



EXPLICIT

Transactions

A DESTINED TO FAIL NOVEL

HAYDEN HALL

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CHAPTER ONE

Austin

I RUBBED MY HANDS together and quietly cursed all my ancestors.

“Bring gloves, Austin,” Maddy had said.

“Oh, I’ll be fine. It’s not that cold,” I had replied some minutes before regretting my entire existence.

Holding them together, I brought my hands to my lips, and blew my heated breath to keep warm. Like a steam locomotive, I puffed out an entire cloud and shifted my weight from one foot to the other and back.

This was my dark gray coat’s third winter. With some needlework over my morning coffee every so often, I’d managed to keep it looking pretty good. Or, at least, I kept it from falling apart. Not that anyone would notice if one of the sleeves fell off. The kind of crowd I was around wasn’t terribly interested in what I was wearing. They were more interested in what I hid underneath the layers.

But tonight, no layers were enough to keep me from the chills blowing from the Atlantic. They cut through my coat like it was the finest, thinnest silk lingerie I'd ever worn.

I paced up and down the street.

Jack Holloway was one of those guys. A workaholic and, as the old adage went, a dull boy. But it definitely wasn't the case of Jack not knowing how to play. He could play hard when he was in the mood for it. This was the case of a man so busy with work that he forgot he'd booked playing for later.

It wouldn't have been the first time I got a text from him apologizing and letting me know he wouldn't make it. However, it would be the first time such a text was the difference between life and ruin. I was desperate for tonight's payout. More desperate than I'd ever felt before.

"Damn," I muttered as I lifted my gaze to the pool of orange light coming from a street lamp. In it, fresh snow flurried in the wind before I felt it peck my cheeks. My fingers were getting numb, which really wasn't ideal for someone who worked with their hands in the way I did. I mean, the last thing I wanted was to make Jack Holloway squirm and squeal. I was all about the best experience I could offer and cold hands cupping balls was as far from premium servicing as you could get.

"Austin," the familiar voice came from far behind.

As soon as I heard him, I realized I'd chosen this spot for a reason. I had expected Jack to be late just as much as I'd expected my friend to be around.

I turned on my heels and flashed him a grin. “What brings you here?” I joked.

Parrish Turner pointed his thumb over his shoulder at the small tattoo shop and rolled his eyes. “Get in.”

My heart inflated as I headed down the street. The white neon lights that normally made the parlor bright were all out. Instead, yellow lamplights made for a subdued atmosphere inside. When I walked in, the heat from the electric heater washed over me and I wanted to fall asleep right there and then.

“Jesus,” I muttered, stomping my feet against the mat. “It’s going to bury us.”

“It’s just snow,” Parrish said, ushering me inside and shutting the door after me. “Coffee?”

I swallowed and blinked. “I don’t know which guardian angel I sucked off to have you as a friend, but I’m very happy I did.”

Parrish chuckled and walked to the back of the shop, where a few words were exchanged, and out came Levi, with two mugs of hot coffee. “Hey,” he said, handing me my coffee. “You should have come straight here instead of waiting outside.”

I bit my lower lip. “Thanks,” I said. “I wasn’t sure he’d be late.”

“He’s always late,” Parrish said from behind, then walked back to the front of the shop. He’d already cleaned the whole

place and I was leaving wet footsteps everywhere my boots touched the floor.

The truth was, I hadn't wanted to bother them. For the past six months that Levi and Parrish had been together, I felt like a third wheel. They kept inviting me over, making me feel good, fussing over every little inconvenience in my erratic lifestyle, and I didn't want to ask for more.

"You should have come," Levi said firmly.

I shrugged and took a good sip of my coffee. It warmed me from inside out as I settled on the sofa in the waiting corner. The entire parlor was meticulously designed for comfort. The wood and brick walls gave it plenty of warmth; the old sofa had big, soft cushions and piles of pillows, and there were armchairs on either side of it with an old wooden coffee table in the middle.

Parrish crashed into one of the armchairs and swept Levi down with him. Levi folded over Parrish's lap.

I rolled my eyes over the top and groaned. "Get a room."

Parrish tickled Levi for a second, then deadpanned in my direction. "Get a new joke."

I couldn't help myself but laugh. "It's good to see the flame hasn't died yet."

"It's only been six months," Parrish said.

"He means to say: give it time," Levi supplied as seriously as if he'd meant that.

I loved these guys. Parrish, for all the frowns and murder glares, had offered me refuge more than a few times. I'd crashed on his sofa, in his apartment only a block away from here, more times than I could remember. And Levi was easily the sweetest, most innocent ray of sunshine I'd ever encountered. They didn't deserve to have their privacy disrupted by me all the damn time.

Then again, I'd posed naked for Levi's studies of physiques that weren't only Parrish. You could say the three of us had crossed the bridge of polite distance and had a certain bond.

"How's Maddy," Levi asked. For a moment, I remembered the awkward stammer when I'd undressed in front of him for the first time. Though all three of us had agreed it was the best idea if I were the model — since we'd all trusted each other already — Levi had gone strawberry-faced and apologetic. It was the funniest shit I'd ever seen.

The awkwardness had faded away after mere minutes and I'd helped out many times after that. In fact, three portraits had been exhibited at Erick's bar just last month as part of an underground art project.

"Austin?" Parrish prodded.

I shook my head and remembered where I was. "Sorry. I was miles away. Maddy? She's getting there."

"Tell her to come around sometime," Parrish said in that 'no debating allowed' voice of his. "We all miss her."

“I’m sure she’ll come without an invite when she’s ready,” I mused. It had been a while since Maddy left the apartment other than for regular check ups. “But I swear, she’s happier every day. You should see the difference. It’s incredible. And, don’t tell her, but I saw her checking herself in the mirror and actually, hands down smiling. Fuck, I almost cried and tackled her to the floor with hugs. But I resisted.”

Levi’s eyes flashed with something so passionately involved that it melted the frost from around my heart. “Can’t wait to see her,” he said. “It’s been three months, right?”

I nodded. That was about right. I’d finally scored it big with another client, the very one I was waiting for right now, and I somehow managed to convince Maddy that I could afford to pay for her hormone therapy *and* not worry about starving to death. She and I had been through awful times together, never once abandoning each other. And getting her to finally be happy with her own body was my top priority.

I rubbed my hands as my nerves went wild. What if Jack canceled our date tonight? How could I go back to Maddy empty-handed? We were running on reserves. I needed tonight and I needed it to be so fucking good that Jack will beg me to meet next week again.

“You sure you can manage on your own?” Parrish asked like he was reading my mind.

“Pfft. Of course I can,” I said. “Maddy’s aunt helps out from a great distance. That covers the day to day stuff. And my

special date can't go more than two weeks without seeing me. I'm not lying when I tell you we're totally fine."

Parrish raised his hands in surrender, but awkwardly as they were stuck under Levi's arms, who was still sprawling over his man. "Fine. I'm just saying..."

"Don't hesitate to ask," Levi finished for him, just to make everything extra clear.

"Hot coffee and that heater over there are more than enough, guys," I said. In fact, they might have been a bit too much. I unbuttoned my coat and shrugged it off to two short gasps from my friends. Yeah, I was wearing a very thin, sleeveless shirt that emphasized every bit of my physique. Jack was going to lose his mind over it. And when Jack lost his mind, he tipped generously. The last thing I wanted was to reek of sweat.

A pair of headlights cruised down the street and came to a halt just before it left my view from the window.

"That's me," I said in haste, pulling the coat back on and cursing the god of bad timing for not letting me at least dry a bit before I had to go out again. Snow flurried in the pools of orange light outside and the headlights from the sleek limo as I thanked Parrish and Levi and rushed out.

By the time I crossed the empty, narrow street, my hair was full of melting snowflakes.

The door opened half a moment before I reached for it, and I pulled it a little before sliding inside. "Well, hello," I said in a

cheerful and charming voice.

Jack Holloway was sitting back on the opposite side. He quickly reached for the bottle of sparkling wine and poured us each a glass. “It’s been a while,” he said. He was a handsome man; especially so when tired. His dusty blond hair was recently cut, but it was still somehow out of place. He hadn’t shaved this morning. The high collar of his white shirt gave him an imposing look while the unbuttoned bit revealed his collarbones. He was strong, too, when he was worked up hard enough and when he thrashed you around his bed like a doll.

But, right now, he wasn’t even close to worked up. He seemed distant, lost in his thoughts.

