmom Number Three was out shopping. Catherine always greeted her step kids when they came home, and being a novelist, she was home almost all the time.

Zara adjusted her oversized sunglasses, conscious of how much Vince would notice in her demeanor. She cleared her throat before greeting him. “Dad really has you working twenty-four-seven, huh?”

“Not too much. But you know how it is.” He shrugged a broad shoulder, and the gun holstered at his chest shone faintly in the light, clean as the day it’d been stolen. “We didn’t expect to see you today, Z.” His expression was warm but somewhat wary. Like he expected a fight too. “Everything okay at school? You forget something?”

“Just wanted to, um, talk to Dad.” She looked behind him at the main door.

“Really?”

He sounded far too shocked. Zara frowned.

“Am I not allowed in? Cause that’d be par for the goddamn course today.”

“No, no. Of course not. You know the door’s always open for you kids.” *Except one.* But neither of them needed to say that out loud. Vince’s head tilted. “You sound off. You coming down with campus crud already?”

“Maybe.” She bit her lip. “Is Dad here or at the office?”

“In his study.” Vince reached down to take her tote bag, shouldering it like it weighed nothing and glancing toward the gates. She didn’t miss his fingers twitching toward the gun as a car backfired somewhere close. “Come on. Let’s get you indoors.”

“You’re not seriously worried about a drive-by *here?*” she asked. They climbed the stairs to the massive, ornate front doors a bootlegging great-grandparent had pillaged from some long-gone French chateau.

“Just you catching pneumonia.”

Zara laughed. “You’re worse than our nannies.”

“Who do you remember handling you little monsters between those nannies quitting?”

She bit back a quip and smiled instead. “Well, we didn’t kill one another, and only one of us landed in prison, so you did a pretty good job.”

Vince's easy smile flickered, and he coughed. "Maybe don't bring up your brother anytime soon," he said so quietly she barely heard. A chill swept down Zara's back. Ben had been a touchy subject since Dad cut him off, and three years ago, it had become official policy not to speak of him in public once he'd nearly killed his fiancée and her best friend while high out of his mind.

The conviction was swift, and the trial closed thanks to three teams of fabulously expensive lawyers and the victims' families' agreement. But the whispers leaked out through the grapevines anyway. It was difficult to miss that Ben's fiancée's family, once firm fixtures at the holidays and friendly to Ethan's political aspirations, would no longer acknowledge the Fitzgeralds. Catherine was still mourning the damage they'd dealt to her social calendar almost as much as Ethan pined for his now-lost political goals.

"What did he do?" she whispered back, grabbing Vince's wrist before he could vanish upstairs with her bag. "Tell me, please."

"Nothing you need to worry about." Which wasn't the same as "nothing," and meant Dad had given clear instructions on which kids needed to know. "I'll take your bag. You go see your dad, yeah?" Zara pursed her lips and nodded, releasing him.

A spark of hope kindled in her chest. *Maybe Dane knows something about Ben too? Maybe he was being mean to keep me out of his way? And then reality hit. But Dane wouldn't see Ben now. Not after everything. Don't be stupid, Zara. Denial isn't going to make it better.*

She ducked into the nearest powder room to hide until the tears stopped again, then touched up her face with concealer to hide the worst of the blotches, and thank God for waterproof mascara and Catherine's habit of stashing cosmetic essentials in every single bathroom. Once Zara was sure she looked mostly normal, she ventured toward the study just off the library, her steps slowing the closer she got to the vaulted

doorway. She stopped when excited barking and the skittering of canine claws on hardwood alerted her to the real welcome team. Fallon and Dodger tore around the corner, tongues lolling and tails wagging. She knelt to hug them and dole out scratches and praise. They smelled like coconuts, so they'd seen the groomers. She wondered if that had been Gia or Catherine's doing.

A few moments of happiness passed before Fallon turned and bounded off toward the study. *Dad's definitely in there, then.* "Traitor," Zara muttered after the fickle foxhound, leaning into Dodger's sturdy side. Being a truly discerning character, Dodger never really liked males of any species. "If you see Dane, bite him. Okay?" The pit bull chuffed, and his tail slammed into her leg. Zara stood up. "Well, I'm going into the dragon's den. Go see Vince."

She waited for him to amble off in the right direction, then took a breath and aimed her feet toward the study. Her father was present, as Vince promised, with Fallon stretched out by his desk, gnawing on a fox-shaped chew toy. Adam Fitzgerald looked up from his tablet and raised a brow. The gleaming oak panels matched his eyes—all warmth on the surface, but hard as a rock if you ran into them. Zara felt a sudden kinship with crash test dummies.

"So that's what all the yapping was about. Aren't you supposed to be at school?" her father asked. The rich timbre of his voice was comforting, even if she was sure they were about to yell at one another.

"We need to talk, Dad."

"Ah." He set the tablet down and leaned back in his plush, leather seat, gesturing to the equally upholstered monstrosity across from him. "Did one of the others call you?"

"What? Why would they?" Zara sat on the edge of the chair, fighting the urge to drag her phone from her pocket to check her messages. "Hannah usually does for the start of classes, but she's busy with the next concert and—"

“Perhaps we best start with why you’re here and not in those very expensive classes, in that case.”

Zara’s lips froze shut. She hadn’t gotten far enough into this plan to figure out what to say. Her brain spun through half a dozen possibilities.

Because I drove up to see Dane and tell him I want to be with him, and I ... I fucking love him. And then Dad would start shouting and lock her in her room and probably have someone beat the hell out of Dane for good measure. Because I’m in love with someone, and he doesn’t love me, and what’s the fucking point? And then Dad would start shouting, lock her in her room, decide she couldn’t be trusted to go to college and send in a psychiatrist to tell her to stop being a disappointing crybaby. Because I’m not any good at anything, not even getting the guy I love to want to be with me.

Fuck.

The tears spilled out before she could find the best strategy, and she put her hands over her face. “I don’t want to do marketing!” When a beat of silence followed, without a single shout, she added, “I hate the classes. I’m not good at them, Dad.”

“Christ’s fucking mercy, this is the problem?” Her father’s exasperation bordered close to amusement, startling her enough to bring her head up. Adam was halfway around his desk and reached her in another step. “All right, enough waterworks. Come here.” He pulled her up into a hug, which only restarted the sobbing. Zara didn’t even feel as if she was the one crying anymore. She was a hapless bystander as her tear ducts took over her body. “Oh, sweetheart, fine. We’ll find you a nice art program. Do you want to come back to that damn design thing you sulked about senior year?”

“N-no.”

“Thank God for small favors.” He kissed her forehead.

“Bradley has studio art.”

“I told you I wanted you to try something else. That’s all! If you were this unhappy, why didn’t you say something? Or hell, change the major and tell me at graduation. If Gia isn’t about to pull that stunt, I’ll eat my damn socks.”

“Because...” she trailed off in a shrug.

“Because you’re the good twin?” He captured her face with his hands and studied her, lines creasing his forehead. “I love you, sweetheart. But I worry so goddamn much about you.”

“What?” This much affection didn’t seem like a reasonable reaction to some minor hysterics, and some sane chunk of her head sounded a warning bell. “Why?”

“You ask me that? You’re here crying about wanting to be an artist. You haven’t even crashed one of the cars or set anything on fire.”

“That would’ve made you angrier.”

“You’re the only one who bothers worrying about that. Haven’t you noticed?” Adam chuckled, and his heavy arm settled around her shoulders, steering her toward the kitchens. “The others I could drop in a Southside alley with a nail file and a roll of pennies, and they’d scrap their way out one way or another.”

She blinked, not sure how to take that. “And I couldn’t?”

“You could. But it would do you more harm than good. Now, let’s get you some ice cream. I’ll see about a note to the college, swearing there’s a family emergency. You can take a few more days off. It’ll be good to have you home.”

“You don’t like having any of us home,” Zara said with deepening suspicion. He’d led her to the vast, echoing kitchen and pointed her to the breakfast nook, where she watched him dig through the freezer across half an acre of granite and hardwood. Fallon followed and sat next to Adam at attention until he stopped and tossed her something, which she raced off with.

“I don’t like having *all* of you home. The screaming and caterwauling gets hard to ignore. But, in ones and twos, you’re quite pleasant. If you don’t bring home another dog. Ah, here we are. Your favorite.”

“Why are you being nice, Dad?”

“Because I’ve had a fucking nightmare of a week. Month, really.” He carried over a carton of cookies and cream and two spoons. “You wanting to be a penniless artist is practically a relief.”

“I can’t be penniless until I spend my trust fund.”

“Which you will do, on canvases and paints and an ugly gallery you’ll call modern, and then on booze and broads when you can’t make ends meet.”

“I’m not gay, Dad.”

“Well, you might be eventually. Once you tire of the pussy bastards who go to art galleries.”

“*You* go to art galleries,” Zara reminded him. For all that he acted like she’d found art by some unfortunate accident, he’d been the one to take her to the Art Institute nearly every Saturday in elementary. Then their dance lessons got longer, and Saturday afternoons with Dad fell into memory, save a few scattered day trips here and there through high school.

“I’ve been a pussy since your mother dragged me to the altar.” He shrugged, chuckling. “Art galleries were the least of my concessions. And a good place to meet your stepmothers.”

Zara finally laughed, and he grinned with his usual devil-may-care expression that simultaneously charmed and terrified people around him. “I missed you,” she said between bites.

“I miss you too, kiddo. The others don’t put up with my humor nearly as well.” They ate silently for a few minutes until his cell phone rang. He scowled at the screen, then slid it back into his pocket. “Zara...”

She set down her spoon with a sigh. “I knew it. You only bust out ice cream if you’re buttering me up.”

“No. I *do* miss you, kiddo. Truly. But...” His jaw flexed, and his spoon hit the table too. “There’s a problem.”

“A war?” She turned her spoon, leaving a sugary white-and-black trail along the bare wood. “I’m not totally oblivious to everything.”

“I know you’re not.”

She looked up to watch her father’s broad, weathered face as she continued. “And Ben just got out, didn’t he?” The tic in Adam’s jaw was far bigger this time, and she swore a vein in his forehead moved with it. His expression iced over at her brother’s name for a second. He exhaled and tapped the table.

“I wish you were about thirty percent dimmer, darling.” Her dad’s smile returned, but it was heavier. Almost sad. “I need you to help me this time, Zara.” Her jaw dropped.

“How? Because I’m not the party planner. Gia’s the one you—”

“I need to make nice with the De Lucca family. And you know the Italians. All about family.”

“Dad!” Zara snapped, pushing away from the table. There was only one reason an Outfit father would start on that track: the nightmare scenario every girl born in a connected family dreaded. The one Zara had feared every day since she saw Hannah’s hollow smile above a thirty-thousand-dollar wedding gown. She’d told herself over and over that Hannah wanted that marriage, that it was a coincidence Hannah fell in love right after Ben’s sentencing. But facing her father right now, with the nightmare in full color... “Tell me you aren’t about to act like it’s the fifteenth fucking century.”

“Zara, it’s just a formality. A nod to their damn traditions. You go out with the guy. You marry him, play house. Three years tops. And if he so much as touches you, come to me, and I call the whole damn thing off.”

“Is this the speech you gave Hannah?” She rubbed a hand over her face, trying to remind her lungs to work.

“Hannah volunteered.”

“And when Grandpa did this shit to you and Mom? Look how great that worked—”

“Leave your mother out of this. You aren’t me, and you sure as hell aren’t her. This won’t be the same for you, I swear ___”

“But I’m not a puppy!” She got to her feet, squaring off with him. “You can’t just drop me off at the Italian kennel and ___”

“I’m up against the Bratva.”

The rest of her outrage died on her lips. The Russian mafia was not spoken of lightly. She looked closer at her dad’s face. The more pronounced lines, the signs of exhaustion, and other details fell into place. Dane’s crazy hours when he should have still been excused for funerals and family things. Sawyer’s tense interactions, snapping and snarling when he was usually friendly. “Oh.”

“Me and Vittorio don’t fuckin’ like one another, and he’s got a million fewer reasons to like those Russian assholes, but I can’t risk it. If they side against me here...”

“What the hell did Bennett do, Dad?”

He shook his head. “I can’t answer that, sweetheart. I won’t. You don’t need the nightmares. But he’s stirred the Russians up.”

“Don’t they know you disowned him?”

“Blood is blood. And he owes it.”

The chair caught her, thankfully, or she’d have collapsed onto the tile. “After everything? He did ... more?” A thousand ugly memories fluttered around her head like ashes in the wind. Finding Gia crying in a guest room with cigarette burns on her arm. The time he’d taught their little brother how to

give “insulin” shots with a spoon and rubber bands. Hiding in the pantry with Dane while Ben went “hunting” because you didn’t want to be the one he aimed his souped-up paintball gun at.

She and Gia planned for months to get something on Ben that would convince their father to stop him. Zara fucked that up, then accidentally fixed it with her stupid confession to Dane. But she’d always thought, somehow, that once Ben was in prison and cleaned up, he’d be different. Better. Unless it was never the drugs making him do all that in the first place.

Adam rubbed his hand over his face, groaning like he saw the same hideous visions. “I fucked up with him, sweetheart. I kick myself every goddamn day, but I can’t let him hurt the rest of you any more than he already has. And here I am, fucking up with you, too. Trying to patch over his bullshit.”

“No.” Zara swallowed hard, grabbing the ice cream container and lugging it to the freezer. “You aren’t fucking up with me, Dad.” She shut the door and rested against it before she turned back. A mile of white stone and empty space loomed between them, but she met her dad’s eyes. “I get it. Gia’s got Dex. They’re off again, but we all know that’ll last a month. Ethan and Hannah are married, Caleb’s in high school, and Derek’s practicing law. And what am I doing? College and Tinder.”

Adam made a face. “That better be a goddamn joke, Zara.”

“You’re asking me to marry for feudal underworld bullshit. You don’t get to slut-shame.”

“I don’t need to hear about your sex life.”

“You lost that option the second you started talking me into a wedding gown, Daddy. What if Vittorio De Lucca is expecting a virgin?”

“The man’s not an idiot. If he wanted a virgin, he should’ve brought it up.”

“If he gets insistent, I promise to yelp and kick him in the knee like I did when I—”

“Enough.” Adam grimaced. “Is this your torturous way of saying you can handle this?”

She watched him for another second before shrugging. “What the hell? As long as Vittorio’s ancient dick—”

“It’s his grandson! Jesus, girl. It’s Joseph. You’ve met Joseph.”

“Oh. Him?” She *had* met Joseph De Lucca more than once. They had mutual friends and sometimes frequented the same clubs. He had sandy hair, pretty brown eyes, and a friendly smile. Even Gia liked him, and she hardly liked anyone.

Zara considered again. He’d know the score with this arrangement too, and they’d both go in with equal expectations and no agonizing daggers in their hearts every time they looked at one another. She wouldn’t beg him to give up his life and run off across the globe with her or wake up every night terrified he’d get killed on the next assignment. She wouldn’t nearly combust whenever he looked at her or ache with want when he touched her hand.

At least it’ll extend the life of my underwear. She made her head bob. “All right. Joseph De Lucca. I’ll clear my calendar.”

Her father hugged her so tight, she couldn’t breathe. She didn’t fight it. Not breathing felt better in some respects. “Thank you, sweetheart. I promise you, I’ll get you out of this shit. Give me a year, and you’re out. I’ll fucking nuke Russia if I have to.”

“It’s okay, Dad. Joey’s a good guy. Who knows? We might even get along. Hannah seems okay with Karl.”

“She does.” Adam’s smile didn’t match his eyes, but he kissed her temple. “I’ll go make some calls. Catherine knows she might need to clear her schedule, so call her. I’m afraid it’ll be a quick job, kiddo.”

“That’s okay. I ... I think the distraction would be good for me.”

One more hug, a few more encouraging words, and then her father was gone with his cell phone already at his ear and Fallon at his heels. Zara stared around the huge, empty kitchen and pulled her own cell out of her jeans pocket. Gia would know where to start. Or how to blow everything up. Either option seemed workable.

Chapter Four

DANE

Poosey Conservation Area, Missouri, September 7

Leave it to Bennett to be as big a pain in the ass dead as he was alive. The thought was becoming a mantra with each shovelful of dirt Dane tossed to the side. His phone vibrated, again, and Dane groaned. He stopped digging to check it.

Adam: **Status?**

Dane wiped flecks of dirt and grass off the phone screen. *Really?* He shoved it back into his jeans. The St. Michael coin clinked against the case, and he patted the mud-caked pocket before wiping sweat off his nose with the back of his sleeve. His wary gaze swept around the pitch-black country landscape, lit only by faint starlight and a waning moon. He barely heard the rasp of their shovels and Sawyer's muttered complaints above the yipping coyotes and screeching bugs. *Quiet country nights, my ass.* Dane took a deep breath of soupy, hay-and-mud-scented air, steeling himself for the next round of excavation.

On the opposite side of the freshly dug grave, Sawyer stabbed the earth with a trowel, grunting as he lifted a hefty chunk of dirt, dropping it on a growing pile beside him. "Who was that?" His voice rasped. Too loud to be a whisper but softer than usual.

"Boss." Dane hefted his own shovel, dropping more damp earth between his knees. *Good thing I'm not attached to these pants.* "Wants an update. I'll give it to him when we get back to the car."

"Again?" Saw sighed. "We're gonna be making reports every half hour at this rate."

Dane shrugged. "Could be worse, considering."

"Guess so. I'm taking a break." Sawyer stuck the trowel in the top of the pile like a cherry on a sundae, and sat back,

stretching his legs out in front of him. Dane sympathized with his partner's pained groan. His own hamstrings burned, and his feet felt like they might split at the arches. A blister the size of Illinois was swelling up across his right heel, too. *My boots were meant for hiking, but I wasn't.* Especially not in the goddamn Missouri woods with coyotes yipping like teenagers who just discovered a new band. *Probably pissed we were interfering with their next meal.*

They could complain to the goddamn Storm Crows. The Crows were one-percenters—the kind who welcomed professional fucking killers into their storied ranks. Dane suspected it when they watched three Crows carrying multiple trash bags to their decoy utility van. Now they'd dug one up and found Ben's hands inside—prints burned away with acid—there was no doubt.

Dane's legs didn't hurt half as much as his jaw. He swung his chin from side to side, testing the ache. *I know I asked Sawyer to hit me, but damn.* He continued scooping dirt out of the hole, his eyes searching out any hint of a shiny plastic surface amid the dirt. All that moaning, and you aren't the one with a swollen face.”

“You'd rather be going back to Duro without a bruise on you? Like, ‘Sorry I let your partner get iced, sir, but I was too busy running the fuck away’, would go down better?” Sawyer lifted his canteen to his lips, gulping loudly before attempting to catch his breath again. “Jesus! Why couldn't the Crows toss his sorry ass in a dumpster and throw a match in? I'd take a charred corpse over this huntsman bullshit any day of the week.”

Dane didn't answer. Mostly because he'd already answered this a dozen times before.

God, is there anything viable?

Dane hoped for his head. *Will anyone even believe it's him? If they've fucked it up as thoroughly as everything else...*

“Dane?” Sawyer flinched, and his hand flew to his holster. “They’re getting closer.”

Dane didn’t bother masking his irritated sigh. Maybe he’d be more patient if they hadn’t just trekked several miles through tree-filled dusk, then dark. “Stop worrying about the goddamn coyotes. The faster we get his head, the faster we can get back to the car and get the hell out of here.”

Sawyer glared at him. “If you’d let me go get a digger...”

“You really want to risk that right now?” Dane waved his hand toward the ramshackle house twenty yards away from the ancient cemetery they were currently desecrating. When Dane first saw it on the satellite images from the tracker they’d dropped on the Crow van, he hoped it was vacant. They weren’t that lucky. Light shone through salmon-colored curtains, flickering in a TV-is-on kind of way. Not to mention the rusty Ford Ranger sitting in a tiny parking lot about forty feet behind Sawyer.

“We have our orders, Dane. Does it matter how we—”

“Unless you want to up the body count tonight. You think those are friendlies in there?” Dane started digging again, fearing they would lose the full moon’s light behind the incoming clouds before long.

“You don’t?” Sawyer positioned himself back at the edge of the shallow grave.

Christ. Try using your fucking head for once.” They’d been watching the entrance, where the main road turned off into a gravel path leading to the parking lot. Once the Storm Crows left, Dane and Sawyer waited to be sure they didn’t come back, and nobody else had set foot on the roads. “Think about it. Broad fucking daylight, the Crows felt safe enough to pull up, dig a giant hole, and throw a few bags of evidence in. Should tell you what you need to know, Saw.”

Reaching in with a gloved hand, Sawyer brushed a layer of dirt away and wrapped his fingers around the black end of a

garbage bag. Just as Dane had gotten used to the rancid, rotting smell of congealing blood and early decomp when Sawyer tore open the first bag, but they both applied a fresh layer of menthol ointment under their noses before he tore into the second.

“Move.” Dane crawled around, knowing that an entire tub of Vicks wouldn’t insulate Saw enough for decomposition. Sawyer didn’t argue, but he didn’t retreat as far as Dane expected.

Dane slipped his hand into the muck, gooey blood and ooze seeping squelching around his leather and latex gloves. He felt around until he touched what had to be hair, up against a solid skull.

“Fuck.” Sawyer covered his mouth and turned away.

“Coyotes seem so bad now?” Dane smirked as he held Ben’s head up. The Crows probably used a power tool to separate his neck from the rest of him. The way the ragged skin hung loose on the throat gave it away along with the spine’s clean cut. A face once fit for magazine covers now looked like a cheap Spirit Halloween mask. The slack jaw revealed missing and broken teeth. Too few to identify with dental records. And the skull was little more than gritty mush around the ears—one of which was missing. *Maybe a souvenir hanging from a Crow chain?* Even Bennett’s golden hair was matted and caked with blood and other matter. At least they didn’t cut out his eyes.

He held the head closer, staring into the empty gaze. His eyes used to be so blue. So fucking bright. Like Adam’s. Red burst capillaries covered each sclera, but even so with the glaze of death, they were Ben’s eyes. *Might be enough.*

“Toss the bag.” Dane waited for Sawyer to slide his duffle bag in front of him and dropped Ben into it. “Give me a hand.” He extended his own, waiting, but Sawyer stared at him like he’d just asked him to recite the first seventeen digits of Pi.

“A hand with what?”

Dane groaned. “Literally. Give me one of Ben’s hands. Actually, fuck it. Give me both.”

“Oh!” Sawyer laughed and dragged the previously torn bag to his side. Dane watched him hold his breath before he dug in. He flung the appendages like dead snakes. “That all you need, bro?” Sawyer didn’t wait for confirmation before pushing the garbage bag back into the grave.

“Good enough.” Dane zipped the bag and slung the strap over his shoulder. “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

Sawyer’s brow creased. “Seriously? But the body’s—”

“Grab the goddamn shovel.” He didn’t check to see if Sawyer followed him until they got to the car and started packing up. After cleaning up with bleach and baby wipes, they changed into cleaner pants and new shirts. Dane settled into the passenger seat of the gray Toyota Corolla and tapped a quick message to their boss.

Dane: Got the prize. Sending it your way ASAP. Heading back to the temp agency.

Crossing his arms, he let his chin fall to his chest, determined to grab a few minutes of sleep while Sawyer finished shoving the soiled clothes into the trunk. He hadn’t slept for shit since he left Chicago—and it wasn’t because he’d spent a week hanging out with Ben and his slaver buddies, and the next three days staking out a Crow safehouse after the bikers captured Ben in a shootout.

The driver’s-side door opened and the seat creaked as Sawyer got in. He eased the door shut, then came the jingle of keys, the roar of the engine. Dane counted the seconds until the car lurched into motion, rolling down the path without headlights. And counted. No movement started. His eyes flashed open to find Sawyer glaring. “Are you waiting for us to get caught, motherfucker?”

“You know damn well—”

Dane tossed his head back against the headrest. “Let it go.”

“They’re gonna find him, Dane.”

“It isn’t our fucking problem. It’s the Crows’ mess. Should’ve buried him deeper if they didn’t want the little shit to get dug back up.”

Sawyer shook his head, putting the car in gear and peeling out onto the main road. “It’s *sloppy*. And that isn’t you. Look, I get you’re pissed at the goddamn world, D, but that doesn’t—”

“We got what we came for, Saw. And without me, your stupid ass would’ve gotten spotted. So maybe before you start pointing fingers about being sloppy...”

“He was your friend, Dane.”

“Why the fuck does everyone keep saying it like I forgot? He *was* my friend. Now, he’s food for the coyotes. And that’s better than he deserves.”

Sawyer fixed his eyes on the road, but his jaw twitched. “You sure that’s all you got?”

“I’m going to say this once,” Dane snarled. “So fucking pay attention. I don’t give one single shit that Ben is dead. Whatever our friendship was, I buried it years ago.” *Four, to be specific*. “But you want feelings? Fine. Dad drowned in his own blood because Ben couldn’t go five minutes without stirring shit up. All I can feel is fucking thrilled that Ben suffered a lot more than that.”

Sawyer’s chest puffed out, his fingers tightening on the steering wheel. “And Zara? You blaming that on him, too?”

“Shut the fuck up and drive.” Dane clenched his jaw and faced the window. Gravel crunched under the car’s tires, and Dane rolled the glass down, just to hear the coyotes howling again.

Sawyer turned the car out onto an empty rural highway and rolled the windows up from the driver’s console. “Maybe

with the little bastard's head, things will change," he offered in a tentative voice. "This De Lucca bullshit doesn't have to happen anymore and—"

"Stop. Even if she didn't have to marry that asshole..." Dane let the sentence hang. No way things went back to how they were. *Not after that fight. I did my job too fucking well.* He bit his lip hard enough to taste blood. He'd had ten days to replay the moment her heart broke, and the tears in her eyes were clearer now than they'd been falling. He shook himself and fixed his eyes on the shadowy countryside rolling by outside. "Wake me up when we get to Chicago. I'm fucking tired."

ZARA

Chicago, Illinois, September 28

"I can't believe you're doing this."

"I can't believe you drove through a flood." Zara stared out the window instead of looking at her sister. The rains beating down on Chicago and the surrounding area hadn't let up for days, turning manholes into geysers and sending half the city running for rubber boots and sandbags. And yet, the ominous gray haze outside was bright as sunshine compared to Hannah's irritation.

"What else am I supposed to do when I find out you're getting married in a freaking month! Gia's in a permanent meltdown. But here you are, picking out place settings." She whipped a pressed linen napkin edged in gold silk off the dining room table and snapped it in front of Zara's face.

"Hey!" Zara swiped at the napkin. "Don't you have a husband to piss off? Why are you being weird at me?"

"Because you can still tell Dad to stuff this farce up his backside." Hannah smoothed her flawless, chestnut hair behind her headband and dropped the napkin on its corresponding cream-and-gold plate with a look of disgust. "Tell me you aren't doing Versace plates."

“These are just samples, Han.” Zara tapped a simpler Wedgwood plate to her left. “I’ll probably go with that one. I’ve been texting pics to Gia, but she’s in class.”

“How about texting Dad to fuck off?”

“No. He didn’t tell me to do this, Hannah. He *asked*.”

“Well, that’s weird.”

Zara nodded. “Things are bad, and this makes things easier. Safer, maybe.”

“Easier for *him*. Safer for *him*.” Hannah’s deep blue eyes fixed on Zara’s.

“I’m fine. Joe’s nice. We’ll be okay.”

Hannah snorted. “Oh, that’s one hell of a basis for marriage: He’s nice.”

“More than I can say for your husband,” Zara snapped, rising to her feet to glare at her sister. “And he didn’t twist your arm to marry Karl. That was all you and those Van der Linde Swiss bank accounts.”

Hannah’s perfect face paled beneath her makeup, and she stood. She had eight inches on Zara’s height, thanks to four-inch Manolo heels and Zara’s ballet flats. “So, the kitten’s getting claws?”

“Shut up.” Zara stormed off across the marble floor and Oriental carpets. “You don’t get to be a bitch to avoid helping with wedding prep. Keep it up, and I’ll have Cathy pick your assignments.”

“Zara, wait!” Hannah caught up with her on the main stairs. Her heels clicked on the stone, sending faint echoes all around them. Zara, padding silently, shot her a look. “Hey! Seriously. I’m sorry. I’m not good at sisterly advice. You and Gia always have this covered between you. I’m rusty.”

“Because you only pay attention to Ethan, Derek, and Ben. Just like everyone else,” Zara hissed.

“That’s not fair. You two always have one another and don’t like outside interference.”

Zara’s eyes rolled. “And since when do you care what other people like? Maybe that’s exactly what we needed, but nobody noticed. Ever consider that?”

Hannah’s lips parted, her shoulders sinking. “I’m sorry. You’re right.”

The unexpected apology deflated Zara’s temper. It wasn’t nearly as much fun to snipe at a contrite sibling. “I told you, I’m fine. I agreed to do this. Joe and I are ... we get along. That’s as good as it needs to be. In a couple of years, we get an amicable divorce, and nobody has to be upset about anything.”

“Unless Dad needs another De Lucca favor, or there’s another reason for an alliance, or Joseph doesn’t like the idea of a divorce by then.” Hannah glanced down the curving staircase toward the open, molded archways and the massive foyer. “Come on.” She tugged Zara’s sleeve to lead her up a story and into Gia’s room. The door clicked shut behind them before Hannah spoke again, her expression all too earnest. “You need to consider what happens if there’s always one more reason to stay. Are you prepared to end up with Joseph forever?”

Zara looked around her twin’s room instead of answering. The crown molding and soft blue walls were the same as hers, but while Zara’s bedding and furniture were mostly white with a few accents, Gia had embraced a more Arabian Nights theme, with hanging silks and colorful inlays. Even the rugs strewn across the dark, wide-cut oak floors were woven in jewel tones. Zara sank onto a pile of cushions, welcoming the riot of color and distraction for once. Anything besides the gray gloom outside and the impending doom inside. “It doesn’t matter,” she said when she realized Hannah wasn’t talking.

Hannah sat next to her, frowning again. “It’s your future. How could it not matter?”

“Because...” *The only thing I want can never happen.* She trailed off with a shrug. “I don’t know what I’m doing anyway. This is a plan. It’s better than not having one.”

Hannah’s brow wrinkled even more. “Zara, what do you *wish* was happening right now?”

“That Ben hadn’t screwed up, and Dad hadn’t screwed up, and I hadn’t screwed up. And I wouldn’t be marrying Joseph. But—”

“How the hell did *you* screw up?” Hannah edged closer. “I can’t think of anything you could do that warrants tossing your whole life on Dad’s pyre.”

She swallowed hard and risked a direct glance at Hannah. Her ever-flawless sister looked ready to walk into a photoshoot—from her flawless hair and contoured cheeks to her tailored Chanel pants. Zara, on the other hand, wore a hoodie haphazardly dragged on over a mini dress and leggings. Her bun had fallen a bit lopsided at some point, with hair everywhere, slightly frizzed from the rain. Hannah probably hadn’t had frizzy hair since middle school. “Everything I do is stupid. You know it.”

“I do not.” Hannah sighed. “Please, just tell me what’s happening? Maybe I’ll be able to help.”

Zara sniffed. “Not likely.” *But why not tell her? She used to love Sawyer. Maybe she’ll know how to get over Dane.* “Fine. Okay. You want to know how dumb I am? I fell in love, and it’s a level one-thousand disaster. And he never wants to see me again. And not having to think about dating for a couple years sounds like a fucking blessing right now.”

Hannah fell back into the cushions, ignoring the damage to her blowout. “So some asshole dumped you, and instead of eating ice cream in your pajamas for five days straight, you picked ‘marry the mafia’? And I thought Gia was the drama queen.”

Zara twisted a piece of fringe on the nearest pillow. “*You* got dumped and married a billionaire political donor. Grandma

would say the pot's calling the kettle black."

Hannah blinked. "Who the heck do you think dumped me?"

"Sawyer."

"How the hell did you—?"

"You can't borrow Gia's clothes and not expect her to snoop."

That got a laugh from Hannah, before she waved a hand as if dispelling the idea. "Points for trying, but I dumped *him*. We wanted very different things."

"You wanted three houses in Europe and a private jet."

Hannah's brows arched. "Wow. Now I know what you really think about me."

"Are you gonna pretend you fell for Karl's personality?" Zara snickered. "Cause you'll have to prove he has one."

Hannah shrugged off the insult to Karl. "If you must know, Miss Nosey, I broke up with Saw because I wanted a family. He didn't. And he works for Dad. So, there's that little hurdle."

"You don't think Dad would've been okay about you seeing him?"

"I have no idea." Hannah's laugh was a shade too sharp, her smile too brittle. "Didn't seem like any point finding out if we couldn't present a united front on something as basic as getting married or having kids."

Zara pulled her legs up and wrapped her arms around her knees. "I just wanted Dane. I don't care about kids, weddings, or normal jobs. But he—"

"Oh, shit!" Hannah sat up, her eyes flaring. "Dane? Dane Freaking Ryan?"

"Why's that so weird? You liked Sawyer."

“Yeah, but you picked a proverbial red right hand. God help you, Zara. The Butcher? That’s not—”

“That nickname’s stupid.”

“You mean accurate.”

Zara scrunched her nose. “Well, you picked The Butcher’s partner. What’s that make Sawyer? The Jackal?”

“Probably.” Hannah looked thoughtful. “That would fit his general temperament. I’ll have to tell Vince. Sawyer will hate it.” Her lips turned in a genuine smile—the first one Zara had seen in ages. Something that never happened when they talked about Karl.

“You know, you could always get a divorce and tell Sawyer you messed up.”

“No, baby sis. I can’t.” She pulled off her headband and messed up her hair. “Men like Sawyer don’t do second chances. I knew that when I walked out.”

“If that’s true, my situation stands, doesn’t it?”

“Maybe.”

“Well, then. Can you please stop lecturing me about Joseph?”

Hannah’s expression darkened. “Fine. But you aren’t sleeping with Joey, are you? I mean, if you’re so set on this marriage being a front...”

“Gross! No.” Zara couldn’t hide her distaste. “We’ve talked about getting there on the honeymoon if we’re bored, but it’s not big on my itinerary. Honestly, I don’t think he’s that interested either.”

“He is a dude. You’re a gorgeous woman. It is definitely on his itinerary, sweetie.”

“As long as he keeps his hands to himself, he can dream all he wants.” She’d treated other breakups with emergency one-night stands before—even turned one or two of those into a new boyfriend. Unfortunately, the idea of touching anyone

but Dane just *hurt*. Which was a new and entirely disorienting experience. She didn't want to know how much worse the hurt would get if she pushed idea to reality. It was mortifying just thinking about it. "Anyway. Can we get back to table settings?"

"Fine. But I maintain this is a terrible idea, and the second you want out of it, I'll help."

"Thanks, Hannah. You aren't the worst big sister in the world."

"From someone five minutes younger than Gia, I don't think that's a high bar, but I'll take it." She slowly got to her feet. "Let's go horrify your in-laws with restrained taste and refined palates."

Chapter Five

DANE

Chicago, Illinois, September 30

“Couldn’t you have picked a nicer bar?”

“Couldn’t you be on a plane back to DC?” Dane didn’t look up from his glass. Instead, he wondered how easy it would be to smash it on the counter and use one of the shards to stab both his eardrums. Anything to save him from whatever order or lecture Ethan Fitzgerald had stashed away for a rainy day like this one. Dane tilted the drink to his lips, the ice in the glass clinking loudly.

Ethan hung his tailored coat on the back of the badly patched barstool, his nimble fingers unbuttoning the cuffs at his wrists. After spending a month of tailing his nearly identical older brother, he kept waiting for Ethan to hulk out. But where Ryan Mayer was all muscles and ink, Ethan remained clean-shaven and lean. “I could,” he admitted as he rolled up his sleeves and waved the bartender to order an old-fashioned. “But I skipped it.”

“Why? Thought you hated Chicago.”

Shoulders slumping, Ethan reached for the bowl of peanuts Dane forgot about and took a small handful. “My baby sister’s getting married any day now. Figured I may as well stay.”