I accepted the glass, but didn’t drink. Normally, I allowed myself one drink for the night with a client. I’d walked away from lucrative dates when men insisted I needed another round.

“Missed you,” I said. It wasn’t even a lie. Jack Holloway was always fun. It had nothing to do with my feelings — they never got involved — but the fact that working for Jack was never unpleasant. His breath was always minty; he was always clean; he even insisted on grabbing a bite most dates. I’d like that in an employer even if I was a goddamn accountant.

Jack gave a weary smile. “That’s nice.”

I lifted a cocky eyebrow. “Oh, and you haven’t missed me, huh?”

The limo moved from the spot where it had been parked. I didn't ask where we were going. This wasn't our first hurrah. Back to his HQ or to an upstate bed and breakfast; it didn't matter. He'd planned it for privacy and comfort.

Jack nodded, albeit reluctantly. "I have."

Holding the champagne in my left hand, I scooted over to his seat and rested a hand on his knee. Contrary to popular opinion, this line of work wasn't only about sex. Hell, I'd go as far to say that it was about everything else more than it was about the act itself. It was about the buildup of expectations and the balance of power. It was about imagination and desire. Sex itself came at the end of a wild game of cat and mouse, often lasted less than twenty minutes, and was only as satisfying as the entire evening leading up to it would allow. And it was my job to make that work. The client needed to relax and get immersed.

But this client snatched my wrist and gently pushed it away.

My mouth worked silently for a split moment. "What's wrong?" I blurted before I could rein in my voice into the charming and seductive tone I used professionally.

"I wanted to talk to you face to face," Jack said.

My heart sank immediately, but I knew how to control my facial muscles to conceal it. "About what?" Perhaps I shouldn't have played stupid. I knew what this was. I'd heard it a million times before. Jack was at least classy enough to do it himself and not just ghost me. People rarely felt like I earned an explanation.

Jack tilted his head to one side, like he was asking me if I really didn't know.

I nodded. "I get it," I said.

He sighed and pressed the edge of his glass against his lips, then poured some of the bubbly liquid into his mouth. After he swallowed, he looked right into my eyes. "You, Austin, are a lot of fun."

I put on a brave smile all the while imagining his dollar bills growing wings and flying away. *Shit. What will I tell Maddy?* I could already see her refusing to continue therapy and telling me she'd told me so.

My eyebrows danced a little in reply, concealing my thoughts. "I've heard that before."

Jack watched me silently as I elegantly took a long sip of my sparkling wine. Nothing was happening tonight. I might as well have the drink now. "I enjoyed spending time with you," Jack said.

I licked the bubbly goodness off my lips. "You were a lot of fun, too." *Best leave them feeling great about themselves*, I thought. Then again, I wasn't lying either. As far as they went, Jack was up there with my favorite clients. "Are you...?" I blurted, then stopped myself. "Never mind. It's not for me to know."

"Dating someone?" he asked and laughed softly. "Not exactly. But I'm trying to put myself out there."

Jack and I came from totally opposite worlds. I'd been brought up by nuns at St. John's orphanage who, once in a while, smacked my head for this transgression or that. Jack came from wealth as old as this city. He was as close to royalty as New York could birth. There was never anything tangible here and Jack wasn't exactly the type of guy I could fall for. He was detached from reality, ridiculously oblivious to the vast wealth he had, and despite his kindness and philanthropy, he was the one percent that caused most of people's suffering, wanting it or not. But still, as I watched Jack break off our arrangement because he was interested in looking for something long term, I couldn't ignore the spark of resentment that flared through me. *It could never be me*, I thought, even if I didn't want it to be me. Rent boys were never considered for more than pure joy. I knew that. I signed up for it. I lived it. And though I never coveted the attention my clients gave to other people — those in the same rank — I still felt the throb in my heart when I remembered I could never have it.

I finished the wine and nodded when Jack offered some more. He knew my one drink rule. This was him saying we weren't doing anything tonight.

“Obviously, I wish you luck,” I said.

“But...” Jack teased a little.

I gave him my best smile. “What can I say? You were a good client.”

Jack tucked his hand inside his blazer and produced an envelope. “For tonight,” he said, handing it over.

I hesitated for just a moment. “Don’t mind if I do,” I said quickly after that, reaching for the envelope. By the thickness of it, he tipped me, too.

“I wouldn’t have dragged you all the way here and left you empty handed, Austin,” Jack said. “And, if I can do something more...”

I wanted to laugh out loud. What? To call him? I didn’t have his number. These people were unreachable to the likes of me. They had my number, but I only ever received an ‘unknown caller ID.’

I bit my tongue and thought about it, then smiled. “If you have some horny friends, I don’t mind you giving them my phone number.” I lifted my glass to toast to new business endeavors. “And the busier they are for dating, the better.”

Jack laughed softly and let his glass touch mine. “That I will do.”

I blinked quickly. “Really?” I cleared my throat. I didn’t exactly expect the upper echelon to share one rent boy just like that.

“I meant to ask first, but you’ve given me the permission to give away your phone number,” Jack said with a casual shrug. “I might know a guy who would appreciate your company.”

I grinned despite myself. “He sounds great,” I said for the lack of anything else to add. I wasn’t picky. I had firm

boundaries in terms of what I did and did not do. I had Maddy to keep tabs on where I was and how long I was staying. And my clients knew I had someone waiting for me. They only needed to be male and I could do the job as well as if I were the son of Aphrodite.

I hadn't been worried about my safety since the early days when the sort of clients I was getting came from hook up apps versus word of mouth recommendations between the classier sorts.

"I'm not making any promises," Jack said. "He, uh...went through some stuff not that long ago. A bad breakup." Jack made a painful expression on his face, like he'd stepped on a rusty nail. "He might kill me for even pitching him the idea. But I think he could definitely use your company."

I let my smile go on for a while longer. "That's an excellent endorsement," I said. And, when there wasn't much else to be said, I finished the second glass of wine, and asked Jack to let me out a couple blocks away from my place.

He did. He said goodbye without much fanfare. The thick envelope was safely inside my coat's inner pocket and the wine was buzzing in my head a little. If I ever saw Jack in public — though I doubt he shopped at *Dollar Tree* like I did — I wouldn't know him. Unless he decided it was okay to recognize me.

As a thickening blanket of snow crunched under my boots, I slowed down. I needed to think. It would be foolish to hold onto some hope that Jack's friend would reach out to me. And

even more so that he would be a regular client who paid the premium price like Jack had all these months.

Damn, I muttered internally. I'm truly fucked now. And, for this fucking, nobody's paying.

I had to figure out a way to support myself and help Maddy. And I had to figure it out soon. With Jack's envelope, we would last until the end of the month. Maybe a week longer if I'm frugal.

Maddy was going to blame herself. I already knew it. She always feared she was a burden and I hated that she felt that way. She wasn't a burden. She was the reason I was even alive and sheltered. She had saved my ass more times than I could count. But she was only human and she ran out of will to fight. It was my turn to do the saving.

And I was failing at it.

Desperation welled in me sooner than I could stop it. I stumbled and turned, then leaned against the red brick building and heaved for air. "Fuck," I whispered, my voice breaking. I'd been trying so hard to keep it light, to give her something to look forward to, and to give us both a little room to breathe.

I'd hustled in kitchens and warehouses; I'd worked the street corners for the cruising customers; I'd landed a big opportunity with an older gentleman, which led to Jack. All the men between them were one-offs, often married and paying for discretion more than for the pleasure of it.

Before I knew it, I was sliding down the side of the building and sitting in the snow. Cold bit my ass but I didn't move. I rested my head between my knees and covered my head as a sob inflated in my chest and I did all I could to keep it there.

Ever since I could remember, I'd always been one step away from total disaster.

My first memory was of hunger. Such deep, insatiable hunger. And of Maddy offering half an apple when the goddamn nuns decided to ration our food.

I really thought I'd struck a goldmine with Jack. Sweet, kind, and loaded. Who the hell could ask for more? And however many times I thought about it, there had been *nothing* I could have done differently to make it last longer.

I was expired goods. It was all just business. And when my services weren't required, I was let go.

Everyone around me was getting their shit together, while I lost more of mine day after day. And the more I tried to get by, the less chance I had for any kind of happy ending. Boy-toys had a use-by date. And, even if I was still just twenty-seven, the clock was ticking. And it was ticking faster every day.

I'd already accepted I would never find love. I gave up looking when survival mattered more. And that was fine. But I couldn't accept living day to day with zero prospects.

I was sick of this fucking treadmill.