Dane winced at the reminder, but Ethan didn’t notice—too busy staring at their surroundings. Keaton’s Place wasn’t quite a dive bar, but it lacked the glitz and glam of a Fitzgerald haunt. Small and intimate, clean in the ways that mattered, with a single pool table to the right of the bar and a half-dozen gambling machines tucked against the back wall. It had been one of Sawyer’s favorite places to drink Hannah out of his system. *And if it worked for him...*

“What do you want, Ethan?”

“An old fashioned, neat. Maybe three or four of them.”

“I mean—”

“I know what you meant.” His voice was sharp as a blade. For all the man insisted he wanted nothing to do with the empire his forefathers built, he certainly could turn on Adam’s don’t-fuck-with-me tone like he was born to it. “We need to talk.”

“Here?” The bar was empty, save for one old regular drowning his blues in a pitcher of Budweiser. A few hours from now, that wouldn’t be the case, but at the moment, the bar was dead. Perfect. Until Ethan walked in. But still too public for a talk.

“Not here. Outside.” Ethan dug into his pocket and tossed a few twenties onto the bar. That done, he swiped his coat off the stool and left.

Sighing, Dane nodded at the bartender and got up.

Out in the apparently endless drizzle, Dane watched Ethan duck into the back of a black Audi. A man in a suit stood by the open door, waiting. Dane rolled his eyes, not bothering to put his jacket back on for the few steps between the bar and the car. He got in, making himself relax into the new car scent and custom leather seats.

The driver stayed where he was, standing sentry in the rain. Dane laughed, canting his head toward Ethan. “You’ve been watching too many movies. Your dad would’ve just called.”

“I’m not Dad,” Ethan said, looking out the opposite window. “Besides, he’s busy dealing with his other son.”

“Which one?”

Ethan snorted. “There’s a loaded question. Who’s to fucking say these days? I guess, in this instance, the bastard one. At least the one we know about.”

Dane sobered and ran his hand through his damp hair. “You know about Ryan?”

Ethan nodded. “Heard Mom and Dad arguing about it when I was a kid. Figured they’d tell me when they were ready. But of course, Dad told you first.”

Ethan Fitzgerald sounding jealous? Christ. “Don’t think he had much of a choice considering the circumstances,” Dane said with an arched brow.

“He always has a choice. But that’s not the point. Just tell me one thing.”

“If I can.”

Ethan finally turned to Dane. “Ryan killed Ben, didn’t he?”

Dane opened his mouth, but didn’t speak. *What the hell is the right answer?* He took a deep breath, and shook his head. Slowly. You didn’t make quick movements around an angry pit viper. “I don’t know. He was at the scene, but so were several other Crows.” Ethan’s frown only deepened, and Dane couldn’t stop himself from asking: “You’re mad he killed Ben? Seriously?”

“No. Of fucking course not,” Ethan snarled. “I knew Ben deserved a bullet, but I wasn’t going to be the one to pull the trigger because he was my goddamn brother. Ryan didn’t even have that choice. He had no fucking clue. And Dad just let that shit go down.”

“Since when do life or the Outfit give a shit about fairness?”

Ethan’s hand balled into a fist on his lap. “And it isn’t even over, is it? We’re still stuck in the fallout of Ben’s shitshow.”

Dane bowed his head. “Just waiting for orders.” Until then, he planned on hiding in a bottle until he could think of anything but dual-colored eyes full of tears.

“Won’t be waiting long. First all the shit with the Bratva? Then the Crows sent their goddamn vice-president up here and—”

“Nathan Wronski in Chicago?” Dane’s spine straightened. “What the fuck for?”

“Oh, just wait. It gets better.” Ethan let his head fall back on the seat and he rubbed his eyes with a well-manicured hand. “You know who Dad was on the phone with when he told me to find you? Ashlyn fucking Davis.”

Dane’s eyes widened. *Bennett’s ex?* The last time Dane saw her, she was leading Ben into a Storm Crows ambush. “The fuck?”

“Right? Talk about a blast from the past. I don’t even know...”

“She married him.”

Ethan’s head popped up. “Ashlyn married Ben? After he tried to kill her? Why the fuck did she—”

“No.” Dane chuckled, closing his eyes. *God, this is going to sound so fucking stupid.* “She married Wronski.”

“When?”

“Couple months ago. Found that out when I did recon on the Crows.”

“Fuck,” Ethan let out a low whistle. “You’re telling me we’re knee-deep in all this shit because Ashlyn married a biker?”

“I don’t think so. Duro, the underground fighting and trafficking? That was all Ben’s happy place. But it definitely added the Storm Crows to his shit list.”

Ethan sat back, his brow furrowing. “Let me get this straight. Ben spirals out in his little fighting rings, dates a socialite, tries to murder her, and gets locked up for it. Then, his socialite marries a fucking outlaw biker in a club that my bastard brother happens to be a member of. And now...”

“It’s kind of funny when you say it all at once like that.”

“That’s not even all of it!”

Dane laughed. "I'm aware."

"Well, you're gonna love the next part. You have to go back."

"I know. Duro is still picking up inventory."

"You can't wait for that. He's got, uh, someone called Megan McClay? Dad said you'd know who she is. Guess that's what Ashlyn called him about. She's some kind of cousin? Seriously, I swear old-money clans are related to fucking everyone."

"Shit." Megan was with the Crows. And she meant something to Ryan. If she was gone now, that meant Ryan and the Crows were going hunting. *That ends in a bloodbath..* "My bag's still packed. I'll head straight there." Wouldn't be hard to meet up with Duro. *Just got to hope he hasn't killed the girl already.*

Ethan leaned over Dane, knocking on the window to alert the driver. The guy must have known what that meant, because he wasted no time walking around the car and getting into the driver's seat. "We'll be at your place in fifteen minutes," Ethan explained. "Which is just the right amount of time to talk about my sister. And don't ask which one."

Dane's stomach lurched.

"Hannah never was good at keeping shit from me."

Bile worked its way up Dane's esophagus. "Not sure what you want me to say."

"Nothing. I want you to listen."

ZARA

Chicago, Illinois, October 1

"Eight more days." Joey's milk-chocolate gaze warmed as they stepped into the sunlight. The breeze carried cocoa and sugar scents as sweet as his expression. Zara looked away, focusing on the flower beds Grandma De Lucca tended every

day. The De Lucca's house was as grand as her father's—though a little younger—built in the glory days of Capone and Moran. Zara studied the pale stone facade, wondering if it was too much to ask the whole thing to collapse on top of her.

“Eight days,” she echoed. Joey squeezed her hand.

“I know you're freaked out. So am I. But we'll figure it out. I promise this won't be a nightmare.”

It already is. Zara made herself look into his eyes and smile. Joseph was a cinnamon roll compared to his uncles and grandfather, but she didn't doubt his sincerity. He wasn't a monster. She'd probably be happier than Hannah once her heart stopped bleeding for Dane Ryan. *He chose the job. Chose Dad. He chose everything except me. Stop being fucking pathetic.* “I know. I trust you, Joey. I'm just completely exhausted from the planning.”

His hand slid up Zara's arm to her elbow, guiding her toward the gazebo at the far end of the yard. “Are you sure that's all?”

“There are a million other things.” Zara sighed. She settled onto a bench near the gazebo's steps. “But those aren't your problems.”

“They will be in eight days.” His lips thinned. “And I think you're being polite. You're always so damn polite.”

Her brow quirked. “That doesn't sound like a compliment.”

“I generally appreciate that trait, I swear. But right now? Not so much.” A frown scrunched Joey's features, making him look twenty years older. For that passing second, she could almost see his grandfather in him. “You know, don't you?” he asked quietly, sitting beside her. He didn't take her hand this time, and his own twisted in his lap like he wanted to strangle his hesitation.

“Know what?” When he didn't answer, she scowled. “What are we talking about?”

Joey's head fell, and his shoulders bowed. "Me and Gia."

"Oh." Zara inhaled, counted to three. Exhaled. "Yes. I know something about it."

Joey coughed, sweeping a hand through his sandy hair. "Well, it's over."

She glanced back at the house. "Is that why we're out here? I thought you wanted to show me the new fountains."

"They're trashy. Mom's got terrible taste." He laughed, rubbing the back of his neck.

"I promise never to say that."

"Gia would." He stared off toward the garish gold fountains, peeking out from under their blue tarps and construction detritus. "That's why they wouldn't let it be her, isn't it?"

"I honestly don't know." This time it was Zara reaching out, and she patted his forearm. Something in his expression felt far too familiar. "But that's probably part of it."

"And she's all about modeling. Mom would lose her shit if I married a showy, mouthy model. Grandpa wouldn't even meet her. But when they started talking about the families getting together, I thought—"

"They'd let you have a say?" Zara's laugh escaped before she could stop it, but Joey didn't get mad. Instead, he gave a sheepish smile.

"I'm so goddamn naive sometimes."

"No, just hopeful. It's good to hope."

Back at home, Zara stood on the front steps, watching the driver who'd brought her turn back out of the drive. The armored SUV was due to pick up Caleb from football practice. *Or lacrosse? What the heck is he playing these days?* Caleb

picked up hobbies and threw them away as often as Gia did hairstyles.

“You don’t look very glowy and happy. Bride-to-Be may be your least convincing role yet.” The all-too-familiar voice spat the words like a gunshot.

“If you’re still harping about Sleeping Beauty, I was brilliant, and you know it.” Zara turned to her twin. “And if you want to have a fight, let’s go upstairs. Joey was all talk today.”

Gianna’s lips froze on some fresh insult, and her sapphire eyes narrowed. “How much talk?”

“Enough that we should go upstairs.”

“Your room. Mine’s got my whole wardrobe spread everywhere.”

“You know you’re the maid’s least favorite, right?” Zara headed inside. Gianna stayed at her right as Dodger trotted out from the kitchen to greet them. Having gotten his due pats, he bounded up the stairs, eager to find his toys. The twins moved slower. Neither of them wanted to have this conversation.

In Zara’s room, with the door shut and Dodger chomping away on his newest chew bone, the twins faced one another while the silence stretched between them. Gia broke first. “I should’ve told you we kept seeing each other.”

“I don’t mind that. It was dumb, but it’s your hide Dad would’ve tanned if he found out.” Zara left Gia standing by the bed and went to her vanity to pull bobby pins out of her hair. Her reflection looked more like Gia than Gia did today—the professional makeup and shiny hair had been costume for another round of engagement photos. “I’m sad you didn’t trust me enough to tell.”

“If you didn’t know, Dad couldn’t tan your hide to match mine.” Gia twisted the diamond tennis bracelet on her arm. “I hope you can at least be nice to Joe. He deserves someone who won’t be a bitch to him all the time.”

Zara's eyes rolled. "So, why have you kept stringing him along?"

"Because I ... I liked him." The words came out in the faintest whisper, barely heard over Dodger's industrious slobbering.

Zara stared at her sister and bent to scratch Dodger's ears. Better to pet him than risk hugging Gia, who looked like she might stab them all for hearing her confession. "You know that's not a crime, right?"

"It is for us." Gia wiped her cheek and stormed across to Zara's vanity, inspecting her makeup with military precision. Huffing, she grabbed a tissue and switched on the lights. "Look what happened to you! Falling for men in our world? Ben was right. We might be too stupid to live."

"Ben is never right." Zara sat beside Dodger and ran a hand on the thick area rug beneath her to ground her thoughts in the here and now. Thinking too much about their monstrous brother was a terrible idea. "Joey's miserable about marrying me. If you saw his face when he talks about you, you wouldn't joke."

The tissue fluttered out of Gia's hand. "His face?"

Zara ran her fingers over Dodger's silky head, down to the coarser pelt at his shoulders. Dodger grunted and rolled onto his belly, wanting more pets and less conversation. "I think he loves you, Gigi."

"You do mean Joey and not your smelly mutt, right?" Gia grabbed the tissue and dabbed at her eyes.

"Says the girl who lets the mutt sleep in her bed."

Gianna sniffed and used some of Zara's discarded bobby pins to twist her hair into a messy bun. "It's not my fault he's too dumb to know the difference between us."

"Uh-huh." She scratched under Dodger's massive chin. "He's not the only one."

That got Gianna's attention away from the mirror. She tilted her head, twirling a fallen lock of dark hair around her index finger. "Zara Leann Fitzgerald, is that a scheme I hear in your voice?"

"Maybe." Zara shrugged. "But we'll both get skinned alive for it."

"I'm not averse if the prize is big enough." Gianna sat down on Dodger's other side. "So, let's hear it."

Chapter Six

DANE

Chicago, Illinois, October 6

Ethan was right. It wasn't fair.

Dane tried to ignore the injustice. He'd stayed laser-focused on the job, but in the midst of wading through Ben's collection of human garbage and broken victims, he'd lost all fucking interest in the cause. And the family. Watching Adam's illegitimate son struggle and reunite with his woman, the jealousy made Dane's trigger finger twitch. Maybe to shoot the lovebirds, maybe himself. Who wouldn't get reckless when they realized they'd fucking had that—a woman who'd throw the whole world away for love—and let her go. Like a dumbass.

She's marrying someone else. He had to keep telling himself that. Especially in the times he started to think another path might be possible. *Plus, she hates me now. I was a fucking asshole. And now I have to go debrief with her dad. At her goddamn house.*

He prayed that she'd stayed in school this semester and wouldn't be home making wedding arrangements. *Maybe she's gone back to fucking France.* That thought didn't lighten his mood as he trudged through a teeming terminal, doing his best not to interact with anyone.

At least shit hadn't gone so far south that one of the guys wasn't ready to meet him outside. He climbed into a waiting SUV and busied himself with notifications and missed calls. The vehicle pulled into traffic, and Dane snarled, tossing his phone down on the seat. Five Instagram posts of Zara's wedding colors and engagement photos were five too many. He tried to study his surroundings instead. *I've got to mute every single fucking Fitzgerald sibling.*

“They weren’t lying about you, huh?” The unfamiliar voice broke into his thoughts. Dane’s black eyes flicked up toward the driver. “Not much for talking.”

Dane inhaled deeply and stared out at the skyline. Cage was a recent hire, a bit naive and extremely annoying. In general, Dane didn’t have an opinion about him one way or the other, but right now, he felt a vague, fleeting hope that Cage might snap and crash them into the next concrete barrier. *Solve all my problems with a broken neck and oblivion. At least it’ll last longer than a bottle of scotch. Cheaper too.*

“I’ve had a long flight. And a long goddamn week. But if you’re feeling chatty, *talk.*”

Cage’s lips tightened, and the car sped up. “I just, uh, it’s good that you’re back. That’s all I wanted to say.”

I don’t think everyone is going to agree with you. “Thanks.” He grabbed his phone again and resumed sifting through his messages in silence for the next twenty minutes. A few weeks out of touch, and people suddenly wanted to chat. Old school friends he hadn’t seen since graduation wanted to say sorry about his dad, a few distant cousins checked in. *Fucking figures. Nothing like tragedy to get attention.*

As they pulled up to the gatehouse and Cage spoke to the guard, Dane’s legs burned with the need to bolt. Which was fucking crazy. This was going to be a good goddamn meeting—shit was on the up and up, finally. Ben was dead. Ryan was safe. Dane’s bonus was fucking phenomenal. He knew Adam was happy as hell with the results: a possible alliance with the Crows MC, connecting with his firstborn son, and maybe even a truce with the old-money Tilden family and their many, many friends. Mrs. Fitzgerald was going to be over the damn moon to get her social seasons back.

A happy fucking ending for everyone.

And yet, swan-diving into the lake sounded sweeter than putting one foot over the Fitzgerald threshold.

It's over. It was over before it even began. Doesn't matter if she's in there or not.

Quickly, he slid his phone in his pocket and stepped out of the car, his gleaming black shoes touching the pavement with silent steps. Buttoning the front of his jacket, he greeted the guard at the door with a nod and was admitted to the mansion's glittering foyer, all priceless chandeliers and gleaming marble. It always looked half-ready to be a mausoleum, in Dane's opinion. But a nice, welcoming mausoleum with velvet trim and a professionally maintained yard.

"Mr. Ryan." Dane turned his head left as Lloyd Anderson, Adam's long-time butler, started down the staircase. He was dressed as sharply as ever—more like an executive's assistant than the kind of Downton Abbey vibe his accent implied. Today, he was in gray wool and Italian leather shoes not all that dissimilar from Dane's. Keeping on the good side of a connected family for over twenty years paid damn well, even if you were in the legit end of things.

"We were expecting you," Lloyd said placidly, his brown eyes gleaming as brightly as the polished interior he oversaw. "I trust your travels went well?"

Dane reached up to remove his sunglasses and offered a nearly genuine smile. He'd known Anderson most of his life—the butler had been good friends with his father and helped tend more than a few injuries over the years without asking questions. Dane figured he'd retired since he hadn't seen him around for a few months, but it must have been a vacation. "As well as can be expected. You?"

"Found a bit of a cold, but I am on the mend. I did wish to express my deepest condolences, Dane. If there's anything I can do for you, you only need to ask."

Dane shook his head. "Thank you."

"Mr. Fitzgerald is still in a meeting. If you follow me to the parlor, I can get you a drink while you wait." Dane

wordlessly fell in step behind him, happy to seek refuge in a room that Adam's children barely used. Lloyd pushed the double doors open and stepped aside, letting Dane in first.

Dane froze at the doorway. Walking in on a ghost had that effect. Zara sat at a table across the room, facing the arched windows, beautiful as ever in a soft yellow sundress with a neckline made to be ripped off her. But it was like looking at a portrait painted a hundred years ago—the subject of the scene was beyond human reach. Even when she turned toward them, there was nothing to her. No warmth or animation. No half-hidden mischief in her eyes. She might as well have been oil paint and canvas.

Something's wrong. Really fucking wrong.

"Miss Zara! I didn't realize you were in here," Lloyd said, bustling past Dane. "You won't mind if Mr. Ryan waits in here for your father, will you?"

"Of course not." Zara rose, an empty smile sliding into place. "I'm only playing with seating arrangements. Would you like something to drink?" She didn't pause as she walked to the drinks cabinet along the far wall. "I'd ask you, Lloyd, but I know you wouldn't take it."