Slowly, like I was drawing energy from some deep and hidden reserve, I got up on my feet and stumbled the rest of

the way home. There, before walking inside, I took a few deep breaths to make sure I was calm.

The moment I opened the door, a spoon sounded against a plate, and a chair's legs scratched the laminate floor. Maddy emerged at the end of the narrow, poorly lit hallway with a curious smile crossing her face. "Already? I thought you'd be ages."

I grinned much like I would have were she a client. By now, hiding emotions was my nature. "Nope. I do my job like a pro." I produced the envelope Jack had given me, and smacked it playfully against my other hand. "Told you I had a winner."

Maddy blew out a breath of air with the sort of relief that I would rather die than take away. "I'm never doubting you again."

I spread my arms for a hug and Maddy pretty much tackled me to the ground. Relief washed over me as we hugged and she couldn't see my face anymore. For a moment, I could take a break for that lying smile. "We're gonna be fine."

"Christ, Austin," she whispered. After a long while, she added: "Thank you."

I rubbed her back. "Don't you dare thank me."

"Don't you dare tell me not to dare," she said, mimicking my tone, and laughed out loud.

When Maddy broke away, I gave her the envelope for safe keeping.

CHAPTER TWO

Luca



MY EYES ROLLED SO hard I nearly lost balance. *For fuck's sake*, I grumbled internally as I swiped across my screen.

Daniel's call went to voicemail and I sank lower in my chair. Now I had yet another unpleasant thing on my agenda. It would likely follow the one I was sitting through at this very moment.

Albie was rubbing his eyes in the chair on the other side of Father's desk. "I can have someone take care of it," he said,

but his voice wasn't so reassuring.

“Bill Miller isn't an easy man to deal with,” I protested. “So far, he's scrutinized every move you've made. If you mean to send someone to 'take care of it,' maybe we should know what you mean by that.”

Albie shot me an annoyed glare. “What I mean, little brother, is this; let me do what I do best and I'll see that Bill sells.”

I swallowed a snort. Father wasn't fond of my snorts. He thought of them as mocking. And mocking family was the greatest sin one could imagine. “I'm only asking about your method, Albie.” I pressed my fingers against my temples. Daniel's name on my screen had sent a sliver of headache my way and Albie's stubbornness was the opposite of a remedy. “If I have to pull out a way to legalize it out of my ass in the middle of the night, I should probably be prepared.” I was getting too close to being reprimanded, but I couldn't care at this moment. My phone buzzed again and I tightened my fists.

“Are you saying you're unhappy with the work you do?” Albie asked. “Because I can ask someone else to do the job if you're too busy...er...doing what?”

Cold rage washed over me and I stared at Albie. His brown eyes pierced me with the venom he couldn't hide. I wondered when Father would step in. And why hadn't he done it already? “I'm saying that you're prone to making rash decisions. I'm also saying we need to put all the options on the table.”

“Right. Because you’ve been so helpful in providing alternatives,” Albie sneered.

“Alternatives to what?” I asked, visibly angry at this point. I leaned in a little, the cool outward composure crumbling. “So far, all I’ve heard is that we need not worry and that you’ll handle it. How will you get Bill Miller to sign the contracts quickly and without risking it looking hostile?”

A vein in Albie’s brow appeared and he turned a shade redder. “I will talk to him myself, man to man.”

I snorted before I could stop myself.

Father’s teeth gritted audibly and I rolled my eyes to myself, concealing it with a side glance. “And if that fails?”

“I’ll send a guy to do the inspection of their waste. He’ll happen to find toxins and pollutants and Bill will be smart enough to realize that selling the land is smarter than paying fines and facing prison time.” Albie was nearly shouting. “How’s that? How does that sound to you, Luca?”

The anger subsided, leaving empty coldness in me that had become a near regular sensation in such meetings. *It sounds like you’re stroking the devil’s cock. And it sounds like you’ll need me to wipe the cum off your goddamn face.*

I took a breath of air and scratched those words out of my mind. If I said that, the best outcome would be a broken nose and a crying father. Albie wasn’t violent most of the time. He was temperamental. Quick to boast of his prowess, as it were.

He hadn't hit me before, but he'd gotten close. And I'd gotten just as close to defending myself.

"Albie is right," Father said.

"He's not," I countered. "Yes, we lose time and it's more expensive, but we avoid stirring a snake nest. Bill Miller is not a trustworthy man. He'll suspect foul play and he will blow up. He'll move against us, I can feel it. So, what do we do then? Do we threaten? Do we trick? Do we extort?"

"Luca," Father snapped.

"No, Father," I said, heating up again. "We're alone. Let's talk without hiding behind semantics. We are talking about extortion and I'm the one who'll have to clean it up if it spills over. So, I'm telling you now, I am not confident I can do it. The odds are stacked against us." I leaned back in my leather armchair with a squeak and bent my right leg over my left knee. One red sock showing beneath my light gray dress pants. I threw my hands up the way I'd seen Mom do when she was asked the impossible.

"I'll find someone who can," Albie said.

"You'll do no such thing," Father growled.

Albie flared. "What? Are we going to listen to him?"

I heard the venom in the last word. I was only ever good enough when I agreed like a well trained puppy. The moment I disagreed, it was a matter of blood and the old ways and strength.

I could cover my ears and still hear the litany Albie would spill out of his mouth. “If we bend to someone like Bill, we’re bending to all the little people who put up any resistance. We’re built on strength, Father. He...” Albie threw his hand in my direction. “He doesn’t know our ways. We don’t negotiate with mice when we’re the lions.”

The childhood stories that he had received from his grandfather had never truly faded from Albie’s mind. I was too old for such stories when I was brought here, so my brain was less washed than Albie’s, at least. “Keep thinking that way and you’ll be a caged lion in no time. Or worse.”

“Is that a threat?” Albie rushed out of his armchair and grabbed the lapels of my suit jacket, nearly lifting me out of the chair. He stared into my eyes with something very close to hatred. If I knew him, he would blow off some steam and apologize within twenty-four hours. His brown eyes were alight and his black hair was out of place from the sudden movement.

I didn’t flinch. It only lasted a moment before Father got involved.

“Stop this at once,” he snapped, rising from his chair. “Albie. Stop it, now.”

Albie dropped my jacket and stormed out. “Fine. Do it his way. Waste your money.”

I finally rolled my eyes openly, then looked at Father after his eldest son slammed the door shut on his way out.

Father sighed. “Perhaps you are right,” he said carefully. “Perhaps not. I need to think about this.”

I lifted my hands in surrender. “You’ve sent me to Yale so that I can advise. So, let me advise.” I inhaled calmly. “These things would never leave my lips outside this room. That I swear. I have no moral dilemma about covering our tracks. Searching for loopholes and forgotten regulations is almost a hobby. All I am saying is this, and it’s a very simple idea; why not choose the safe way when risks are as high as they are?”

“Convenience,” Father said, although not with any gravity to it. “Speed. Certainty that it will be done.”

“And I ask you, is it worth the risk of your life’s work falling apart?” I said. “A great many things we’ve done are held together with little more than duct tape and prayers. The last thing we want is to give Miller a cause to move against us. Call me a coward all you like, but I am cautious for the entire family.”

“No one’s calling you a coward, Luca,” Father said. “And if they do, they have a problem with me.”

I shifted in my chair uncomfortably. This wasn’t the first time I’d allowed my annoyance with Albie to spark a debate over which one is Daddy’s favorite. It was not a pedestal I wished to stand on. And the talk that usually followed — of which one of the three sons was positioned the best to take over once Dad was no longer able to — made me even queasier.

Something heavy settled in my stomach. “Well,” I huffed. “I’m glad that you’re as reasonable as ever.”

Dad smiled softly, then turned his attention to the screen of his laptop. “Leave Albie to me. I’ll see what we can do.”

I nodded and smiled back, aware that he noticed in the periphery of his vision, then got up and left his office.

Mother and Father lived in a sprawling mansion outside the city. I visited often, both for the business dealings that were best done in his private wing and for the tightness of our family that had been instilled in me since the day I had been brought into this household.

Mother was out, though I had seen her this morning when I’d first arrived. Albie was probably fuming and Anthony was nowhere to be found. As the middle child, Anthony had been the bridge between the more hostile Albie and the vulnerable newcomer that I had been many years earlier.

Now, at twenty-seven, I wasn’t so timid and helpless anymore. And my contributions to Father’s business had been immeasurable throughout the last few years.

I made my way out of the mansion to where Martin, my trusted chauffeur, was waiting. “All ready, Sir?”

“Yep,” I said casually, but the seething anger underneath it seeped through.

Martin winked with understanding and started the car as soon as we were both inside. He pulled up the window between the front and the back to give me the privacy without

consulting me. He knew my kinks after so many years of being my right hand man.

So, in the silence, I pulled out my phone and discovered the voice message that Daniel had left. With nothing better to do, I played it, and reaffirmed my decision to cut him off. It was a pathetic display of grief, cut through with anger that I had dared break up with him.

“And, uh, I guess, if you want, maybe...I dunno, Luca. Maybe gimme a call sometime,” he finished sadly after he’d sobbed and gone on a rampage cursing my entire family.

I was the cool-headed one among my brothers. It was the trait I had gotten from our Father. It was not inherited, obviously, but a thing I had admired in him enough to take for myself. It was learned.

Daniel annoyed me as much as a mosquito would annoy me on a hot and humid evening.

It had been six months since we’d broken up. Six dry and lonely months that were preferable to staying with him. Not that we’d had a budding romance going on at any point in the past. We’d gotten together and Daniel had misunderstood the nature of our relationship. For nearly half a year, he’d kept misunderstanding it and I’d kept shrugging it off.

My bad.

Perhaps I deserved the pestering, now.

I rubbed my temple and waited until Martin brought me home. My Upper East Side penthouse looked over Central

Park and I paused at the windows that reached from the floor all the way to the ceiling, the entire length of the open concept kitchen and dining area.

I wished I had a way of being sure Albie wouldn't do something stupid. I wished I could glimpse our future and make sure we're not all behind bars because Albie recklessly threatened old Bill Miller. But all I could do was hope that Father would listen to my advice.

Albie would never understand unless he did it his way and it backfired. And even then, he would have a hard time telling me I'd been right. But it was the only way I could imagine him quietly accepting the fact that he'd been wrong.

If Father chose the slower and safer way of dealing with Miller, Albie would forever hold a grudge and assure me it had been an unnecessary precaution.

The elevator dinged behind me and I turned around. There were only three people in the world, aside from me, who knew the pass code. My housekeeper Anna, Martin, and my old friend, Jack. He was the one who cocked one side of his lips as the elevator doors slid open to let him pass.

"You look like shit," Jack said.

I sighed and walked over to the small, solid wood console table behind the sofa where a tray with various hard liquors and clean glasses was set. I poured us each a drink without saying a word, then loosened my tie while walking around the sofa, and crashed into one of the armchairs.

The fire was burning in the fireplace, banishing the winter chill from the apartment and my bones. “I didn’t expect you.”

“That would be why I have the pass code,” Jack said. “So I can stop by unexpectedly.”

I snorted while Jack made himself comfortable on the sofa.

“I had a feeling you weren’t doing great,” Jack said.

“Mm,” I said and went silent for a while. “A feeling. Or Anna ratted me out.”

Jack made an exaggerated gesture of zipping up his lips that drew a laugh out of me. I was a very private person despite occasionally landing on a random tabloid’s front page. Usually, it was thanks to some charity event my family took part in. Those instances had always been both isolated and completely above the surface. My private affairs were known to these three people and, when it was appropriate, my family. Lately, it had been less and less appropriate for my family to be included. My whole sexuality, not to mention the constant pestering by Daniel, was not something I carried with me to the Sunday lunch at my parents’ place.

“I’m fine,” I said, but there was no chance Jack would believe me.

He simply rolled his eyes that I would even try lying. “Which is it? Albie or men?”

“How about both?” I sipped my scotch and soured my expression.

Jack snorted. “It’s the winning combination.”

I sighed and shook my head. “Albie’s being rash, as usual, and it’s everyone’s neck he’s putting on the line.”

“Nothing new, then,” Jack said flatly.

“Nope,” I confirmed.

We sat in silence, fire crackling and the day draining away, sipping our drinks. We had been friends since high school, when I had first allowed myself to believe that my new life had become reality. Though I had lived as a DiMarco for a few years already, I hadn’t really let myself be comfortable. *It can be taken away as easily as it had been given*, I’d always told myself.

But by my high school years, I had forgotten about my past life. St. John’s had faded away from my memory, replaced by a tightly knit family. Later, I learned what my family was, and what my place in the grand scheme of things would be. And I rose to the challenge.

“I can’t help you with Albie,” Jack said. “That’s up to old boy.”

I directed my blue gaze to Jack, nodding in agreement, but expecting to hear more.

He smiled. “I can, however, help you with the other bit.”

I frowned. I’d nearly forgotten my other problem. “Daniel?”

“No,” Jack said. “Never really met the guy. But Anna said you’ve been coming home alone for a while. You work and work. And listen, I get it, but you’re missing out on all the fun you could be having.”

“Says a man with half his brain working at this very moment,” I pointed out.

Jack chuckled. “Be that as it may,” he said with a nod. “Listen, I have a friend who can help you out.”

“How so?” I asked. Once again, I nearly forgot that I was in the middle of a very dry spell. My mind was elsewhere and all the other problems were too large and spiky to fit inside my head. Everything else hovered in the mist somewhere in the distance.

Jack gave a cryptic smile. “He’s discreet and very experienced in entertaining men with cash.”

It clicked in my head abruptly. “Christ, Jack, don’t beat around the bush. Rent boys don’t shock me.”

Jack laughed out loud. “I’m sorry. I never know which Christian values they instilled in you and which they failed at.”

I laughed a little, feeling guilty about it the next moment. That was oddly Christian, now that I thought about it. “Well, I don’t blush around sex workers. But I am also busy.”

“Let me just give you his number,” Jack insisted. “You never know when you might feel lonely.”

That one word alone opened a chasm in my chest. I was very lonely most of the time, but that was something I’d chosen for myself. To represent the *DM Enterprises* was to live a life of solitude.

“And you know him...how?” I teased.

Jack laughed at that. “I don’t kiss and tell.”

“Neither does he, huh?” I asked, more to keep the chatter going than to truly find out. Or so I thought. In fact, I wasn’t aware of my growing curiosity at all until late that night.

Jack nodded firmly. “He’ll sign any NDA you want.” Without a prompt, Jack went on. “He’s very good looking, more your type than mine. He’s easy to work with. I can give you his number.”

I looked like I was considering it, but my brain was returning to the issue of going head to head with Albie all the goddamn time. The older brother syndrome was strong in him and Albie was sensitive to being outsmarted by a twenty-seven-year-old.

A sliver of concern passed through me but I furiously shoved it away from my mind. *He would never*, I assured myself. But the feeling, no matter how fictitious, had planted its seeds in my heart. What if I became a problem? How many times did I need to cross him before he considered me a personal rival?

“Luca?” Jack said.

“Huh? Oh. The number. Yes.” I handed him my phone to type the number in, then took it back and glanced at the name Jack had saved. Austin.

Many hours later, after revising Father’s contracts for safety regulation compliance, I pushed myself away from my large, mahogany desk and examined the screen of my phone.

Austin.

It had been too long since I'd last felt any sort of closeness to another human. And as much as I prided myself with being independent, I was growing sick of my own hand doing the job for me. I was getting bored of never feeling even a trace of attraction. Most of all, I was sick of pleasuring myself like it was a chore.

I longed for a moment of lust that would carry me toward the other person.

How many times had I considered inviting Daniel over for an evening? Normally, I would have thought of it very late at night and, no doubt, Daniel would come, but he would bring Pandora's Box with him.

I didn't have it in me to go out and flirt. Too many risks; too much time.

But Austin was there, a phone call away.

It was...tempting.

CHAPTER THREE

Austin



AFTER THE MAN WHO had introduced himself as Martin typed in the elevator pass code, he walked out, leaving me alone as the doors slid shut. He also carried copies of a non-disclosure agreement I had signed on the way here and a copy of my rates as if they were the most priceless contracts he had ever handled.

The elevator moved silently. There was nothing rusty in the Upper East Side. Things here didn't screech or shake. Smoothly, it came to a halt, and opened to a dim living room.

I stepped into the warmth of the spacious apartment. My host either had great taste or, more likely, enough money to afford a talented interior designer.

The large fireplace built into the wall on the far left side of the open concept apartment gave the most light. Its flickering orange flames were far more powerful than the subdued lamps around the place. A heavy wooden coffee table before the fireplace was surrounded by a slender, contemporary sofa and two matching armchairs. Behind the sofa, an elegant, slim table held several bottles of alcoholic beverages and clean glasses of various sizes. To my right, a large, round table with six chairs formed a dining area, with an open kitchen further to the left. On either side of the kitchen was an open door.