Something was wrong with her. Dane watched her, wanting to shake her, to demand to know what happened. But he knew. At least, he knew where it began. *This is my fault.* Behind him, Lloyd spoke, but he didn't hear the words. Just the buzzing of his accent and the blood rushing in Dane's ears. Then he was gone, leaving them alone. And she was right there. Closer than she'd been in weeks. And yet ... the fucking distance seemed as far as it'd ever been.

"Why are you doing this?" He didn't mean to ask it out loud, but there was no taking it back now. His eyes sharpened on her, waiting.

Zara paused, the stirrer stilling in the glass, her vacant eyes staring into his. "If you don't want a Jack and Coke, Cathy's got the martini stuff out."

“That’s not what I meant, Z,” he said through gritted teeth.

“What else is there?” She sighed. “Maybe you shouldn’t drink. You’re not making sense.”

“The hell I’m not.” He started toward her, but she held the glass up between them to stop his advance. He took the hint and grabbed the drink, taking a step back as he glanced into the dark liquid. “Are you okay?” She could at least tell him that.

“I’m fine?” She clasped her hands in front of her, shoulders raised, her head turned slightly to the side, no longer making eye contact. “Just tired. Planning a wedding my stepmother and Mrs. De Lucca will accept when flooding took out the city for half of September is exhausting.”

Dane’s lips thinned, and he looked down into the glass. “Remember who you’re talking to,” he said, keeping his voice low. “I know when you’re lying.” He also knew he had no right to say that, let alone push her. He lost that thirty-five days ago. But he’d been officially protecting her for four years—for most of his life, unofficially—and hell if he’d let her pain go unnoticed now. He could handle his own misery, but he couldn’t ignore Zara’s.

Her pert nose wrinkled. “Then you’re projecting. You’ve been gone a while. Jet lag’s probably got you seeing stars, too.” Zara returned to the cabinet and mixed her own drink—a martini, he noted. And stronger than what she’d given him. “Why don’t you text Sawyer and relax for a bit? Daddy’s almost finished with Mr. Kincaide.”

“Only you could make a few weeks sound like a decade,” he muttered before tilting the glass to his lips.

“From what I understand it was quite a fraught few weeks. They ought to count as a decade. At least.”

“I can’t say that’s wrong.” He paused. *So many things to say, and no idea which ones would help.* “I just wanted to say that ... I want you to be happy, Z. You deserve it.” He couldn’t

look at her. He meant the words, but the thought of her finding joy with somebody else... Turning away, he walked to the window and looked out over the grounds.

“Thank you. Welcome home, Dane.” He heard her exhale and tried not to picture her chest rising and falling in that damn dress. “I hope you’ll be joining us next week. Hannah’s put you and Sawyer with Vince and his wife. I think Gia would like to see you there. She’s, uh, been having a hard time with all the changes. Poor Dex’s life’s been rough. And Dad’s had Cage handling guard duty, so...”

“That explains why he was so happy to see me today.”

“No doubt.” She paused. “So, will you—”

“No.” He couldn’t take the thought her walking down the aisle. He’d shoot Joseph De Lucca on fucking principle. His fingers gripped the glass hard enough he was surprised it didn’t shatter. “I’m sorry, Zara. I’ll be working.”

“Oh. Well, then. Never mind.” Her voice was softer. Sadder. He heard her move across to the table, the tokens sliding around on the paper. “There. Easy fix.” A sip from her glass, her phone pinging. He didn’t turn around. “Hm. Sounds like I have to go inspect the gazebo. It was nice to see you, Dane.”

Stop her, you idiot!

He didn’t. He listened to her footsteps until they faded into the house’s interior. His jaw clenched so tight, he was afraid his teeth might crack.

And what if you go after her? Stop her? What would that change? Nothing. The answer is nothing.

Instead of throwing the cut crystal glass, he slammed it down on the table and kicked one of Catherine’s fussy Louis XIV chairs over.

“Dane? Is everything all right?”

No. It isn’t. He looked over at Lloyd, snatched up the glass to empty it, then set the chair upright before the butler

could get there. “Sorry. Clumsy moment. Fuckin’ jet lag.”

Lloyd lifted a single, gray eyebrow. “Do be more careful. We can’t have anything happening to you now.” He gestured back toward the foyer and said, “Mr. Fitzgerald is ready to see you.”

Dane nodded, hoping once the debrief was over, Adam would have another job for him. He had a sick feeling he was going to be gifted with time off. Never mind that he’d rather shoot himself in both feet than have time alone with his thoughts. *Maybe if I begged?*

“You!”

Dane’s foot froze on the bottom step, his hand on the banister as he wrenched his head around. Hannah Fitzgerald’s high heels clacked on the marble floor, and she marched right at him. Before he could ask her what she wanted, her hand was on his arm, tugging him back toward the parlor.

“What are you—”

“Dad can wait. I need to say a few things to you.”

Dane huffed but didn’t resist. She tried to fling him into the room, and he humored her, his steps quickening briefly before he turned, facing her with his hands on his hips. “If this is about Zara, your brother’s already—”

“I know what Ethan said,” Hannah snapped. She closed the doors and wheeled around with near-military precision, even more distracting because nobody should’ve been able to move like that in heels that high. “About moving on. How it wasn’t personal.”

“Something like that, yeah.”

“It’s bullshit.” Hannah reached out and grabbed Dane’s lapels, shaking him as best she could. She was taller than the twins, but he still gazed down at her much like a mastiff might look at a pushy Pomeranian.

“Are you unwell, Hannah? Should I get Mrs. Mac to check you for fever?”

“He didn’t fight for me, Dane. I hoped and prayed and he ... he just let me marry somebody else.”

“Shit. That’s...” Dane slowly lifted his hands to Hannah’s shoulders. “Isn’t that what you wanted?”

She released his jacket but didn’t move out of his light hold. “I told myself it was.”

“I take it that helping with a wedding’s bringing up bad memories?”

Hannah glared. “Does he still love me, Dane?”

Dane dropped his hands, turning his back to her. Shoving his hands into his pockets, Dane found the St. Michael coin and ran his thumb across its worn features. “It doesn’t matter, Hannah.”

“Everyone keeps saying that, but they’re wrong.” She walked around him, getting back in his line of sight. Her bright blue eyes were manic. “Why didn’t Sawyer stop it? If he loved me, why didn’t he fight for me.”

“You’re better off with Van der Lindt, Hannah. You knew that as much as he did. That’s why you chose—”

“I didn’t choose,” she hissed. “He made it clear to me he wasn’t an option. Just like you’re doing right now.”

Dane scowled. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.” He turned again, his eyes on the door. “I have to meet with your father. I’ve already kept him waiting.” She jumped in front of him again, her hands shoving his chest. Hard. Dane fell back a step to keep his balance. “Hannah...”

“If *anyone* knows what they’re talking about here, it’s me, Dane. And trust me, I wish you were anyone else. When Zara told me who it was...” She shuddered, as if being attached to his name was akin to willingly getting cancer.

“Wow. There’s a vote of confidence.”

“You’re The Butcher, Dane. Would you be thrilled if your baby cousin tried to marry someone with your

reputation?”

“And yet here we are, and you’re—”

“You can’t let her do this, Dane!”

He took a deep breath, his shoulders sinking. “Even if she doesn’t marry him, she’d never have me back. I know what a burned bridge looks like.”

Hannah stared up at him with wide, sad eyes. “Do you love her?” It was such a stupid question. Dane closed his eyes, visions of Zara’s stricken, tear-streaked face haunting the darkness behind them. “Do you love her, Dane?” Hannah asked again.

“Yes. But it isn’t that simple. I need her to be safe. Happy. She needs that.”

“She’s marrying a De Lucca. That’s not safe. And she sure as shit isn’t happy. So, what’s your next excuse?”

Something in Dane’s head shifted into place, sending all sorts of dust and dirt flying. He took another step back. She was right. *What was all this for if, in the end, neither of those things were true? What was any of it for?* His hand fisted in his pocket, the edge of the coin pressing into his palm. “Your father is waiting for me.”

“Dane!”

“Do *you* still love Sawyer?” That shocked a gasp from her. One hand rose to her chest, grasping the silver charm hanging at her neckline.

“I will always...”

“What’s *your* excuse, then?”

Her perfect face contorted in a mix of grief and anger. “I’m married, Dane.”

“Ah, yes. And we all know how Fitzgeralds honor the institution of marriage. By the way, how is your stepmother? You know which one I’m talking about, yeah?”

He used her shock to get around her, pushing the door open. He half-expected her to shout at his back or try to tackle him from behind. She didn't. Maybe she didn't have Gia's temperament. That or he'd given her something to think about.

Good. That makes two of us.

ZARA

Chicago, Illinois, October 7

Seeing Dane hadn't been the worst thing in the world. It wasn't in the top fifty-thousand options, but it ranked solidly above water torture and an evening at the opera with Grandma. But it didn't help her state of mind in the slightest. The rest of the afternoon passed in a blur of choices she deferred to her stepmother, her sisters, or the wedding coordinator. She simply didn't care anymore. *Have I ever?* This wedding—if it happened—would be spectacular, no matter which flowers decorated the altar. The event joining two of Chicago's most powerful and storied clans would forge a legend on its own. Everything else was just gilt and glitz.

She spent the next day at a spa with most of her wedding party—Brenna, and five of her high school besties who were available (several were too far away to come for more than the wedding). Brenna was the only one staying in the Fitzgerald house, and once they said good night, Zara slipped into her own room. Her head spun with airline arrivals and departures, and so many logistics. Her phone pinged with a confirmation from Gia, and she said a silent prayer of thanks.

Now, I just need to grab her outfit from under my bed, and go sleep in her—wait.

The hair on the back of her neck crept up, and her spine stiffened. She spun, staring into the half-lit space, past the dress form wearing her wedding gown, to the gauzy curtains blowing in the lakeshore breeze from her balcony. "Fuck. If that rain gets in, Cathy's gonna kill me..." She rushed to shut

the doors. The first one swung shut easily. She reached for the second, and a hand closed over her mouth.

“Don’t scream.”

The scream in her throat evaporated. She’d have known his voice anywhere—and the scent of his favorite cologne. He must have felt her relax because instead of explaining anything else, Dane lowered his hand and stepped back, allowing her to face him. As usual, he wore all black, but his damp hair hung longer than she’d seen it in ages. His expression arrested her more than his presence—worried lines showed between his brows, and dark circles ringed his eyes. “I’m sorry to surprise you,” he said in a rough whisper. “But I needed to see you. Alone.”

She took a second to glare at him in silence. Whether she was more annoyed about the shock or his choice to look vulnerable now, she had no idea. She couldn’t even fault his logic. She hadn’t been alone for five minutes in weeks, except to sleep. Dad insisted on two guards if she was outside the mansion, as both he and Vittorio De Lucca seemed to think rivals might get ideas about sabotaging the alliance via the sham marriage. Not that she didn’t think Joseph would stand up for her or pay a ransom. He would. But he wasn’t any more interested in being married to her than she was to him. They were engaging in a formality, meant to appease the traditional minds among the Outfit. Like the man in front of her.

Dane was nothing if not a traditionalist, after all—albeit a chaotic, sadistic one. *But even those traits are good, old-fashioned ideals here.* The thought made her even more tired. “We’re alone,” she answered, her voice flat. “What’s the problem, Dane?”

Instead of speaking, he just studied her, his midnight gaze scanning over every inch of exposed skin. “Does he treat you well? Is he hurting you?”

Really? That’s where he’s at with this? She replied in silence and a single raised brow.

Dane's left hand clenched into a fist. One of his only tells. "Fucking tell me."

Zara's eyes rolled, and she stalked toward her closet, stripping off her gray slip dress as she went, and turning slowly to show off her lack of bruises. Being in the same room with him already felt like being naked, so standing in her bra and panties was hardly a change. He'd seen her naked after all—and hadn't gone mad from desire. *Otherwise, he wouldn't have thrown me out.* "Do I look hurt?" she snapped, before dragging a silk robe on.

She'd never seen him pale before. Her mouth opened to comment on it, but he surged into motion, striking fast. She had enough time to gasp as his hands caught her upper arms, his grip tight, possessive. Then his lips crushed hers. The alarm in the back of her head went off—*This isn't in the plan!* But her mouth opened for him and her body had its own ideas. The tension evaporated out of her shoulders for the first time in weeks, and she leaned into his hold. Until the memory of standing in his doorway flashed. And then, Hannah's words: "*No second chances.*"

Zara dragged herself back, pushing against his chest. "No." The word tore from her, leaving a jagged hole in her chest. "I'm not a toy, Dane. You don't get to pick me up after you threw me away."

"I was wrong," he said, his voice thick.

"You didn't seem to think that at the time."

Dane's hold stayed tight on her arms. "It was never about choosing you, Zara. Because, for me, it's *always* been you. I didn't throw you away. I let you leave."

"The things you said—"

"I thought it was better. That you'd be happier with a man like Joey. Who hasn't done the things I've done. I—"

"Broke my heart and thought I'd be *happier* for it?" Tears burned their way down her cheeks.

“I was an idiot.”

“Yeah. You were.” She pushed her hair out of her face. “But at least Joey isn’t. And neither am I.”

He shook his head. “It should have been your choice, Zara. I’m so sorry.”

“Well, you’ve got your wish, for what it’s worth. I am safer now. Joseph’s never going to hurt me like you did. Nobody can.” The tears came faster, and she turned away, refusing to look at him.

Dane coughed. “I got you into this mess, Zara. I swear I’m going to get you out of it. Maybe I couldn’t make you happy, but I can at least make sure you’re free.”

“You didn’t even try!” Zara’s temper flared, and her hand flexed. She wished she dared throw something at his thick skull. “You shoved me out the door before you even asked what I wanted. Do you know what I need to be happy, Dane?”

He stared at her, shaking his head. “Tell me.”

Fine. He wants to know. His funeral. “It’s stupid.” Zara shoved his hands off her. “Because it turns out, I need you. Just you. A giant dumbass with bullets where his brain’s supposed to be.”

“Then let me fix it!” If she didn’t know him better, she’d have thought he was begging. But Dane never begged.

“How the hell can you fix it?” She stifled a sob and Dane’s arm rose, then fell. Like he didn’t know whether to reach out or not.

“I promise, sweetheart. No more closed doors. No more pretending we’re better off without each other.”

“What?” He might as well have spoken in Greek.

“I can’t keep acting like I don’t love you.” Dane’s eyes shone, his voice shook. “I still don’t think I’m good enough

for you, but I need you, too. Zara, baby, I need you so fucking much. Just let me fix this.”

She stared. What else was there to do? He’d said more in three minutes than he had in the last five years. *Well. More about his feelings anyway.* And suddenly a lot of things made much more sense. She swallowed, fighting the urge to throw herself at him, because then they’d stop talking and he might never start again. “Dane, there’s no such thing as not being good enough.”

“I’m a fucking enforcer, Z. You know what that means.”

“What you do isn’t what you are. If that’s the case, I’m a useless student who’s never going to have a real job and wastes her parents’ money.”

“That’s not even half true.”

“I don’t even care if it is.” She grabbed his hand and dared to move closer. “I love you, Dane.”

“Zara—”

“And I don’t think I’m capable of loving anyone else, so you’re probably stuck with me.”

He squeezed her hand, and stared into her eyes. “I’ve made a lot of enemies. I’ll make more. I’m not telling you this to scare you off. But—”

“You know I don’t scare easily.” She shouldn’t have felt a beaming smile on her face at his confession, but try as she might, she didn’t care.

“If you’re choosing me, baby, you’ve got to understand the risks.”

Zara put her free hand to Dane’s cheek, moving closer until their bodies almost touched. “Listen to me, Dane Ryan. I would walk into an actual fire for you. Whatever enemies you make, whatever you do, you have my heart. But I can’t do this if you’re going to change your mind again. I want you forever, or not at all.”

“You have me, love.” Dane’s broad hands caught her by the waist, splayed across her back, and he pulled her in, closing the last few inches between their bodies. “I’ll always be yours.” He bowed his head and brushed his lips over hers. “I guess I won’t have to kill Joseph after all,” he added with a smile.

Her eyes flared, then narrowed, even as she leaned into him. “Don’t you dare. I like Joseph.” She slid her fingers into his damp hair, drawing him into a deeper kiss. “He’s been a gentleman.”

Dane’s fingers curled possessively around her sides. “Don’t tease. I will fucking start a war if he touched you.”

“Liar.”

“Not really.” He squeezed her hip.

“Not even a kiss on the lips this whole time.” Zara smoothed her palm along his back, tracing the strap for a holster. She sighed against his lips. “And none of my new guards will flirt with me. I blame you.”

“Maybe you just haven’t noticed?” He seized her hips and lifted her off the floor.

“Also your fault,” Zara retorted, trusting his familiar hold. She wrapped her legs around his hips to feel his heat, gasping at the ridge of his erection pressing against her.

Dane moaned against her throat. “Not one kiss?”

“No.” She pouted and flexed her hips. Dane pulled her in hard against his erection, then fell with her onto the bed. His arms took most of his weight, but his hips pressed down, pinning her to the white duvet.

“I have a lot to make up for, don’t I?” His right hand found her side and cupped her breast. Zara could only nod and rake her nails along his black cotton shirt. He claimed her mouth again, deepening the kiss and taking control until she whimpered with need.

“Mm.” Zara’s eyes opened. She studied the hard planes of his face, the scruff of beard, the wicked gleam in his dark eyes and heard the distant sound of voices and movement in the house—her brother Caleb downstairs, the housekeeper. They weren’t alone. Not truly. A thrill whipped through her and kindled an ache low in her center. Seeing him half-mad with desire, knowing they’d have to be almost silent, made it all the hotter. *God, what’s wrong with me? I’m not the kinky one! Am I?*

He wasn’t just Dane, but The Butcher, the shadow who’d caught her alone in her room, and stolen back the heart he’d broken. Zara walked her fingertips along his waist and slid them under his belt. She couldn’t reach the buckle yet, but the tilt of his lips said he understood her intentions. And maybe more than that. The ache sharpened, and she moved under him, restless. Needy. His kisses were fierce, lips bruising against hers. It wasn’t enough.

“Please, don’t make me wait,” she whimpered. “I love you, I can’t wait, please...”