I couldn't tell where the jazz sounds were coming from for the first few moments, then I spotted discreetly placed speakers all around the apartment.

I slipped my hands inside my coat pockets and stepped forward, examining the place. Truthfully, I expected vast and empty spaces. I imagined someone living here would need a golf cart to cross his living room. But this elegant and cozy place shattered those expectations to the smallest pieces.

As I explored, I reached the large windows that overlooked a shorter row of buildings and Central Park beyond them. If I squinted, I could see some flickering lights far south from here. That was the billionaires' row, with buildings so high above the clouds that even the birds went: "That's too high, bro."

The stranger had only given me his name when he'd called. Luca. But there was another thing he had given me in that moment; the color of his voice. From that husky tone, I knew he was young, but I also sensed confidence that often translated into sex appeal.

I looked around again. The faintest glow of light was coming from the door on the left side of the open kitchen. And in that subdued glow, a shadow moved. It was only when I gasped that he truly moved.

Covered in darkness, Luca leaned against the door frame. He seemed to be holding a glass purely based on his silhouette. I narrowed my eyes but saw nothing. The man was very tall and didn't block the entrance to the room with his width. So, he wasn't a mountain of a man. But he didn't seem like a twig, either.

Not that it made any difference to me.

Sometimes, I liked to be throttled. Other times, I liked the nimbleness of someone's long, skinny fingers. Luca struck me as perfectly balanced.

"Do you like the view?" he asked, voice just as husky as it had been over the phone.

"I do," I said, bobbing my head to try seeing him.

He was very elusive. Hidden in the shadows, he was still invisible to me.

"You can take your coat off," he said and moved. The clinking of ice and the sloshing of liquid gave his action away.

It drew a smile from me. “Do you want a drink?” he asked, probably after seeing my smirk.

“Maybe later,” I said, softening my voice for him. I wasn’t sure what his tastes were and having trouble seeing his expressions made it hard to adjust accordingly.

“Ah, no drinking while working, huh?” Luca asked, amusement touching his voice in passing.

“It’s a matter of caution,” I said, my voice still as soft and seductive as before. I shrugged my coat off and revealed a perfectly fitted shirt underneath. It earned me a short pause while Luca, hopefully, admired my figure.

“Like photographing Martin’s car,” he said.

Wariness zinged in me, but Luca chuckled. It was a tiger’s purr. “I sent that photo to my friend. And this address.”

I fully expected to be scolded for it and I loaded my counter-arguments. Instead, Luca sloshed the rest of his drink down his throat, then exhaled through his nose. “Good.” The word was crisp and firm. He stepped forward and into the slightly brighter lights that were built into the kitchen ceiling.

My breath hitched and I let my reaction show on my face. Like I’d suspected, Luca was young. Perhaps my age. Perhaps slightly older. Blond and blue eyed with an oblong face, sharp cheekbones, and a well defined jaw. His nose was straight and his lips were sharply outlined with a Cupid’s bow and slightly curled corners. His thin, black eyebrows lay flat and his long, dark eyelashes framed his blue eyes with stark contrast. He

wore a medium length fade undercut with a few stray locks falling over his brow and left eye.

The plain white shirt he wore was unbuttoned at the top quarter, revealing glimpses of his collarbones and his long, slender neck. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, his forearms bare and defined. I suspected the rest of him was just as well cut and shaped. His shirt fit him well over his round shoulders and was tucked messily around his narrow waist. Everything about him seemed strong, not in that weight lifting way bigger guys were, but in a way of endurance. Here was a guy who could hold his own against the world.

“I respect your caution,” he said. And, as he stepped into the light, I realized I knew who he was. I’d seen his face on Maddy’s trashy magazine covers. I’d seen it a dozen times.

“You’re Luca DiMarco,” I whispered.

“And you’re Austin James,” he said, finding some amusement, apparently.

“How do you know my last name?” I asked, more curious than concerned.

“How do you know mine?” he retorted and set his empty glass on the kitchen counter. He glanced at the coat I was still holding folded over my right arm.

“Your face is on magazine covers,” I said with a teasing smile.

“I didn’t realize you read *The Scoop* and the *Glam Gossip Weekly*,” he said playfully.

“You didn’t answer my question,” I pointed out, a trace of a challenge in my voice. He seemed to react well to that. A spark of interest burst in his cold, blue eyes.

His sharp lips stretched into a wolfish grin. “I’m also a cautious man. I’ve done my research.”

“How much?” I asked.

He raised his flat, black eyebrows. The curves he formed in his curiosity made him look twice as hot. “Not too much,” he assured me and I trusted him. I couldn’t tell you why. The DiMarco name wasn’t synonymous with trust. No more than any old money name would be. Perhaps, in fact, less so. But it was the sureness in his voice and the genuine expression of interest on his face that soothed me. “I didn’t dig through your past if that’s what worries you. I simply know your name, your address, and some of your past clients.”

I grinned at the last one. “That is secret.”

“And well done on keeping it that way,” he said. I thought he was teasing me, but then he continued. “It took Martin some digging to find that out. I trust your discretion.” I hadn’t realized he was moving closer toward me until he reached over and took my coat. “Let me,” he said softly as I surrendered it.

As he turned away from me and hung my coat on the rack, I caught a whiff of his scent. Cedarwood, vetiver, and musk. It was a woody, earthy, attractive combination; bold and almost like a statement. Underneath, there were traces of something sweeter that might have been vanilla.

“Make yourself comfortable,” Luca said softly and gestured around the living room. On the far side, the fireplace was pulling me closer. I drifted across the room and neared it, then felt Luca’s presence close by.

I tucked my hands inside my pockets. The pants that I wore, black and checkered and fitting me perfectly to accentuate all the important curves, were held up by my red suspenders, which matched my red socks as well as something Luca would get to see a little white later.

I smiled to myself thinking about it. Normally, I always found a way to be attracted to my clients. Everyone had something I liked and my tastes were diverse. But it had never been this effortless. It was scary to realize that something was fluttering in my stomach when I thought of giving myself to Luca.

It was strictly transactional, of course, but the sensation made the work so much more pleasurable.

“So, Luca,” I said softly, turning away from the fire and looking up at him. Now that he was so close to me, I realized just how tall he was. Six-foot-four, perhaps. He had six or seven inches on me, which was always nice. “What can I do for you? Are you looking for anything in particular?”

He crossed his arms at his chest and I glanced at his curling biceps. Yeah, this guy was very nicely built. “I haven’t exactly, ah, outsourced this before. I was rather hoping you’d have an idea.” He shared an innocent smile and shook his head slightly, a lock of blond hair dancing over his eyebrow. I

noticed, now, that the roots of his hair were ever so slightly darker, as well as the sides.

For a hotshot lawyer, he was definitely rocking these youthful vibes. I wondered if working for your family gave you more leeway with the way you looked. Even one of his forearms had a geometric tattoo, combining lines and shapes into a nice, discreet composition.

“I see,” I said and inhaled deeply.

Luca unfolded his arms and rested his right elbow on the mantelpiece above the fireplace. It was a hard, wooden shelf that didn't squeak under Luca's weight.

“Well,” I started, pouting for a moment to think. “My rates are hourly, but I can stay the night. It costs extra and I prefer to know ahead of time.”

He waved his hand in dismissal.

“Okay,” I said, smiling. “Let's see. There's little that I won't do. No cuts and bruises.” He winced when I said those words. “We can discuss protection, but I'll need your test results before I say yes.”

“Fair enough,” he agreed.

I squinted. What else was there to tell him? I would much rather step closer and show him the things I could do for him.

Before I could say another word, Luca cut in with a question most clients never wanted to ask. “How many regulars do you have at this moment?”

I raised my eyebrows. “Regulars? I...”

He waved his hand again. “It doesn’t matter. What I’d rather know is this. Would you stop seeing them?”

A little wrinkle trembled between my eyebrows, but Luca didn’t pause.

“I mean, would you consider being exclusively with me while we are in, ah, this arrangement?” he asked. And, as if discussing a very lucrative business opportunity, he continued. “I want your company on weekends, from Friday evenings to Sunday afternoons. I’ll triple your rates whatever they are for such a schedule but I don’t want you taking any other work.”

I gulped and concealed my shock. My heart tripped several times as I tried to force the meaning of his words to sink in. “That...is possible.”