He grinned, and for a heartrending moment, she thought he might draw it out just to make her lose her mind. But then he stood, his long, nimble fingers unfastening his belt, untucking his shirt from the waistband of his pants to lift over his head. “If you’re that impatient,” he began in a playful tone, “then maybe you should just take what you want.” He lifted his hand to her cheek, his thumb tracing her lower lip.

Zara’s grin answered his, and she nipped his finger. “I already did.” She sat up, grabbing his waistband and pulling him on top of her. “This is where my future husband is supposed to show me exactly how much he missed me, and all the things he’s been fantasizing about since the last time.” She giggled. “But quietly. If someone comes in, there’s going to be absolute chaos.”

“I’m not the one who needs the reminder. Unless that was some other brunette goddess screaming down the apartment walls...” His fingers grazed along the side of her

knees, over her hips, catching the hem of her dress and lifting it along the way. She sat up and helped him remove it, but before she could lay back, his hand went around her to unclasp her bra. “Don’t move,” he whispered, bowing his head to kiss her. His lips burned a trail down her throat, nipping her skin. His hand covered her breast, teasing her nipple to a peak. “Do you think you can be quiet, Zara?”

A soft gasp escaped, but she closed her lips and nodded. She stayed still otherwise, her eyes wide and dark with all her own fantasies. “For you? I can be.” Her hand stirred then, sliding along his hip, to the bulge just below his waist. “It’s a lot more fun following your directions here than in the middle of a party...” She kissed him before finishing the confession. “I had to discard so many panties thanks to your bossy voice.”

“Damn it, Zara,” he groaned through his teeth. She blinked, confused by the sudden change of tone. He shifted on top of her, getting onto his knees and catching her wrist to move it aside. She propped herself up on her elbows, the question in her eyes but unspoken. “Take them off unless you want me to rip them,” he warned, lowering his own pants and briefs.

She didn’t hesitate. Keeping her gaze on him, Zara wriggled out of the offending cloth and flicked them away with her toe. She laid back, legs spread just enough to keep his attention as she toyed with her bare pussy. “The idea of you ripping my clothes off does sound fun, but I don’t think I could stay quiet for that.”

His dark eyes settled between her legs, watching her for a minute until he captured her wrist again. “Later, then.” He lifted her hand to his mouth, his tongue flicking out over the tip of her fingers, his eyes closing as he tasted her. That’s all it took for him to release her, grab her legs and drag them over his lap. His fingers stroked her, testing, working her until she begged all over again. Then he gripped her waist, pulling her even closer as he thrust his hips forward, entering her in one full stroke.

Zara caught her scream and muffled the sound against Dane's shoulder before dragging his hand up to her mouth and pressing it there. Her body was ready to explode from weeks of denial—she'd barely even touched herself, because doing so only called up fantasies of Dane. Now she was so wet, she almost worried he'd object. His next thrust, she moaned again, the sound stifled by her lips, his hand, and her shreds of self-control.

His head bowed, his lips roving along her shoulder. His body began to shiver, his thrusts becoming more erratic until he slowed down. Almost too slow. "You feel so good," he whispered against her ear. "I'm not letting you go."

Zara whimpered, tightening around him, digging her nails into his arm to keep him close. She bucked under him, the slow pace setting every nerve ending alight. The ache burning inside her took on a life of its own as the tension of holding back her cries took its toll. She wanted to scream his name, beg, demand he go faster, harder, give her the pressure she needed for release. Instead, all she could do was meet his hips with hers, scrape his skin with her nails, and feel every heartbeat between them.

He lifted his head, his eyes locking with hers. For so many years, she could only wonder what he was thinking. Now, she didn't have to. He loved her. He was hers. All hers. Her hands cupped his cheeks, her lips claiming his, letting their tongues speak. He moaned, his arms wrapping around her as his thrusts quickened once again, taking her hard, fast, until she felt the heat of his climax filling her.

She almost forgot. The orgasm hit so hard it stole her breath. Her thoughts. She was lost in it. In him. Dane's hand covered her mouth in time to save them. Barely. Zara trembled, tears escaping her eyes as the last aftershocks faded. He was still inside her, and she kept her leg wrapped around him. "Dane?" she whispered his name with all the longing she'd been afraid to express before. "Tell me we're leaving tonight. I don't think I can say goodbye to you after..."

He took too long to answer. She braced herself, waiting for all the reason and logic to spill out of him, to explain all the ways it was too dangerous. “Where do you want to go?” he asked, pulling back to give her a lazy smile. “The airport isn’t far. Maybe we just figure it out when we get there.”

“Vegas,” she answered. “At least for a couple of hours.” She ran her fingers through his tousled hair. “I want to marry you before anything else can happen.”

A line appeared between his brows. “Isn’t that where De Lucca is? And his whole rat pack of groomsmen? Doesn’t sound like a great time to run into him, sweetheart.”

Zara caught her lower lip in her teeth. *Guess this is the moment to come clean.* “It, uh, might be perfect, actually.”

“If you’re hoping I can kill off half the wedding party at once—”

“No. There’s no need for that, D.” She cleared her throat. “By the time we get there, he’ll be married.”

He narrowed his eyes and tipped his hand up to push her chin back toward him. “Want to run that by me again?”

Her mouth turned up at the corner, her smile sheepish. “So, um, it turns out that when Gia broke up with Dex, it was because of Joseph.”

“De Lucca? Seriously?”

“Mm. That’s why she’s been going to ‘art lessons’ this semester. She flew to Vegas this afternoon to catch his bachelor party at a strip club where he could make a clean getaway from his security. Joey figures Vittorio will calm down after a while, so—”

“You’re kidding me.”

“Nope.”

Dane’s expression blanked into a perfect poker face. She wouldn’t blame him for being upset. *But on the other hand, he kinda deserves it.* But her heart seized when he pulled out of

her and sat back on his heels, his hands going to his thighs. “Joseph met your sister, fucked her, presumably had a conversation or two with her ... and *still* wants to marry her?”

Zara did her best to look severe while his cum was still dripping down her thigh. “That’s my twin you’re talking about.”

Dane’s lips twitched. “Yeah. The evil one. I’m aware.”

“Stop. Just accept the gift, okay? He at least wants to marry her more than he wants to marry me.”

“He has shitty taste, but I won’t complain.” Dane kissed her temple, then sat on the edge of the bed to reach for his briefs. “I guess we could go to Vegas and hope your dad’s too tired to kill us after he’s done with Gia.”

“Daddy will be fine. He’ll still get the De Lucca accord, and he’ll be too busy picking up the mess the Bratva’s been making to worry about anything else.” She grabbed her dress from the foot of the bed, then wrapped her arms around Dane from behind, settling her cheek on his shoulder. “Or should I do things really well and steal some of Cathy’s jewelry on my way out to finance our tickets?”

His hand covered hers, and he turned his face to kiss her cheek. “We don’t need to do that,” he said. “Zara, just so you know, I’m happy to marry you tonight. But there are other ways to go about it. I don’t want you to feel like that’s the only way for us to be together.”

Her expression shifted, wariness and confusion, settling into a pout he’d probably seen more than once and pulled away from him to drag her dress on and get to her feet with as much dignity as possible. “Do you think I’m running off with you as a prank, Dane Ryan?” she rounded on him. “I’ve been waiting for you since I was thirteen. And I’m not living with a man I’m not married to,” she added primly, crossing her arms. Sex was one thing. Commitment was entirely different.

She heard him sigh, and though he turned his head away, she could *feel* the eye roll. Yet, when he turned back, he wore

a smile as he grabbed her again. Somehow, she ended up on her back again, arms still crossed, pinned between his arms as he settled over her. “I was just making sure,” he laughed. “But, really, Zara? Vegas? We’re not that cliché, are we?”

“I’m cliché at a genetic level.” The sullen note faded out of her voice despite the retort. It was hard to sulk with Dane pressing her into the bed and his lips so close to hers, but she maintained a trace of wariness.

“No, you’re just *stubborn* at that level.”

“Then where do you want to get married? I mean it, Dane. I’m not shacking up with you for a year in Bali or Venezuela or anywhere else. You’re the only man I want to be with, and I want it legal, so Dad won’t get any more great ideas.”

Dane’s smile didn’t fade. “Oh, don’t get me wrong, baby girl. We’re getting married, but I don’t have De Lucca’s clout, and he’s got too many uncles over there. We’ll need to bail for a bit. You were saying something about Nepal before?”

“Too cold. But it’s a big globe.” She rubbed her leg against his, her playful mood returning. “Spain is nice this time of year. Hannah will let us borrow one of their yachts that’s moored there.”

“Hm,” he moaned, adjusting his weight and slipping an arm beneath her. “If we’re hopping planes tomorrow morning, we’ve got a few minutes before we need to leave.” His lips trailed along her jawline and down her throat again. “Because I don’t think I can let you leave this bed before making love to you one more time.”

“I think that sounds like a very, very good plan.” Her leg hooked around his hips as she spoke, and she traced idle patterns along his sides, up his back. “Probably better to slip out later anyway. Less people wandering around to ask questions.” She giggled. “But if we keep this pattern up, we’ll be breaking for orgasms five times between here and the airport.”

“So be it.” He reached back, his hand sliding down her leg to her knee to tilt her hips higher. “After all, we only have a few more nights before we’re married. Better not waste them.” She didn’t have the chance to respond before he thrust his cock inside her. Zara nearly cried out, but his lips were there, catching the sound and many more that came after.

Chapter Seven

ZARA

Sardinia, Italy, October 22

The slight rocking—a constant of the last nine days—lulled her mind to a quiet, half-dreaming state. Zara blinked at the sunlight dancing through the cabin curtains and curled closer to Dane’s warm chest. She didn’t want to wake up yet, lest the champagne and dodgy local wines she’d downed the day before remind her what a stupid idea that was. But it had been their wedding, and she’d never planned on being a sober bride. What was the fun in that? Besides, she’d needed the booze to take the edge off missing her twin, her friends, and even her other siblings.

Zarah sighed and pressed her lips to Dane’s shoulder. His arm moved reflexively, sliding up her back and pulling her closer. She murmured her appreciation. So long as she stayed close to him, the rest didn’t matter. In fact, if she woke him up with a proper kiss, nothing else would matter at all for an hour or three.

And then her new phone started singing some chirpy Euro-pop tune she couldn’t stand.

“Fuck!” Zara flung Dane’s arm off and scrambled to reach the nightstand. “Why are you... Google, stop? Google, shut up!” But it wasn’t her alarm, it was a goddamn call. Only one person had the number. “Fuck.” This time, the word came out with more dread than annoyance.

“I swear to God, if this isn’t an actual emergency, I’m going to shoot that thing.” The bed shifted as Dane sat up. Rubbing his shoulder, his eyes locked on the phone. “Shit. *Is* it an actual...? Damn it.” He tossed the comforter off his naked form and scooped his pants off the floor.

“Maybe not?” Zara shrugged helplessly, wishing she could admire him and maybe just throw herself across the bed

instead of doing what she really should. She tapped the screen. “Hannah?”

“Hey! Finally. I was worried you were still passed out.” Her sister sounded as exhausted as Zara suddenly felt.

“I wish I was. Is there a reason you’re calling me at the wrong side of 7:00 AM the day after my wedding?”

“Of course. But how was the wedding? Did you—”

“Hannah. I’m hungover and tired. I’ll go over the pics and details later.” She heard her sister huff, and imagined Hannah staring too hard at her manicure.

“Gia’s back home,” came the eventual explanation. “With Joey.”

Zara blinked, her sleepy brain not keeping up. “I know. You texted yesterday.”

“And his grandfather’s given his blessing about the whole thing.”

That’s the big news? “You couldn’t possibly just text me that?” Zara watched Dane pull on a shirt and pouted until he made a pointed glance downward at her still-naked breasts, tossing her a t-shirt.

“Um. That’s not the news. It’s how the news started, though. And it took a lot of talking, but Dad accepted it too.”

Zara dropped the shirt into her lap. “Really?”

“Yes!” Hannah sounded so excited. “I told him—” Zara didn’t need to hear the rest of that sentence. *Christ, please not that.*

“Hannah, please fucking tell me you didn’t tell him anything.”

“He’s fine! Zara, I swear he’s fine. He was so worried about you.”

“Does he know what ship we’re on?”

“No! Of course not. But I said you were in Italy, and I’d call and—”

“Fucking Christ...” Dane marched to the wardrobe, yanking the door open so hard it banged against the wall. *Guess he’s keeping up with the conversation better than I am.* Zara kept her eyes on him. He swore under his breath in Italian and hoisted a suitcase onto the foot of the bed. “Get your shit. We’re getting off at the next port.”

”How about you just choose a new next port with the captain?” she asked gently, already dreading another mad flight into the night. Running from Chicago to St. Louis, and then hiding in a seedy Atlanta motel wearing a barely convincing, torturously itchy wig hadn’t been high on her favorite trips. She reached up and tugged at her now-light-brown hair, wondering what the hell shade she’d need for their next vanishing act. *Good thing I bought that bleach kit, I suppose.*

“Zara, he’s not mad.” Hannah spoke as urgently as Dane, but with more calm. “We talked for hours. I made him promise not to do anything stupid. He just wants to talk.”

“Dad’s idea of talking isn’t always bloodless,” Zara scoffed. “Even you know that.”

“It is this time.”

She drew a deep breath. “Where did you tell him we’d talk?”

“Sorrento. You’re heading there next anyway, right?” Hannah’s question made Zara glance at Dane, who’d stopped at the door. Their eyes met for a long moment.

“Right,” Zara said with false assurance. “Sorrento. And if we land there, and I end up a widow, I’m going to claw your eyes out.”

“That’s fair.” Hannah sighed. “I promise, you don’t have to panic about this.”

“I’m not. But I do need to convince Dane not to buy every gun between here and Sicily, so I should go.”

She hung up on Hannah and dragged the t-shirt on. Thankfully, it was one of Dane’s so it worked just fine as a dress.

Her new husband drummed his fingers on the door then pushed himself back into the room. He sat on the edge of the bed, his head bowed. “There aren’t that many guns between here and Sicily.”

“I suspect you’d find some if you wanted them.”

His lips twisted, and he reached for her hand. Their fingers entwined, he raised his gaze to hers. “You do realize we’re not going to Sorrento, yeah?”

“Of course not.” Zara settled closer to him and laid her head on his shoulder. “But we should get moving. Wherever we are going.”

“I’d toss the phone overboard, too.”

She offered it to him. “Do that on your way to the captain. I’ll just end up worrying about it killing dolphins or something.”

“I think the dolphins will be all right.” He took the phone but set it aside and wrapped his arms around her. His midnight eyes stared straight through her own. “Is this what you want?”

“What do you mean?”

Dane stroked her hair. “When you pictured our life together. We’ve run straight through half the US and Spain. Are you sure of this?”

Zara swallowed the knot rising in her throat. “What other option do we have?”

“They’re your family, Z. Are you willing to never see them again? For me?”

Her eyes rolled so hard she half-expected them to get stuck. “That’s the stupidest question you’ve ever asked me.”

He didn’t let her pull away. He caught her hip and pulled her, unresisting, onto his lap. “I know you love your family. And I know you love me, Zara. But—”

“But you’re already wanting an annulment so you can ditch me?”

“You know that’s not true. I would do anything for you. Except make you miserable.”

“Then shut up.” Zara sat up, using his chest to lever herself up further, so she could look him in the eyes. Tempting as it was to straddle his lap, she was a little too aware of her lack of panties and that it would just end in sex. Immediately. “Dane. The only way I’d ever consider going home now is if you left me. And even then? I’d probably just go marry Cristoforo from the bar and—”

His lips silenced her. She gasped but didn’t fight it. Next thing she knew, she was on her back, pinned beneath him. “I don’t know who the fuck Cristoforo is, but I’m going to make sure you forget him.”

“Mm. A lovely goal.” She slid her hand through his hair and let her lips find his pulse point, just below his left ear. “One you can pursue after you talk to the captain.”

He shook his head then kicked the suitcase to the floor. “I’ve got plenty of time.” Kneeling between her legs, he lifted his shirt above his head. “Unless you’re too tired, love.”

“Never.” Zara let her legs part further, and rubbed her foot along his calf. “But considering your track record, I don’t know you’re capable of this kind of rush job, Mr. Ryan.”

Dane stared down at her, a smile almost dawning. Without breaking their contact, his hand flew to the nightstand. Zara bit her lip to muffle her laughter as he brought the corded phone to his ear. “Captain? Dane. Change of plans. My darling bride wants to go to Capri.” He licked his lips, nodded, then hung up the phone. “You were saying?”

Zara giggled, but she was already reaching for him. “That you definitely won’t be done before we set sail?” She tried her best to look serious as his brows arched and he unfastened his pants. “It’s okay to admit your limits, D. You’re just not good at going fast.”

“Oh, I can go fast.” His hand slid down her side, between their bodies. He stopped short of where she wanted his touch. “But some things demand my full and thorough attention. Don’t you agree?” His fingers hovered above her pussy.

She tilted her head up, playing imperious despite the quickening beat of her heart and her fingers digging into the tangled covers. He knew exactly how much she liked his thorough attention to detail. She liked playing games too. They both did, luckily. “Hm... You’re saying thoroughness isn’t compatible with speed?”

“Maybe.”

Zara smirked. “So, you’re admitting your limits.”

Dane rolled his eyes and sat up. “You know, maybe I am. You’re so right.” He grabbed his shirt and started to pull it back on.

She laughed, dragging the hem of her shirt up as he was pulling his on. “You’re giving up so easily? Damn. Marriage really did change you. Guess I’ll handle myself and—”

“Like hell.” His shirt flew across the room, and he gathered her in his arms, dragging her back onto his lap, straddling him the way she’d hesitated to do earlier, his erection finding her entrance with disconcerting ease, especially considering the way his grip tightened on her. Not that her own body minded—the dangerous glint in Dane’s eyes only made her hotter. “Who said anything about giving up?” Before she could reply, he buried himself inside her, in a fast, brutal thrust, anchoring her with his forearm at the small of her back.

Zara didn't answer, except in pleased gasps and the way her nails dug into his skin. She was aware, dimly, that she ought to care that his pants were still on, the zipper rasping along her thigh. But nothing mattered except the pressure building inside her with each rough movement and the taste of his lips on hers. When she could think even for a moment all she said was, "Don't stop. God, don't ever stop..." Then everything else was moans and half-finished syllables as a wild climax slammed her with his next thrust, throwing her back into a delicious exhaustion.

She opened her eyes, finding her head was back on her pillow, her chest still heaving. Dane was no longer beneath her. Zara opened her eyes, turning her head to find him stretched out alongside her, blocking her view of the door. Rarely did Dane ever look vulnerable. Even when he slept, he seemed slightly on edge. But right now, he looked worlds away, a wicked grin lighting his features. "That fast enough for you?" His words came out breathy as she felt.

"Not bad. For a first attempt." Zara's laughter bubbled up—she couldn't hold the game face anymore. "Are we doing marriage wrong, do you think? I don't remember anyone saying it's supposed to be fun. I thought it was the opposite."

"That's because you've only seen your dad's set of trainwrecks." He set his hand on her hip.

"Good point." Zara nodded, but her teeth caught her lower lip as some of the future caught up to her orgasm-clouded head. "But you don't mind either, do you? I know I'm signing away my family. You're giving up your career. And running off with me. Permanently."

"Before you start to wonder about my regrets, let me make it clear. I only have only one."

"And that is?"

His grin melted into a tender expression she'd never thought him capable of. "We should've done this years ago."

"When we weren't talking to one another?"

“Fine. I should’ve kidnapped you until you forgave me.”

“You say the sweetest things.”

He propped himself up on his elbow and ran a finger along her cheek. “I love you. Wherever we go, so long as we’re together, that’s more than enough. God help me, corny as it is, it’s true.”

“I promise not to make you say it very often.” She turned her head to kiss his hand, sighing as he nuzzled her shoulder. “Wouldn’t want you losing street cred.”

“I’ll make it up to you, baby.” His lips brushed hers. “I promise.”

“You already have.” She caught his shoulder and tugged him down. “But I’ll let you keep trying anyway.”

DANE

Capri, Italy, October 23

This is stupid. What are we fucking doing? What the hell was I thinking? We should have kept going. But they might track the boat. We need to ditch it now and disappear. This is the best choice. There are plenty of smaller things to rent here in the off-season. We hit Monaco, and I’ll check in with Pedro. He owes me a favor or two. Then use the next ID sets, and disappear in Switzerland.

Dane slumped in the biggest armchair in the cabin and stretched one leg over the ottoman, trying to keep his frantic thoughts hidden. His foot tapped on the floor in an uneven rhythm counter to the ship’s constant, faint rocking. He held a book—one of hers—but hadn’t read a single word thanks to the alluring dance of bare skin, lace, and gauzy cotton happening right in front of him. The constant urge to get up and drag all Zara’s clothing back off of her didn’t fade even when he was losing his mind, apparently. They needed to get the fuck out of this boat. Maybe the planet. *Besides, I can’t*

pull her through the streets of Capri naked. I'd have to kill too many people.

She glanced over, and he smiled, then set his cheek against his fist to keep from reaching for her. Zara returned to her makeup, and Dane's smile fell away, his tongue gliding back and forth along his teeth. It wasn't like telling her to hurry would help—they were stuck in a holding pattern until the boat could reach the berth. And they'd been stuck for almost two hours.

He heard more than felt the engine kicking up. *Cleared to dock? Thank Christ.* He dropped the book in his lap and glanced out the window. The wait wasn't quite as long as he feared—not as many tourists this time of year—but the endless doubts and second guesses circled his skull the same way they had for twenty-four hours.

Standing up, he tossed the book on the bed and brushed his hair out of his face. Capri was twenty minutes away, and they had no better option. Nowhere in Italy was far enough from Adam Fitzgerald. At least here, if shit went south, they could get another boat relatively fast and make a break to Santorini or Egypt. Anywhere, really. It didn't matter. Not now. He only needed breathing space to set up somewhere with the new identities. No matter where they landed, someone would be needing wet work and cleanup.

Meanwhile, Zara sat at the vanity, painting on makeup like she didn't have a goddamn care in the world. Like this was just a honeymoon, and they weren't fleeing for their lives.

Dane jammed his hands into his pockets, wincing at the cheap material. *Fucking board shorts. Jesus.* The pastel blue color didn't help—but Zara thought they were hysterical, and he'd lost the argument. *Better than the flip-flops. I think.* God, he could punch himself. Dressed like one of Z's douchebag fuck-buddies. At least he'd drawn the line at Hawaiian shirts, no matter how much she pouted. “Babe? About done putting on your face?”

Zara grimaced at the mirror. “I’ll be done when the ship stops. Being ready before won’t help unless you plan on jumping into the harbor and swimming for it.”

“I’m considering all options.”

She slipped whatever piece of cosmetic nonsense she’d been wielding into her bag and smudged something on her cheekbone before arching her newly emphasized brows at him. “Why are you fidgeting? This is Capri. It’s off-season, but there’ll still be enough of a crowd to hide in, and you’ve gone over every step past this one at least hundred times. I know it by heart. Including the fifteen different if-we-get-separated options.”

“Maybe it’s the goddamn clothes. I feel like a fucking idiot.” *Or because Adam won’t hesitate to have one of us shot on sight. And I can’t even blame him.*

“You’ve worn stupider things. Your old school uniforms, for one.”

“That was a lifetime ago. I seared it out of my memory.” He threw himself on the bed, glaring at the light fixture.

“It’s not the clothes. You’re still worried Dad’s tracked the ship, aren’t you?”

He bit his bottom lip. “And I can’t find my coin.”

Zara huffed, muttering God-knew-what in French. He doubted it was a compliment. “The coin’s in your bag, in the left side pocket. And I’ve seen you handle Gia, me, Hannah, and Ethan walking into exposed arenas without ready backup more gracefully than this. Not to mention our lovely excursion through St. Louis, Atlanta, and Madrid. So, tell me what the heck’s got you wound up, or I’ll drag my feet about leaving this boat for the next two weeks.”

He gritted his teeth. “You’re all of ten pounds, Z. I’ll carry you.”

“Kicking and screaming loud enough to get outside attention?”

“Chloroform is a hell of a drug.”

Zara snickered. “You don’t have any. Nice try.”

He sat up and stared at her, his expression softening as he took a steadying breath. “It was different before.”

“Oh?” She gestured impatiently with her hand. “How?”

“I didn’t give a shit what happened to me back then. I wasn’t...” He knew the words he wanted to say, but saying them? *Jesus, I’m a fucking child.* “I wasn’t scared before.”

She frowned again, but this time she got up and came closer, holding out a hand. Dane reached for her without thinking, drawing her to stand between his legs. Her rose-and-candy scent caught his attention just before she leaned in and kissed his forehead. She’d been buying new perfume at almost every stop they made as some inexplicable accompaniment to her changing hair colors and wigs. He’d only vetoed one that smelled like a hippy opened a bakery. But, for all the wardrobe changes, she hadn’t put contacts in, so her familiar blue-and-green gaze bored into his. “Funny. Because I was *always* scared for you.”

His breath caught, and his chest tightened. “I’m sorry,” he uttered before he could stop himself. He didn’t even know what he was apologizing for. Lifting his hand to her cheek, he kissed her gently. “I’m so sorry, Zara.”

“For being yourself?” She laughed against his mouth, and her arms encircled him. “Don’t be. I love you. Even when you’re a reckless asshole. I’m the one who’s sorry. The nerves are about me, aren’t they? You’re trying to run like a professional, but you’re stuck dragging me along. Forever.”

He pulled her closer, guiding her head to rest on his shoulder while her fingers combed through his hair. “I can’t lose you, Z.” He kissed her temple, and splayed his hand protectively across her back. “You aren’t an assignment. You’re my wife.”

“I am.” Her smile returned. “And I’ll learn all the tricks. I promise you that. Now, let’s get out of here and find

somewhere stable for a few weeks. You can teach me how to disappear and fight and—”

“I’m not giving you a gun, I like living.” He smirked but Zara only sighed.

“Dad would probably forgive you if you manage to toughen me up at all. I know he thinks I’m useless.”

“Who gives a fuck what he thinks?” Dane smoothed her now-blonde hair back from her face. She looked beautiful no matter the color, but he still wasn’t used to the bleached-out beach girl vibe she’d gone for. “If he knew anything about you, he’d know what I have always known.” He looked into her eyes. “You’re perfect the way you are.”

“Thank you, my darling husband. But I’m not dumb. I know I need to learn how to do, um, what we’re doing. Running. And how to do things when you eventually decide you need to go back to work for ... someone.”

“You’ve got time to work that one out.” Dane swatted her ass lightly, allowing a smile to break through the worry as she got to her feet. “Finish getting ready. I need to make sure the crew has our bags prepped.” He kissed her, then stood, adjusting his shorts. “Sweetheart, next time you shop for me, buy a size down. Christ, we may have an incident with these things.”

“Use a belt,” she said with an airy shrug. “You can always strangle someone with it later.”

“You know me so well.” Dane laughed, kissed her again, then snatched his sunglasses from the nightstand and hurried on deck, where their luggage waited in a neat row, right in place. Leaning against the rail, he watched the yacht slowly back into place, enjoying the ocean-and-citrus breeze. There weren’t as many people milling around the harbor as he’d hoped, but a decent crowd to get lost in. His eyes scanned the harbor and lifted higher. *Why is everything in Europe uphill? Good thing it’s beautiful.* Jewel-tinted buildings glittered

against the crystal-blue sky. He understood why tourists loved the place. It was a living goddamn postcard.

The deckhands shouted across to the dock workers as the ship edged into place. Ropes flew, and the gangplank extended. Dane turned as Zara emerged from the cabin, a large floppy hat on her head, shading a face half-covered with designer shades. Dane held his hand out for her. “Subtle, love.”

“You said to look like everyone else.” Her fingers shook slightly against his, and she hitched the oversized bag she held higher on her shoulder. “I remember the plans.”

His hand tightened around hers, and he drew her closer. “You could never look like everyone else,” he teased. “Stay close, baby girl. It’s just another day in paradise.”

“The first of many.”

“I like that idea.”

Once the captain dealt with the harbor officials, and everyone’s paperwork checked out, they gathered up the bags and departed. Dane kept a hand on Zara’s arm as he led her over the gangplank and down the dock. He matched the general pace of the sparse crowd, despite his instincts telling him to full-on sprint to the nearest seedy hotel. *Do they even have those here? The billionaires have to take their hookers somewhere, right?*

The initial stretch behind them, he paused at a quiet intersection and pulled out one of the burner phones he’d picked up in Madrid. “We should probably find somewhere to —” The words caught in his mouth. His eyes were playing tricks on him. *Gotta be fucking stress.* But at the cafe across the street, a face almost exactly like Zara’s stared right at them. *It’s stress. I’m seeing shit. It’s stress.* She took off her sunglasses and rose, stepped in their direction, and— “Go. Hurry!” Dane swept in front of Zara, grabbing her waist to push her in the right direction.

“D? What—Oh.” He heard her gasp, but a worse target hit his peripheral vision.

Dane’s knee buckled. *Sawyer*. Walking right toward them. They didn’t just *track* the damn yacht. And if he’s here... “It’s a fucking trap. This way.” Hopefully, they could lose the team in the next alley. Capri’s ancient maze of streets could buy a minute or two. He could work with a minute.

“Wait! Zara!” Gianna’s voice confirmed this wasn’t a nightmare. She dodged between people to get to them, while Sawyer kept a steady, slow pace. At least he didn’t look armed. “Zara. Parley!” Gianna waved a frantic arm, and Zara froze beside Dane.

“I have to talk to her.”

“You fucking don’t.” He tightened his grip to drag her off her sandaled feet if necessary, but Zara’s hand pushed into his chest.

“You have eighty-three backups. I know what to do if we’re separated, but I must do this.”

He’d never actually shaken Zara, but she was playing it close. But in all the plans and contingencies, he’d never factored in Gia and Zara’s mind-scrambling attachment. *My mistake. I should’ve known Adam would use whatever would stop her.* Dane turned, checking over his shoulder. Fate bore down. Sawyer was too close. The window was already gone. He couldn’t make it out now, unless he did so alone. “I’m not going anywhere.”

A large hand dropped on his opposite shoulder. Dane ripped a knife from his pocket, the blade flashing open. He spun, bringing up the razor-sharp edge beneath the man’s chin. *A hostage might—Fuck.*

Are you fucking kidding me? Dane’s eyes narrowed, but he kept the knife in place. Ryan “Grim” Mayer grinned like this was a standard greeting. Maybe it was for the Storm Crows MC. “Really?” The biker’s brows rose. “Put the knife away, bro.”

“Dane!” He didn’t turn around to look at Sawyer. “Calm down,” his former partner continued, far too calmly. “We aren’t going to hurt you.”

“It’s not what you think.” That was from Gia, who’d reached them too. She grabbed Zara’s free hand. “Za-za, it’s not. I swear on everything, Dad’s cool right now. Unless Dane kills our new half-brother.”

“Our *what?*” Zara swallowed, audibly, and Dane felt her fingers curling against his wrist. “D, don’t kill whoever the hell that is. Yet.”

“His name’s Mayer.” But he lowered the blade. Not only because she asked, but because people were staring. “What I don’t know is what a fucking Storm Crow is doing on this side of the Atlantic.”

Ryan laughed. “I fucking flew.” His hand returned to Dane’s shoulder, urging him to the side. “They told me you looked just like Gia.” His bright, blue eyes appraised Zara, his ink-covered arms crossing over his broad chest. “I kind of see it. Different eyes. Higher cheekbones.”

“That’s makeup,” Gia said disdainfully. “Aren’t bounty hunters supposed to be harder to trick?”

“You know him?” Zara’s attention swung back to Dane, and her priorities seemed to have gone sideways as well.

“It’s complicated.” Dane sighed. *Well, it was only a matter of time before I landed in the doghouse.*

“I wouldn’t say he *knows* me. But since he saved your future sister-in-law’s life, as long as he doesn’t hold a weapon on me again, I’d say we’re in a good place.” Ryan’s smile fell. “Adam hired me to find you two. It would have been a lot nicer if you two could’ve stuck around Atlanta a day longer and saved us all the jet lag, but—”

Zara’s glare slid from Ryan back to Dane and over to Sawyer. “So now Dad’s dragging in spare kids to clean his messes up? Where the hell is he, John?”

“Good question,” Dane muttered but stopped at an outright hostile glare from Zara.

“Spare?” Ryan held up a hand. “Dude. I’m standing right here.”

“Yet you haven’t been there for at least the last twenty-one years, so her point stands,” Gia said, sounding far too cheerful for someone in arm’s reach of an oversized Storm Crow.

Zara sniffed. “I’ll bother being polite when you aren’t ambushing my husband.”

“Husband?” Sawyer gaped at Dane. “You actually married her?”

“Mad you weren’t the best man?” Grim asked.

Dane’s eyes rolled. No divine stroke of genius or patience struck, so he had only one option. “Let’s get this shitshow finished, however it’s gonna land. Where’s Adam?” Maybe they’d finally answer.

“Up there.” Gianna pointed toward the cafe she’d come from, but up a level to a covered balcony that had been empty as a grave thirty seconds earlier. Now, Adam Fitzgerald and another guard stood just this side of the shadows. “He didn’t think you’d take it well if you saw him first. I volunteered.”

“If this goes to hell, I’m going to do a lot worse than the staircase would, Gigi,” Zara hissed at her twin, her tone shockingly cold. *Nice to know she’ll wreak a little havoc on my behalf. Hope she puts flowers on the grave too.* “Just so you know.”

Gia nodded. “I promise he’s only here to talk. You can take me as a hostage if he pulls anything shady, okay?”

“Did that threat make sense to anyone else?” Ryan’s confusion drew a shrug from Sawyer and an eye roll from Gianna.

“If you’re a good mercenary, we’ll explain it later. Come on.” Gia linked her arm with Zara’s, leaving Ryan and Sawyer

to walk Dane across the narrow street, but not putting more than two steps of distance between the groups—a kindness, Dane realized with a start, as it meant there was no clear shot anyone could take from Adam’s balcony without risking the twins. Gianna doing anything with forethought and consideration felt as ominous as Adam’s actual presence. *That hunk of diamonds and rubies on her left hand couldn’t have caused a new personality, could it? Jesus, I hope we’re not all about to die.*

Inside the restaurant, a handful of well-dressed patrons lingered by the windows, no doubt taking shelter from the muggy air that had already begun frizzing Gia and Zara’s hair—though for once, the twins’ strands were vastly different, with Zara’s lightened to sunny yellow and cut to just below her shoulders, and Gia’s still dark as sin and braided to her waist with her usual staggeringly expensive extensions. A few patrons eyed the pretty girls—and Zara’s bare back—but looked away quickly from the three unhappy men with them. Sawyer wore his usual suit, Ryan wore cargoes and a polo so new they still had marks from the tags being pulled out. Dane half-expected a waiter to interrupt them, thanks to his board shorts and Zara’s flimsy sundress, but whoever had paid off the staff must’ve included enough to cover the dress code too.

Their mismatched group headed up a flight of stairs that had probably seen Napoleon’s troops, and out onto the balcony where Adam lounged in an upholstered seat with a bottle of Chianti and a massive platter of cheese, olives, and meat spread on the table.

“Well, well, well. If it’s not the prodigals.” Adam lifted a glass in their direction. “I hope you appreciate the size of the donation I had to make to Father McGinty for canceling that damn wedding at the last second, Zara.”

“Not my fault you got out-bargained by a priest, Dad.”

Dane winced. “Maybe we can try *not* to antagonize your father right now, sweetheart?”

The look Zara leveled on him could've stopped a train in its tracks. "I don't think groveling is going to help now, but you can try it if you want."

Dane lifted a brow. "He's only related to one of us."

"That's not quite true." Her attention returned to her father, and Dane tried not to notice Ryan and Sawyer chortling in the background. "The marriage was done with our legal names. Dane's your son-in-law now."

"Ah. So you are married." Adam sighed. And drank.

Dane cleared his throat. "We'd have invited you, but I wasn't sure if you'd congratulate us or bury me."

"Smart boy." Adam nodded with far more approval. "I ought to at least dangle you off the fuckin' balcony til you produce a proper fuckin' apology."