“Good,” he said matter-of-factly. There was such determination in him that it felt like a done deal. He hadn’t been speaking hypothetically. He had been laying out the terms.

“Ah...” I frowned. “Don’t you want to know what you’re paying for before we make any agreements?”

He grinned and eyed me shamelessly. His gaze touched every inch of me, then returned to my big, brown eyes. “Oh, I don’t think that’s necessary. I think we’ll get along just fine.”

My heart leaped. I wasn’t sure why exactly. The cold reason was telling me it was because he had just dropped a truckload

of money into my lap and I could finally help Maddy for all she had done for me.

But that wasn't all.

There was something else brewing in my chest. It was a sense of joy that Luca DiMarco desired me. He desired me in a way that made him completely determined to have me again after this.

“Can I ask you something?” My voice softened again after the business talk. Perhaps it was the melting of the shields I'd always carried around myself when I was meeting a new client.

“It's only fair,” he said.

“Why hire me?” I asked. “You're not just looking for an hour of relaxation in expert hands. You're talking entire weekends.” I shook my head abruptly. “Don't get me wrong, I'm more than happy to give you value for your money. But... wouldn't dating achieve the same thing?”

Luca clenched his jaw visibly and perked his ears. His eyebrows moved up a bit. “Dating is,” he started slowly, carefully pondering what to say next, “precisely what I am trying to avoid.” He tilted his head, his gaze scanning my face. “In small doses, like weekends, it's great. But when you allow for more than that, it gets complicated.”

“I see,” I said. “No commitments, but all the fun. Best of both worlds.” I thought about it shortly and made a move

toward Luca. My left hand touched the mantel and fingertips felt its edge as I slid it closer to Luca's elbow.

He didn't balk from me. In fact, his blue eyes widened a bit and he watched me with a cat's predatory interest.

I made a little mental note to be the boyfriend he wanted in the hours he had me.

"If that arrangement works for you," Luca said carefully, the thirst finally showing on his face. His words were growing distant, like he was too busy looking at my features to bother with things like sentences.

"For me? You're paying a high price, Luca," I said, noting the sparks in his eyes at the mention of his name. "You know where I draw my line. The rest..." I shrugged casually, letting my fingertips touch his elbow. My other hand slid forward and rested above his hip. "The rest is yours, fair and square."

Luca smiled his sinister smile. "Mine?"

"Completely," I said, softer. "I think it's time for you to sample what you're buying." As soon as the words were out, I bit my lower lip and dragged my hand along his body to reach his neck. His smooth, heated skin was soft under my fingertips, and I surrendered to the whirl of feelings that rushed through me.

Luca leaned in slowly enough that I had time to get ready. His minty breath mixed with the smoky aftertaste of scotch and traces of alcohol made for a filthy, lusty fantasy of flavors as his lips touched mine.

Every bit of me was strung and tight and nervous. All of me rocked and shifted. Something in my chest opened, moved, and gave room to my heart as it grew. And holy fucking hell did it feel good.

Luca's right hand moved up to cup the back of my head, fingers running through my hair until he reached the crown of my head and closed his fist full of my hair. He pulled it back just roughly enough to show me he was in charge.

His eyes flashed with sparks of wanting as he examined me. They were so goddamn blue. And the flames of the fireplace were dancing in his wide pupils.

“Did you like that?” I asked.

Instead of answering, Luca leaned in again, pressing his lips against mine harder. He liked it a great deal, apparently, and wanted much more. And that was exactly what I gave him.

My lips parted just enough so he could feel them. In reply, he smiled a little while kissing me. It was the last reaction I expected and the one that made my heart hammer the hardest.

What greater joy was there than getting serious pleasure from your job?

Luca's tongue slipped into my mouth without hesitation. He explored my mouth with his tongue until it touched the tip of mine, playfully, and he moved his head to the other side. Kissing me deeper, he finally let his hand slide down from the small of my back and to my firm ass.

A sigh that left his lips and merged with my breath was the highest compliment I could hope for. It made my cock throb hard in the small bit of fabric that packed it tightly.

I placed my hands on his hips, resisting the temptation to pull his shirt out of his pants and feel his steely abs already. Instead, I tugged him closer until his crotch feathered over mine. He nearly kicked air out of me after the lightest of touches when I felt him against my leg. He wasn't kidding.

I could feel his smile stretch and couldn't resist smiling myself. He knew I was surprised and it did things to me that I couldn't begin to describe. It made me equally fearful and excited, resulting in the deepest desire I'd felt in a long time.

When you did this for a living, there was always a risk of getting too used to hot guys with clear intentions. But with Luca, that wasn't the case.

I wanted him desperately, right now, and right here.

With his hips in my hands, I pulled him closer again, gnashing our bodies together and letting myself react to his proximity like it wasn't just business for both of us. That was the crucial point where I excelled and others failed. I gave myself fully to him, opening my mouth and letting our breaths merge and tongues explore one another. I rubbed myself against him, hiding none of my urges.

"Fuck," I murmured against his lip when his hand squeezed one of my cheeks and the other tightened the grip on my hair.

This man liked to be in charge as much as I liked being controlled.

It was as though my thoughts somehow traveled from me to Luca, because he stepped back, still holding a fistful of hair on the back of my head, and examined my face. What he was looking for, I didn't know, but I bared my teeth and hissed when he tightened his fist. The slightest pull of his hand sent a shiver down my arms and made my cock pulse in my tight underwear.

"Such a pretty boy," Luca said.

The fact that we were around the same age did nothing to dispel the submission that his words provoked in me. The praise of my looks and the way he called me a boy, though I was just a year younger, made me want to fall onto my knees for him.

This evening unfolded so effortlessly.

Luca released my hair and cupped my cheeks instead, moving that steely blue gaze up and down my entire body. His voice was a low growl when he spoke next. "You kiss well."

"I do many things well," I whispered seductively. I didn't need to keep myself in check. I didn't need to mind my tone and adjust it for Luca's pleasure. It came out of me so smoothly and naturally, shaped by the intensity of his gaze and the fact that his soft hand was on my cheek.

"Show me," he said. He didn't need to raise his voice to make the command obvious. And I obeyed commands. They

were the swiftest way to make me slide down to my knees.

I pressed the palms of my hands against his broad chest and dragged them down his torso as I knelt.

Luca inhaled a shuddering breath of air and the stark outline of his hard cock made me wonder how long it had been for him. These thoughts worked their way around the periphery of my consciousness and I remembered the way he'd tensed when I'd asked about dating. He'd been hurt, I thought.

As easily as blinking, I batted these thoughts away and I licked my full lips while hooking my fingers inside Luca's pants. He wore a leather belt with a silver buckle that I worked quickly so I could unbutton and unzip his pants.

When that was done, and with increasing heat in my face, I undid the buttons of his shirt. He stopped me halfway up and dragged my hands lower to feel the soft fabric of his underwear instead.

While Luca finished the buttons of his shirt and simply allowed it to open and reveal his defined muscles and his tanned skin, I pulled his pants down.

His boxer-briefs were plain black, but my attention narrowed to the thick, long bulge that pitched a tent near his left hip.

Water poured into my mouth as unearthly desire filled my chest to the brim. This was not how I normally worked. My tongue was tied and my nerve endings were on fire. I was craving his touch and his scent; I wanted a taste of him; I

wanted him to do things to me as much as I was going to do them to him. These wishes had never had any room in my mind when I was hired.

How long had it been since I had last allowed myself to wish for it? To truly make love? I couldn't remember.

Luca stepped out of his pants and rested his right hand on the mantel above the fireplace and his left on the back of my head. He nudged me closer and I went with the eagerness of a twenty-five-year-old virgin who'd been dreaming of this his entire adult life.

My lips slammed against his solid abs and the heat of his body made me sigh as I kissed his tanned skin and his trimmed happy trail. My lower lip grazed the waistband of his underwear and a fresh wave of desire surged in me. How I wanted to grapple him down to the floor and ride him until he exploded.

Fuck, I thought as I realized how little control I actually had over my own body. This had never been a problem before, but the commanding way he used my head to kiss him where he wished made me want to surrender. I wasn't going to last very long if the excruciating pressure and pain in my cock were anything to go on. And I wasn't going to fuck his brains out if I allowed myself to overthink it.

But the more I thought, the more I feared I would disappoint him. It quickly became all I could think of. It became the most important thing to my narrowing mind. I wanted to be so good

for him that he would never think to replace me. I wanted him to savor every moment with me and want me again and again.