"Would that have worked on my father, sir?"

"He'd have taken a bullet to the knee first. Then apologized."

"If the cops won't mind the gunshot."

"Honestly, are you sure you don't want him thrown off the balcony?" Gia muttered.

"I'm reconsidering." Zara tossed her hair and moved forward, fixing her father with a very Gia-like stare, as if calculating some internal odds. "But you can't shoot him, Dad. You also can't throw him off anything high enough to damage him. Sorry."

"And why the hell not?"

"I am sorry, Adam." Dane stepped in front of Zara. He'd be damned if he hid behind her. Or anyone. But especially not her. "If I could have done this properly, I would have. But that's as far as my apology extends. I respect the hell out of you, but I couldn't let her marry somebody else. Sure as hell not Joey De Lucca."

"And *my* husband's very happy about that," Gia added.

Adam glanced at something behind Dane and Zara—*Ryan? The seashore? God, please not a sniper*—and let out a long breath. Then poured himself another glass of wine. “Accepted. And I promise not to shoot your husband, Zara. But we need to have a chat, and you girls need to be somewhere else for it.”

Zara’s hand tightened on Dane’s fingers before she let go. “Business? Already?”

“It’s been a fucking war, sweetheart. We won’t keep him too long.” He nodded to Sawyer. “John, get the girls some food, and don’t let either one wander off for once.”

“Yes, sir.” Sawyer held the balcony door open, and Gia sashayed through. Zara glanced back once but disappeared into the dark interior once Dane nodded. No one spoke.

The door clicked shut, and Adam leaned forward with an expression as cold as a Chicago blizzard. “So, what the fuck were you planning on doing, Dane? Dragging my daughter from cave to cave? And with what fuckin’ income stream? You going to the Albanians after all?”

He considered lying, but it seemed like a bad time to bluff. “To be perfectly honest, sir, I was making it up as we went. But we had enough for a while.”

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Are you hearing this?” Adam waved a hand toward Ryan and the new guard. Dane vaguely remembered him from Chicago but had no idea what his name was.

Ryan chuckled. “I can’t judge him, Adam. I’ve done stupider shit for a woman. When she’s the right one, your brain don’t always work. You know how it is, right? Or I could call Mom and—”

“It’s not too late for more than one of your asses to be off the balcony.” Adam’s lip quirked, but the expression he fixed on Dane wasn’t nearly so amused. “I can understand stupidity. Impulsiveness. But your job was to take care of her.

And you're telling me you ran off into the fucking night without so much as the ghost of a goddamn plan."

"*Your* job was to take care of her," Dane spat before he could stop himself. "My plan was to make her happy, which is far more than Joseph De Lucca could have done for her."

Adam rose from the table with all the power of a hurricane cresting the horizon. His bright blue eyes blazed as he closed the distance between them. "My job is taking care of all of them *and* the family. Something you might learn if you live to see next year."

"Adam ... Dad." Ryan inched closer, all traces of levity gone from his expression.

"Stand down, Ryan. I've promised Hannah he won't die and Zara that I won't maim him."

"Right, but—"

"I never said a damn thing about this." Adam's right fist slammed into Dane's jaw. He stumbled but kept his footing, waiting for the next blow. It didn't come.

"I deserved that," Dane said through a haze of pain. He almost lifted a hand to check the bleeding, but kept his arm down. His tongue stroked over his teeth, the copper tang of blood attacking his taste buds before he spat it out. "I'm sorry, Adam."

"Not as sorry as you're about to be."

Dane squared his shoulders to face his boss and father-in-law. "I didn't betray the Outfit, but I fucked up your trust. I accept whatever you say I have to do. Except losing her."

"Oh, you're not losing her." Adam's smile was darker somehow than his anger. "You're going to get the worst fuckin' punishment there is."

"Oh, God." *Worse than death? That must be...* "Please don't make me watch Gia."

Ryan and Adam's laughter sounded eerily identical. "Worse than that," Adam said with a chilly grin. "You're going to handle the legit side of the business for a while, Dane. A nice, tidy office job. As a consultant for Ethan."

Dane's stomach plummeted to his feet. "Are you sure I can't watch Gia?"

"Or you can sign some simple annulment papers and take your job back."

There it is. The twist. "I don't mind an office when you put it that way."

"Sure about that?" The boss's eyes were sharp as Dane's favorite knife. "You've never had a legit job, son. You're a fuckin' killer. It's in your blood, and it's sure as shit in your soul. I know you like your work. Tell me you haven't been itching like an addict at rehab the last three weeks."

Dane glowered, his gaze locking with Adam's. "You know I can't tell you that." Even pulling the knife on Ryan spun him onto a high. "But I will never choose anything over Zara." *Not again. She won't forgive me again.* He'd had four years on her bad side, and weeks in Missouri living for the job, feeling the heartbreak in every waking second—and most of the sleeping ones. He could live for the job, he'd already been doing that. But Missouri made it clear what that was going to be when the job never included her again, and neither did his time off. He didn't like who he'd be without her around, and he sure as hell didn't like how he felt. "I can't."

"So be it." Adam returned to his chair. This time he filled two more cups as well as his own and pushed them across the table. "Sit down, boys. We're going to have some family discussions." Dane waited for Ryan to move and cast a worried glance at the doorway before sitting beside Zara's half-brother, facing Adam's inscrutable features.

Adam rubbed his bruising knuckles and Dane tried not to feel their imprint. "You know, shit would've been so much easier if you'd just fallen for Gianna? Fucking Christ. That

girl's made to marry someone on the wrong side of the world. But Zara?"

"She's tougher than you think," Dane said, reaching for the glass but not drinking.

"I never said she wasn't tough."

"I think he means she's not an ice-hearted bitch." Grim saluted, then sipped from his glass.

"See? He's met his sisters. He knows." Adam shrugged. "Zara's sweet. She's kind. She's a fucking genetic anomaly. Her and Caleb. Not sure where the hell they came from. My blessed mother always said changelings ran in the family. I figured it was just her going batty."

"You mean, there might be legit Fitzgeralds out in the world, completely unaware that you're their dad." Ryan's lips tightened. "Wonder what that'd be like..."

"Son, that's not the meaning there. I told you, your mother was worried about this family and what it would do to you."

Grim burst into laughter. "Well, thanks to her, I'm an upstanding fucking citizen, right?"

Adam's attention swung back to Dane. "Zara's going to be worried about you on every assignment. Every night you don't come home. Every missed call. Every time there's blood you forget to clean off your socks or some shit. The girl could barely make herself tell me she wanted to change majors, and you're aiming her toward that?"

"I tried telling her." He frowned, staring at his wavering reflection in the liquor. "But she doesn't have to worry about jackals from within now," he said, opting to take a swipe at her psychotic brother's ghost. "She'll be safe."

"And if she gets pregnant, and it turns out she has her mother's ... difficulties?" Adam's pause was all the closer he'd get to describing his first wife's mental struggles. The ones that had distracted everyone from Bennett's early

warning signs and caused endless drama until the divorce and effective medications steadied her.

“If that happens, we will deal with it. Together.” Dane took a sip and set the glass back on the table. “In sickness and in health, right? I didn’t make those vows lightly. Whatever she needs, I’ll see that she gets it. But, I can’t worry about what-ifs that may never happen.”

Adam snorted. “Son, if she’s not already pregnant, I’ll eat the damn tray. I’ve got how many kids?”

“Do you even know?” Ryan asked, grinning.

“Living? At last count, eight. Keep pushing, I’ll consider moving down to seven.”

“Poor Caleb.”

This time, Dane laughed. “I see your point, Boss. Mine still stands. We’ll deal with tomorrow as it happens. As husband and wife.”

“As long as you also deal with the damn due date,” Adam replied. “I don’t remember how long you’re allowed to put her on planes for. And considering you’ll be working in DC with Ethan for a while...”

“She’s not pregnant.” Though now we aren’t facing a firing squad, the thought didn’t scare him. Zara wasn’t her mom—and even if she was, he felt rock-solid faith in their ability to find the right path through it. *Jesus, it really doesn’t. Maybe I’m the one who needs a shrink.*

Adam only smirked. “Care to put money on that?”

“Not if he has a kid on the way.” Grim emptied his glass. “But he’s right, Dad. If she’s knocked up, what choice do they have? They figure it out. And if they don’t figure it out... Well, they’d better.”

Adam spread his arms like some old-fashioned bishop. “Oh, don’t look so worried, boys. This is all ceremonial. So that later, when you’re completely fucked, you can’t look back

and pretend I didn't give you plenty of time to get the hell out of the mess."

Dane managed not to glare. Somehow. "Thanks." He grabbed his glass, threw his head back to empty it, swallowed hard, and slammed it on the table. "So, do I call you Dad now?"

"Why not? Joey keeps doing it." Adam grimaced. He glanced out toward the harbor, his expression strange. "Well. Let's get the girls back in so Zara can see you're not maimed." Adam gestured to the silent guard, who put a hand to his ear, switching on communications to summon Sawyer and the twins.

They all returned in a rush of whispered arguments and Sawyer's muttered curses. The second Zara stepped across the threshold, she ran for Dane as if throwing herself into his arms would deflect any damage her father intended. "Dad, you promised!"

"One punch!" Adam protested. "It's a little bruising and a busted lip. He's had worse. Now calm down. We've got travel arrangements to make, and Dane's got a new position to tell you about."

"Position?" she echoed, while Gia snickered.

Dane took her hands in his before she could touch the swelling bruises. "I'll be working for Ethan for a while. It's not Sorrento, but DC does have its charm." He bent to kiss her cheek. Better to hold off on kissing her lips until they were alone. After he washed his mouth out.

"DC!" The outrage came from Gianna, shockingly. "What the hell is he supposed to do there? Bore Ethan to death?"

Zara's arm slid around Dane's waist, and she hid her face against his shoulder. "I'm so sorry." She kept repeating it while Gia launched a tirade at their father.

"He's one of yours! You can't just send him off to Ethan. We need him in Chicago! Send him to Joey if you're so set on

being huffy.”

“The hell I’m sending *any* help to Vittorio unless he damn well asks. Let alone one of my best hands.”

Gianna crossed her arms, matching Adam glare for glare. “Then have him as my guard for a year. He’ll hate it, and it’ll count as punishment.”

“Dane suggested the same thing.” Grim canted his head to the side, leaning back in his chair. “I was kind of hoping he’d stay in Chicago, too. Especially as I’m getting my bearings.”

Adam pinched the bridge of his nose. “This is why I never allow more than two of you at home at a time.” The balcony fell into taut silence for a heartbeat, then two. Above, gulls and seabirds called out, and the noise of traffic and passersby took over. Dane found his arm tightening around Zara.

“Six months,” Adam announced. “With the DC crew. You need to learn both sides of the coin. Then, if you’ve behaved, you’ll come back, and we’ll discuss your future.”

Six months sounded bearable enough. And Ethan wasn’t the worst company. Better than Derek’s endless moralizing, at least. “He’s right,” he whispered to his wife. “I do need to learn.” *Dad could’ve run both sides of the business in his sleep if he had to.* If Dane wanted any kind of future with the family, he needed to be just as rounded, no matter how torturous boardrooms were when you couldn’t shoot anyone.

Zara nodded but didn’t speak. Dane felt the tears on his shirt before her shoulders shook. Her hand clutched his cotton shirt hard enough he half-expected to hear it rip.

“I’ll, uh, go get the plane booked,” Sawyer said, coughing before he all but ran out the door.

“Good job, now she’s crying.” Gianna glowered at Adam and Ryan as if this was their fault.

“Shit, I’m getting a bit misty-eyed myself.” Grim shook his head at Gianna and stood up. “Is DC really that bad, Zara?”

Over Zara’s head, Dane watched Gia’s lip curl in a familiar snarl. “DC is a shitshow. And it’s boring.”

“Still better than falling over a balcony.”

“Is it? Really?”

Grim shrugged. “Maybe Zara needs some rest. It’s been a long day, and it isn’t even dinnertime yet.”

“There’s a hotel suite booked for you two unless you want to return to the boat.” Adam pulled a small envelope from his linen jacket and stood up, passing it off to Dane before putting a hand on Zara’s back. “Either way, there’s no point in tears. Things have worked out, haven’t they? You’re going to be fine.”

Zara straightened up and let go of Dane, turning to her father. She flung her arms around him. Adam stiffened in surprise. “I missed you, Dad,” she whispered. Dane doubted anyone else heard it, but there was no missing the way Adam hugged her back—exactly like a father who’d been worried sick for far too long.

“It’s all right, kiddo.” Her father put a kiss on her forehead, then gently disentangled himself. “Get some rest. It’s a long trip, and I’m sure you and Gia will want to go shopping before we fly out.”

“Sounds nice.” Zara stepped back, but reached for Dane as if she wasn’t sure he wouldn’t get taken away again. She glanced at him with red-rimmed, somewhat dazed eyes. “Hotel? Or?”

“It would be nice to sleep on a bed that didn’t move.” Dane circled an arm around her, his other hand wiping away the tears on her cheek. He wished he knew what else to say. He never knew what to do with himself when she cried. “A nap and then food? Sound like a plan, love?”

“Yes. A plan. Let’s do that.”

Gia moved in and hugged her, then Ryan—which oddly didn’t appear to upset Zara at all—and then they were simply shown out. As if it was any run-of-the-mill family meeting. Nobody in the downstairs portion seemed upset about the soap opera occupying the balcony, and outside, the traffic and the sea breeze showed no sense of anything changing. Yet the entire future was different. Everything from this moment stood ahead of them without the terrifying uncertainty that tainted their last few weeks.

He would’ve enjoyed it more if Zara wasn’t clinging to his arm like she might faint any second. Whenever he tried to ask her anything, she dissolved into tears before he finished the sentence, and he gave up. Thankfully, the cab driver he hailed accepted a vague “too much sun, too much sea” explanation and didn’t reach for the Italian 911-equivalent. Dane let the silence continue until they got into the hotel suite. And then gave her a couple more minutes while he swept the place, just in case.

Stepping out of the restroom, he found her where he’d left her: on a tiny bench by the door. Dane emptied his pockets, set his wallet and knife on the TV stand, then approached. Crouching down, he took her hands in his and brushed a kiss along her pale knuckles. “What do you need, love? The waterworks are scaring me.”

“N-nothing. I just...” At least this time, when she trailed off, it wasn’t into tears and sniffles, but he’d never seen her so lost for words. Finally, she took a breath, starting again. “I—I didn’t think of this. That it’d just be over? We’re going home. And it feels, um, like I can’t breathe? Only I can? But what are we doing, D?” Her voice cracked on the question.

“Going home.”

“Are we? Really?”

Dane squeezed her hands then stood up, leaning back against the entry wall. “Zara, reality is, there’s a price to pay

for our actions. Thankfully, I'm the only one who has to pay. Six months is nothing. Not when I get to build a forever with you."

"W-what am I supposed to do in Chicago? While you're in DC?"

Dane stared at her like she'd just sprouted a mushroom on her head. It was about as ridiculous as the question. But he understood why she asked it. "Come here." He took her wrist and drew her up against him. "I hoped you'd want to come to DC, but I wasn't going to force you. I do want you with me."

"I want to be with you. That's what I wanted from the start." Some tension eased out of her, and her breathing slowed, but she wasn't melting against him like usual.

"Talk to me, Z." He whispered the plea against her hair. "Whatever's freaking you out, let's deal with it."

"I know..." More tears soaked into his shirt. "I know we were fucked. I know this is the best option. But I was kind of glad we ran away. When you're just a lone wolf, I could learn to help or learn or to be something. A partner? But back home —"

"You *are* something." He took her left hand, holding it between them, his thumb tracing her wedding band. "This happened because of you, Zara. Gia married De Lucca because of your plan. You were up against a wall, and you found a way out. I couldn't ask for a better partner."

Her brow furrowed, and her eyes were a picture of heartbreak. "But you're made. You know what the wife's supposed to do. To be. No questions, no answers. No nothing. I ... I can do that. I will. But I'm scared I'll end up losing you that way. The way everybody always loses Dad."

"Come here, baby girl." He led her to the bed, and they sat together, Zara still holding him so tight he felt her arms shaking. "My dad always made it perfectly fucking clear he and Mom were a team. She didn't get heavy details, but she knew damn well what was up. That's what I want, not some

pure little angel picking out drapes.” He breathed in her scent, smoothing her hair. “You can still pick out drapes if you want to. But you’re my partner too. Screw the old rulebook, just be you. That’s all I need.”

“Thank goodness.” The last of the tension left her, and the arms that slid around his shoulders were warm and eager. This time, she kissed him, and the worried line between her brows vanished. “I can stand disappointing anyone except you.”

“Then I’ve got some good news. Disappointing me is a thing you could never do.” Dane grinned and took hold of her hips, dragging her onto his lap. “Now let me do my damndest not to disappoint you.”

He kissed her softly before turning and pulling her down to the cloud-soft covers with him. His hips settled between her legs, and after a scramble of hands and ties and clothes, she was taking him, arching beneath him in ecstasy. No boring business meeting or adrenaline rush meant a damn thing next to the pleasure of holding Zara.

The End

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BONUS SAMPLE CHAPTER

BROKEN WINGS

Storm Crows MC, 1

Allegra Grey and Emily Sloan

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Sample Chapter

Oak Grove, IL

Does hell have fans? Joker groaned, rubbing his face until his contacts shifted the world into focus. Overhead, a squeaking fan spun molasses-heavy air to no effect but a nerve-shredding counterpoint to the buzzing from his nightstand. The glistening brunette tangled in the black sheets beside him didn't move. He slid his arm out from under the girl and reached over her to grab the stupid phone. A familiar number blinked across its screen.

Shit. Six missed calls. His companion inhaled and rolled over without missing a beat. A long weekend ride and longer parties lay behind them both, and he didn't blame her for knocking out. *Might as well leave her to it.* He pushed the

sheet off his legs and dropped the phone on the pillow. Better to get moving and say he hadn't heard the ringtone on the bike than admit he slept through it.