As I extended my tongue and pressed it against his warm skin, Luca shuddered. I knew instantly that it wasn't just about the money he was paying me. It was mostly about that, as any job would be, but there was more to it. There was a sense of privilege that it was me he wanted. And I didn't want to lose it.

"That feels so fucking good," he groaned as I dragged my open mouth down to his bulge and closed my lips over the stretched fabric where the tip of his cock was starting to make a wet spot.

Luca loosened his grip on my hair and I saw it as an invitation to take charge for a bit. My fingers moved from his hips and hooked inside his underwear, then pulled the waistband over his cock.

The man was nine inches long with girth I could already feel inside of me. A spike of lust was injected into my bloodstream after a single glance. The swollen head of his cut cock glistened with precum that made my mouth water.

I bit my lip and glanced up at him with my best puppy eyes.

Luca wore a small, knowing smirk and the confidence he displayed turned me into a puddle of wanting.

I calibrated my brain. The desire I felt was unexpected, but still the best tool I had in my arsenal. By all means, it was precisely what I needed to prove my worth to him.

I also examined his needs and made a note of them. He wanted someone to truly take care of him for a short while every now and then. He wasn't looking for a quick release. Oh no. Those clients paid by the hour.

Luca was different. Possessive enough to want me exclusively and not bat an eyelash at the price; needy enough to want me for days on end. He wanted more than just sex. He wanted proximity and companionship to the exact degree that he alone determined.

When that spiky thought found a way to settle inside my mind, everything else fell into place.

Our gazes were locked for only a fraction of a heartbeat before I looked down at his cock at full mast. He didn't shy away from me as I pulled his underwear all the way to his ankles. In fact, I could have sworn I heard a deep chuckle when I licked my lips.

He could see my lust plain as day. My face was awash with it and I didn't bother hiding how desperately I wanted to taste that silver drop of precum that gathered on the slit of his cock.

Determination grew in me as I wrapped my hand around the base of his dick. With my fairly average hands, his size was even more impressive. I stroked him and felt the ripple of excitement soar through him. He shuddered, muscles of his torso flexing rapidly, as I held him firmly and moved my hands along his length.

It was all I could do not to immediately choke on him like I wanted.

Instead, I reined in my wishes and deliberately tortured him with my hand, bringing my face closer and closer to his cock and lifting my gaze pleadingly at him. Every last act of mine he received precisely as I'd hoped. It turned him on to tower over me just as much as it turned me on to kneel in front of him.

I stroked him with my right hand all the while my face came closer to the trimmed bush around his cock. And when I could feel the tickle of his neatly shortened hair on my lips, I moved my head ever so slightly closer to his cock and felt him throb against my cheek.

My hot breath washed over the skin of his abdomen. I inhaled again and lowered my head a little more until my lips were nearing his big, heavy balls.

Luca lost control in one moment. It was sudden and more than welcome when he grabbed my head and pulled it in. The lower side of his cock rested over the upper half of my face as the lower half pressed against his balls. He swung his hips slowly back and thrust them forward, sliding his cock along my face and pushing his balls against my open mouth.

Just in time for the second thrust, I extended my tongue as much as I could and felt his smooth balls slide over it.

“Fuck,” Luca grunted. “You’re so fucking hot, baby boy.”

The deep, warm color of his voice and the words that came from his lips made me dizzy with desire.

He thrust again, humping my face freely and teasing me with his balls. There was a sliver of precum trickling down his cock and sticking to my face as he thrust it forward again and again.

And then, as abruptly as he'd begun, Luca pulled back. He breathed deeply, his sculpted chest rising and falling, and watched me for a moment. I licked my lips in his full view and that drew a sinister smile to his face.

"You're doing good," he purred and my heart all but pounded out of my ribcage.

"With someone as fine as you, it's easy to do well," I said softly.

He paused for a moment as if to consider whether I was only saying it to make him feel good. I could read the acceptance of it on his face. I wasn't sure whether he accepted it as the truth or purely as something I would say, but he seemed pleased.

Luca kicked his shoes off, stepped out of his pants and underwear, then shrugged his shirt off. It fell on the floor behind him and he stepped over it as he drew back from me. His gaze was locked on my face as I straightened on my knees.

I was so hard that the outline of my cock was visible even with my pants on. I'd chosen this fit for a reason. But it was my underwear that allowed only very tight space for my cock to truly rise. It was bothering me by now and I wanted to be free of it.

Luca either had the same idea or read my mind.

He stood tall for a moment longer, blessing me with the single sexiest view I'd witnessed in the years of working with men. He erased them all from my memory. He remained the sole man I wanted with his sculpted build, his height, his husky voice and knowing gaze.

He lowered himself into the armchair, knees spread well apart so I could kneel between them. "Get up, pretty boy," he said softly, but the command carried. Combined with his insistence on being my sole client, his dominance made me throb with wanting.

I rose to my feet.

"Take your clothes off," he said and put his right hand around his cock. He held himself freely and moved his hand very deliberately as I kicked my shoes off. My red socks drew his attention and made him smirk.

Next, I hooked my thumbs under my red suspenders, feeling the excruciating tightness in my chest as the moment got closer. Soon, we would both be naked and he would have his way with me.

It was this game of teasing that made the act itself so much sweeter. I made it last.

My suspenders fell to the sides of my legs and I began unbuttoning my shirt from top to bottom. Each button I undid revealed more of my torso. It took a great deal of effort to

sculpt these muscles and I knew how to show them off for the greatest pleasure.

My nipples were small and hard by the time I shrugged my shirt off and took a couple steps toward Luca.

His eyes caught a glint of the fire and the blueness turned to flames. His pupils dilated so much that they eviscerated the little coldness left there. He watched me as I undid the button on my pants and got as close to the armchair as I could. My knees leaned against the edge of his seat and Luca lifted his hands to feel my abs.

I let him explore my torso for a short while, then closed my hands over his and navigated them down to the edge of my pants. Like unwrapping a Christmas present, Luca peeled my pants off and revealed the tightly packed bulge in my red jockstrap.

A tiny exhale of amusement escaped from his nose. “You’re so fucking hard.”

“What boy isn’t hard for Luca DiMarco?” I asked.

One corner of his lips ticked up, but I had a sense he didn’t take me seriously. Whatever the case, these thoughts evaporated from my mind with the blazing heat of his touch. He slipped his hands around to my bare, smooth ass and squeezed hard enough to push a whimper over my lips.

A moment later, he pushed me away just enough to drag my pants all the way to my ankles. I didn’t need to be told to step out of them and take my socks off. But as I reached for the

first sock, he tsked and shook his head. “On your knees, pretty boy,” he husked.

I dropped to my knees like invisible arms had grabbed my shoulders and grappled me to the floor. My mouth dropped open to both marvel at the things he was doing to me with his voice alone and with the desire to be filled until I choked. Glancing at his glistening, rock hard cock, I figured it wouldn't take long before I really was choking.

I punched my fists into the thick, soft carpet and crawled until my chin touched the wet tip of his cock and he hissed.

I opened my mouth wide and pulled back, waiting and using my long eyelashes to blink at him seductively, almost pleadingly.

It worked. He liked my big eyes and the dark, curved eyelashes that framed them. I could see it in him; he reveled in being watched like this.

Luca closed his slender hand around his cock and pushed it away from his torso. I could almost feel the strain of the wide angle as he aimed the tip to my mouth and reached with his other hand to hold the back of my head.

And then, as if the entire world had held its breath for a heartbeat or two, Luca pulled my head and my lips wrapped around his cock. The sweet and salty precum that beaded at the tip of his dick and trickled lazily down the bottom side of it coated my tongue. I lowered my head, but lifted my gaze.

Luca narrowed his eyes, holding my gaze firmly as he pushed my head down his length. He filled my mouth like I was a toy; truthfully, I wasn't much more than a toy just yet. This was his mouth to fill any way he liked.

And fill it he did. Soon, his hips jerked forward and the tip of his cock pushed into my throat. My mouth stretched as wide as it could, but he was still crammed in tightly.

I breathed in quick bursts whenever Luca pulled himself a little back, only to have him thrust his cock deeper in, cutting off the flow of air and forcing saliva to pour out of my mouth.

Luca folded his hands behind his head and allowed me to work my magic on him. Greedily, I sucked him off. I sped and intensified until I felt him throb once against the back of my throat. Then, I pulled back almost all the way and used my tongue to play with his head; I circled the rim, tickled him slightly, and pressed the tip of my tongue hard against his slit until he hissed and grabbed my head with both hands.