Joker stumbled to his feet and reclaimed his clothes from the floor—boxer briefs, Kevlar jeans, and a black t-shirt—so he wouldn't wake the girl by rummaging around. The crow insignia's weathered eyes looked reproachful as he lifted his cut from the doorknob. The sun-faded leather felt like wearing a flak vest these days thanks to a black-lettered, sharp-edged badge with the words "Vice President". He draped it over his arm instead of slinging it on, ignoring the twinge of guilt. *I should have been up earlier. Should have stayed at the clubhouse.* The endless list of things a better VP might have done ran through his head.

He eased the door shut behind him before he walked down the hall and nudged his roommate's door closed on his way by—no snoring, no tapping keyboard, meant Grim wasn't back from his run. Flipping on the bathroom light, Joker dropped his boots on the tile floor and choked. A fake apple stench assaulted him from the potpourri bowl on the towel cabinet. His nose twitched. *Does that shit have some kind of nuclear half-life, or is Grim refilling it?* He could just about imagine his best friend buying it, if the salesgirl was pretty enough.

He turned the water on, splashed some onto his face, and blinked until the contacts moved again. His reflection glared back at him, red-eyed and shaggy as a stoner hobo. *Fuck, that's impressive. No wonder you get pussy so easy, asshole.* He ran his hands over his jaw, scratching at the day-and-change stubble. Shaving would end the itch, but wearing a beard took the edge off his sharp features and—more importantly—hid the damned dimples. *No inspection at 0500 these days. Screw it.*

Donning his cut, he took a pack of Marlboros from the left pocket. He stuck one between his lips and lit it to spite the potpourri phantom. *I'm dumping a case of Febreze here next*

paycheck. Reagan's gone, and her stupid scented bullshit's gotta go, too.

Joker trailed smoke through the house and out to the garage. Standing on the threshold, he swiped his hand at the wall-mounted button just inside and watched with a reverence polite society reserved for churches as silver moonlight poured past the rising bay door, casting an ethereal glow behind a divine vision of chrome and black: a 1992 Low Rider Sport, 582 pounds of steel and twin-engine perfection customized so she was all his, right down to the stylized wings painted on the fenders. After hunting her down for three years, he'd spent the last two getting every last part just right, achieving every spec he'd dreamed up out in the Iraqi desert.

Standing beside his baby, he lit a fresh cigarette, savored the cool night air, and looked out at the silent street. Frogs and crickets practically drowned out the occasional sounds of traffic echoing from the main road.

Forgotten by the world outside, Oak Grove—like the rest of Pharaoh County—belonged to another era, a fact that suited the Storm Crows' original chapter and its national president just fine. Taking a last, slow drag, he checked his watch and calculated what level of bullshit might be waiting. He'd left the rest of the crew neck deep in pussy and booze, so probably a bar fight. Unless it wasn't.

He tossed the cigarette butt, crushing it with the tip of his boot while he slid his gloves on and flexed his fingers to stretch the leather. He ran his right hand over Baby's fender to pay his respects before he straddled her. The usual thrill lifted his soul—feeling her purr to life beneath him lit him up in a way nothing else did these days. Her engine rumbled, eager for the road. He grabbed his helmet and locked it in place before answering her call.

He took his preferred route—the long one—toward the clubhouse, reveling in the empty roads up north of town that wound through endless seas of grass and early spring crops. The cool spring wind in his face and the open road always

cleared his head. He needed that tonight. A few cars passed, and he had to look out for deer—always a bitch of a hazard, but no worse than an IED. At least the deer were visible beforehand. He checked his watch at a stop sign, sighing at the time before he made the turn to head back west. *Tree's going to rip my nuts off if I'm late again...* He gunned it on the straight, revving to eighty in a fifty-five until a headlight shone in his mirrors. Another glance revealed one light, not two: a bike. He moved into the right out of courtesy. So did the other rider.

Fucker.

About twenty feet behind him, the stranger slowed to maintain the distance and flashed high beams. Signaling. *For what?* Joker squinted at the mirror again, but the darkness revealed only the headlight. *Is it one of the guys?* Too late, he realized his phone was back in his bed.

Why would Dad send somebody out to wave me down? His question unanswered, he accelerated. The tail could ride behind him to the clubhouse and tell him there. The guy matched Joker's speed. And gained. Concern became irritation, became nerves. *This don't smell right.* He adjusted in his seat, more aware of the Glock in the back holster beneath his cut—he didn't even remember putting it on, but the habit was too engrained for thought.

He turned off the highway onto an oil-and-gravel road that skirted the edge of Oak Grove over to Ravenwood. Shit to ride on, but his shins could take a few rocks. And his baby could take the turn faster than whatever junker the asshole behind him rode. The distance between them grew. He checked the mirror and kicked down a gear—he didn't need to spin out on loose gravel. Baby's front end wobbled from his shifting weight and the uncertain road. He looked ahead, praying for a passing car. Something. Anything to knock the fuckstick off until Joker could get steady enough to outrun him. Or pull his gun.

A set of matching white lights gleamed in the distance. A house. If he could get there, maybe asshole would get off. Witnesses fucked up these games... The light behind him flashed again. A set of headlights turned into the road. A few hundred yards and closing fast. *Shit.* Steadying Baby with his left hand, he reached for his gun with his right. A darker shadow loomed in the pavement ahead.

He swerved around the pothole—plague of southern Illinois roads—and turned back.

Crack.

Shrieking, rending metal. Chrome on gravel. The world slowed and tilted, everything going weightless. It didn't hit him until he hit the ground: he'd been thrown. The pain slammed through him, taking over his body with excruciating pressure, crushing and tearing him apart at the same time. More snaps, crunches. Not his bike, but bones. The assholes after him were shouting, but the pain roared in his ears. Darkness claimed him without even the flash of a gun.

Raindrops hit his cheek instead of shrapnel.

For a delirious second, he imagined he'd dreamed it all while passed out in the clubhouse yard, gotten caught in the rain. He opened his eyes. Bone hung out of the skin on his left arm, yellow, white, and vicious red-black in the starlight. Body turned to meat. He spent the last of his strength pushing himself onto his back with an aching but usable right arm. He tried a scream, but his lungs betrayed him. There wasn't enough air in the world. The pain dulled, even cooled. Maybe it was the rain. His eyes took in the storm-darkened sky, glaring at the inconsistent stars.

Was a bullet too-fucking-much to hope for? The dark yawned and the stars wavered. Guess it could've been worse: Got laid, got to ride Baby the way Harley intended, laughed with my brothers.

But going down like this?

Bleeding out on a dark roadside, gravel in his back, and rain spitting in his face. Alone. No buddies calling in a chopper, no friend taking his tags. Just a bunch of fucking cowards who ran off before they even finished killing him. At least he had his cut on, and the bright light heading his way. *Won't be alone for much longer.*

Ashlyn

A wet ribbon of patched blacktop wove through fields and pastures lit by the waning moon and her Miata's headlights as they prowled along hairpin curves and blind corners. Ashlyn ignored her engine's purring invitation to speed and fun: two herds of deer had already crossed their path, leaving her knuckles so white they all but glowed against the black steering wheel. *This is what we get for leaving the main roads. And the 21st century...*

She cranked the volume and sang along to her latest favorite song as she negotiated another turn, taking her car from the blacktop to an oil maintenance road—a shortcut to Oak Grove, little used. Yet another hill followed. At the crest, a high beam scorched her retinas. Her voice flew sharp into a scream, the Miata's tires screeching to a halt alongside with her heart and Taylor Swift's chorus. She braced for impact.

Nothing happened.

Ashlyn eased one eye open. The beam hadn't moved, so she opened the other and allowed herself to breathe. Assess. The offending light shone out of the ditch further up the curve, explaining why she'd thought it was in her lane. Several yards past it, something lay crumpled and motionless at the edge of the right shoulder.

Great, more kamikaze deer.

She threw the shifter into park and grappled her cell phone out of her oversize, overcrowded purse, only to wince at the screen's messages. One measly bar of service—guaranteed, by the miracles of technology, to mean the same

thing as no bars. *Of course. Why would you need service in the middle of nowhere? Why would you even be in the middle of nowhere? That's a place crazy people go, obviously...*

She opened her door and hit her phone's flashlight app as she got out, only to belatedly duck back in and hit the emergency blinkers. Outside, the Illinois night pulsed with life. June bugs and cicadas sang their crackling tunes, frogs and crickets adding another melody while the wind whispered through the grasses and trees beyond the fence row. Somewhere in the darkness, a rain crow called, and she could just about feel her hair frizzing in answer to it.

With her headlights, flashlight, and the foreign headlamp all lit, a forest of shadows rose up beyond the cyber-age LED's, writhing and receding with every crunching-gravel step to reveal the heaped, twisted wreck of a motorcycle. She raised her glowing phone up like a shield, turning its beam to survey the damage. Black paint and chrome gleamed here and there, but deep gouges showed along the side facing her. A busted Harley emblem lay a couple yards away from it. *No rider.* She frowned. Considering the shape of it and the worrying smudges along its side... *Why'd they run off and leave the headlight on like that? Is it stuck?*

"Hello?" She called into the night. "Hey! Anybody there?"

A rumble of distant thunder answered her. Then something rustled. Close. Ash's stomach jolted, and visions of coyotes and dire-wolves danced through the shadows as she turned her phone toward the lumpy thing half-hidden by the road's slanted shoulder and overgrown ditch. Her blood chilled.

Not a deer.

"Oh no... No!" She clutched the phone tight and ran. The tarp wasn't a tarp: it was leather, shredded to pieces by the oil-and-gravel pavement. Mud from some earlier downpour coated the person. Man, she amended as she knelt—huge frame, and the badly broken leg didn't look feminine. *Hell,*

that doesn't even look human... Swelling must've set in? Maybe that means he's alive? She searched her memory for any lingering remnants of Girl Scout First Aid. A helmet and cracked visor masked his head, but he had to be mostly road rash or dirt beyond that.

“I don't know if you can hear me, but I'm calling for help. Okay?” Ash reached for the man's left arm, only to find the bone far too visible through his torn leather sleeve. She stopped before her fingers made contact. *So much broken stuff, where am I supposed to touch him?* “Shit-shit-shit don't be dead.” Like pleading would make a difference. She decided to try his neck, just under the helmet. A little bit of skin not stretched over a bone. *Not cold means not corpse, right?*

Her tentative fingers brushed over his neck as lightly as possible. The rider's clammy skin felt kind of warm, so she let out a breath and pulled her phone's keyboard up. 911. Send. *Come on, networks. Don't let me down.* The call connected as she got up the nerve to touch his throat again, this time daring to press against his damp, unconscious flesh. He had a pulse. Not strong, but present. The call dropped. “Fucking *merde*, *sheit*, hell, dammit...”

Two more tries. First, the call dropped before it even rang. The next connected, buffered by the steady stream of frantic curses. “Please, you've got to hurry. It's a bike wreck, and he's... I don't know how long he's been here. His leg's busted, and his arm's pretty bad, too, and his helmet's still on...”

The 911 lady sounded less than patient. “Well, can you tell me where you are?”

“No, I can't!” she hissed. “My phone's got GPS. Can't you just find me?”

“The county hasn't upgraded yet.”

Of course. Of fucking course. Why would Pharaoh County ever leave 1957? Panicked tears stung Ashlyn's eyes,

straining her voice. “I’m on the ... County Maintenance 20 ... North of Oak Grove.”

“How far?”

“I—I don’t know. A little bit after Route A...”

“Is that where Ryman Dumbrowski’s farmhouse burned down?”

“How would I know? I don’t know a-anything about this place! Google won’t load, and I just ... just drive out along Route A, take County Maintenance 20. White Miata in the stupid road! I put the flashers on. Please!”

Powerless to move the ambulance, she fumbled his visor up, half recalling some Girl Scout leader talking about airways, and checking them. The guy made a pained, grunting noise. Ashlyn choked back a sob. *I moved him, and now he’s dying. He’s dying now. God, why is this even real life?*

Inside the helmet, his face was a bloody mess, but most of it seemed to be coming from his nose. And he kept breathing. Worst—or best?—his swollen eyes moved. Hard to tell if the slits were blinking or not, but she opted for yes.

“Shh, it’s okay.” She softened her voice, barely touching her fingertips to his neck again—the only bit of skin both visible and not shredded, sliced, or over obviously broken bones. “Y-you... Can you talk? Your name? What’s your name?”

His eyes, both of which were almost hidden in bruises but might have been brown or black, darted around for a few seconds before they locked on hers. “Nathan,” he said in a raw, rough whisper. The headlights kept his ruined face mostly shadowed, but she smiled, hoping to encourage him.

“Nathan. Okay. Don’t move any more. You had a pretty bad spill, but help’s coming. Um. Eventually.”

Nathan winced and his eyes shut. “Might ... be faster ... to go to them...” He sounded like he thought this idea did not

belong to the same order of likelihood as Mr. Tumnus running out of the nearest oil well.

“Right. Yeah. First, um...” *What do they do in TV shows? Shit, come on, what would Grey’s Anatomy say?* “Tell me if you can wiggle your toes. Um. Your right ones. The left leg’s ... kind of broken. Let’s not move it.” She figured that would take him a minute or two. He had long legs and probably a concussion, so it seemed like a big job.

Thunder rumbled again, and Ashlyn cringed, looking at her tiny, two-seater convertible. She focused on his legs. Big, much longer than hers, plus all the blood and swelling. *Crap. Should I take his boots off, or does that make it worse? Oh God, I should probably tourniquet something... But what if I tie the wrong bit? Didn’t someone say those were bad now?*

“Moving.” He didn’t sound convincing, but if he thought his toes were moving, why argue?

“Okay.” She relayed the information into the phone. More syllables cut up into unintelligible nonsense answered. She took a deep breath, tried not to look completely terrified, and got off her knees to settle down onto the road beside him, ignoring the gravel biting into her hip and the unpleasant chill of wet dirt on her bare, shorts-clad leg. *Do I keep him talking? If he has a head injury, he’ll die if he passes out. But he was already passed out once... Why the fuck didn’t I get a nursing degree? Where is Google when I need it?*

Nathan’s head tilted back in the helmet, or maybe it settled into the mud. “Th-think ... they’re gonna make it?”

She glanced at him but a second later, her gaze rolled to the sky as fat raindrops landed on her arms and then the top of her head. *Of course.*

“They’ll be here, Nathan. Hold on.” She ran to her car, frantically tossing through the stuff piled in the passenger seat and floorboard. Her fingers closed around the Hello Kitty umbrella just as the sky opened up. She raced back and dropped next to him with a muffled shriek at the cold water

rolling down her spine. *Cold-as-hell rain would be Mother Nature's choice today. Why not?*

"I ... I can't believe ... I'm gonna die here..." His mirthless laugh turned into a moan.

"Shut up. You're not dying." The words came out harsh to forestall any further argument. After two fumbled attempts, the umbrella blossomed above them, shielding Nathan from another mouthful of rain.

"Well..." His gaze swept over her as he exhaled. "There ... there are worse ways to go..." She glanced down to find her light pink shirt clinging to her bra and managed not to roll her eyes. Barely.

"At least your vision's survived." She switched the flashlight app off—the headlights were bright enough. Better not to see Nathan's injuries while she attempted to keep him conscious. The bone in his arm (or out of it, more importantly) was making her queasy. Eternities dragged by. At the end of the universe, sirens wailed like a blessed choir of distant angels. Ashlyn sagged in relief until she realized they were still alone.

"Hey, they're here!" She squeezed Nathan's right wrist and touched his neck again to find his pulse. Weaker, but still there. He didn't answer. She dropped the phone and tapped his cheek. When that didn't work, she pulled the umbrella up and over so the rain hit his face. He twitched. "Hey, eyes open, Mister! Wake up! You are not dying on me. I don't have those paddle-thingies. Come on!"

"M... here..." He slurred.

Shit, does he have a brain whatever? Nononono...

"Wake up. Wake. Up. Eyes up here. Hey! Eyes on my boobs? Go ahead. No, seriously. Please, come on..." The next few minutes passed with her tapping his cheek and forcing responses until the ambulance's wail drowned out both their voices.

The two paramedics hauled ass from their vehicle, and Ash found herself politely (and thankfully) pushed out of the way. She watched them from a safe distance until a guy in a Pharaoh County sheriff's car helped her into his back seat to get warmed up. He and an officer from the State Police filled out forms and took down her information. She stuttered out a few numbers and hoped they were the right ones.

PhaCo Deputy Zack Gebbert had blue eyes and an easy manner, even lending her his cell phone so she could call her grandparents, who'd waited up and were about to call the sheriff themselves. He continued quietly putting down information until she hung up, probably making sure she was who she claimed. Ash didn't blame him. She doubted her grandfather mentioned her at Council meetings. Or ever. *No one brags about family disappointments, Deputy.*

She handed the phone back with a shaking hand. Zack must have noticed because he turned on the heater. She wiped a water droplet from her forehead. It took more effort than she anticipated. Her eyes drifted from Zack to the patrol car's windshield. Before, the scent of blood and rain had kept her focused. Now, the fog settled in. Running on two hours sleep and already exhausted emotions, her thoughts scattered. A corner of her head wondered if she could even touch the deputy sitting across the console. *Is he real? Nothing feels real... We've already done this, and it's a long time ago...*

"Are you sure you can drive, Miss Davis?"

"I ... I'm just tired."

"We can pull your car off the road, and I'll take you into town if you want. There's no sense risking another accident tonight." Deputy Gebbert's earnest gaze held hers. She wrapped her arms around herself under the blanket. Someone had put it on her shoulders. When? Was there a blanket last time a cop sat with her? She thought there had been, but maybe that was a paramedic and not a cop at all...

"Yeah. Yeah, okay. Can you? I'm kinda woozy." She held out her keys. Zack took them and got out into the rain.

Soon enough, her Miata was backed off the roadway at the entrance to somebody's pasture, and they were on the way to Oak Grove, where her grandmother waited with a hug and fresh cookies. Her grandfather discussed the evening's events with Deputy Zack in the front room, and their voices faded to a dull buzz behind a haze of cookie scents. Grandma Bonnie fussed around the kitchen until she pressed two pills into Ash's hand and ushered her to bed. None of it felt solid until her cheek hit the pillow.

I hope Nathan lives... But she couldn't get the words out before the sleeping pills caught up to her.

End of sample chapter

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