Riled up with my teasing, Luca shoved himself deep down my throat as he stood up. He pushed me back, never letting me completely slide off his cock, and fucked my mouth from above as I knelt.

I ran my left hand over the painful bulge in my jockstrap. My cock begged to be released but I endured even though it made sweat break out over my brow.

Luca's hands pressed over my ears, fingers running through my hair, holding my head in place as he swung back and forth. Embarrassing noises broke out of me, but they only seemed to

turn him on harder. He grunted, drops of sweat forming on his face and upper chest. Fire illuminated his entire torso as he thrust harder, balls swinging and slamming against my chin while his cock filled every fraction of space in my mouth.

When he buried himself deep in one vicious swing, I paused and held my throat open for him for as long as I could. Two heartbeats had never lasted that long. It felt like minutes without air. My throat constricted after a moment of stillness and Luca pulled back, groaning as a strangled cough broke out of me and saliva splattered my chin.

Luca stepped back and watched the mess on my face with a pleased smirk. And I, in turn, gave him my best smile and an encouraging nod.

“You are very good, pretty boy,” Luca purred.

“I’m only as good as my other half,” I whispered. My words did precisely what I meant. I blocked all of his thoughts of this being strictly transactional and immersed him in the experience. What I hadn’t anticipated was the sense of closeness and companionship that I felt when I said the words. What should have been a purely scripted line to make Luca forget he was buying this night made my heart stumble.

“Let’s see what else you can do,” he said firmly.

Tingling rose through my abdomen at the thought of him filling me like that. “How do you want me?” I asked, voice soothing, inviting.

Luca stroked himself and glanced down to where my hands were on the carpet, between my spread knees, and tilted his head. “On the floor,” he said. It was as simple a sentence as one could be, but it shot through my body like a lightning bolt.

I bit my lip.

“Turn around,” Luca said as softly as ever, but just as commanding. He stepped around the coffee table lightly and suddenly a pillow dropped in front of me. It was a large, round, dark brown pillow he’d lifted off the sofa and I bent down.

My cock pulsed three times quickly. I could feel how full of precum it was; I could feel it leaking, soaking my jockstrap. My balls tingled and my hole clenched as my upper chest rested against the thick pillow. I wrapped my arms above my head and around the far edge of the pillow, resting the left side of my face against its soft brown fabric, and waited.

My knees spread wide on the soft carpet.

I closed my eyes for a moment, but the flames from the fireplace still danced in front of them.

In the few heartbeats of blindness, my hearing was extra alert. The crackling of the fire and the jazz from the discreet speakers mixed with the howling of wind outside Luca’s windows. But it was the soft click in Luca’s knees when he knelt that made my heart skip a beat.

His hands gripped my hips firmly and his hot breath washed over the smooth skin of my butt.

I felt prickles rise all over me and shivers run up my spine. He was very committed to this and I adored the treatment I was in for.

Luca's tongue dragged from my taint up. His hands moved simultaneously to my cheeks, pulling them further apart, squeezing them, rubbing them in circles. His warm, wet tongue slicked me before I could inhale and his inner beast was no longer caged. A single lick later, Luca buried his face between my cheeks and devoured me hard enough to curl my toes and make me whimper with pleasure.

I grunted and thrust my ass back against his face when he pressed his tongue right against my rim. He licked and slurped and worked me with his mouth until a continuous moan was leaving my mouth. I wasn't faking a thing. I couldn't. I was too far gone in the land of lust to think of something to do that would make this better.

He was already dragging genuine moans out of me. All my cells were on edge as he pressed his lips around my hole and sucked me between his messy licks and thrusts.

"Fuck, Luca," I panted. In an instant, I felt his smile against my body. I felt his facial muscles stretching his lips and his warm exhale over my wet skin. "I want you...so bad..."

I clutched the pillow as though letting go of it would risk me floating away.

Luca moved his head back, freed me of his grip, then spanked both my ass cheeks with swift and merciless moves of his hands. The sharp shock made my teeth close around my

lower lip and a cry of joy broke through my nose. My cock throbbed so hard I feared I had tripped into an unwelcome orgasm.

But Luca's soothing massaging of my cheeks afterward had calmed me. A moment later, he stopped. "Stay like that," he said, then added, "Delicious boy."

A grin stretched from one ear to the other and I buried my face into the pillow in embarrassment at how easily he could do this to me.

The shuffling behind me clued me in and when I looked over my shoulder, Luca had already slipped a condom on and was pouring lube over his fingers. He rubbed himself lazily, hard as marble, then moved his slick fingers to me.

"Ready?" he asked in a low purr.

"Fuck yes," I huffed, excited to feel him inside of me like it was my first time.

My toes curled when he touched my rim. His index finger circled it for a little while as he placed his other hand on the small of my back. Instinctively, I curved my lower back in and pushed my ass toward Luca; in the same instant, his finger entered me, and I gasped.

My hole pulsed around his knuckle as he reached deeper and pressed the tip against my prostate.

He worked my hole slowly, getting me used to the sensation and stretching me gently. One finger, then two, until he was filling me with three and making me moan without a filter. I

reached back and grabbed his wrist, frustrated with his grueling pace, and yanked his fist in until a sliver of pain mixed with this unique sensation of unity between two beings.

When bodies collide, everything else pales away.

“That’s a good boy,” he purred, then mimicked my gesture without any input from me. He rammed his hand in, three fingers preparing me for the thickness of his cock. And still, each time he thrust his hand forward, all of me tensed.

“You’re going to make me come, Luca,” I whimpered. “Please...I...” Speaking was getting increasingly harder. I had no use for words. I wanted his body and I wanted this night to last. “I need you.”

Luca’s fingers slid out of me and rubbed my hole as it clenched and relaxed. He was still gentle, but firm. And when he pressed the tip of his massive cock against me, breath hitched in my throat.

Every ounce of strength in my body directed itself to relax my muscles.

Luca was a determined lover. And a skilled one. He penetrated me gently until my body tensed and offered resistance. He quickly pulled a little back, letting me relax around the head of his cock before impaling me halfway down his length.

He swung, settling inside of me after a few slow thrusts, and I finally released the breath of air I hadn’t realized I’d been holding. It came out as a shuddering exhale and I pushed my

ass back at him, taking him deeper until the pressure on my prostate was such that I wanted to moan at the top of my lungs.

My heart tripped and hurried to catch up when Luca placed his hands on my hips and yanked me back. Once, twice, thrice. He was pulling me back on his length, shoving himself deeper and grunting. If he consciously attempted to ruin other men for me, he was close to doing precisely that. His size meant I needed time to adjust, but he was well aware of that. And he used it to both our gains. Filling me deep and wide, Luca angled himself from above, squeezing my waist with both hands and bending my lower back until stars flashed before my eyes and I left the real world behind. What remained was pure and lusty bliss.

He fucked me hard and tugged me back at him until I accepted him whole and my bubbly butt smashed hard against his abdomen. The loud slapping mixed with my moans and panting as well as Luca's low rumbling growls. His voice, smoky like an expensive bourbon, came between the grunts. "So fucking tight," and, "Gonna stretch you hard."

And he made full on that promise. With each precisely angled thrust, I felt myself relax around him more. I felt myself loosen and embrace him. My dick tickled from within at the sensation; my prostate received the brunt of it, injecting warmth and tingling into my bloodstream and spreading to all the cells in my body.

As Luca pulled me back on him harder and faster, I found myself whimpering and begging for more. He snatched my shoulders and pulled him up, his hands sliding down my arms until he held my wrists and continuously penetrated me like I was little more than his pleasure hole.

To be that, just now, was equally pleasurable to me. To be honest in our filthy, sinful acts was like soaring through the skies after years of living in a cage. It was the ultimate rebellion to the nuns who'd spanked me as a child and the Sunday school lectures. It was a giant 'fuck you,' to the entirety of my past and 'well, hello there,' to the pits of hell that held my reservation.

I spewed a mindless litany of profanities, telling Luca precisely how to use me. Every muscle in my body seared with strain and Luca kept pulling me back until he was nearly lying on his back on the floor and I was kneeling with my torso upright. Now was my time to prove my worth.

I freed my arms from his hold and huffed out a murmuring, "Let me," then leaned forward and pressed my hands against the carpet. Slowly, I sank on his length and felt him probe me deeper still. Under this angle, my prostate received the excruciating pressure that pleased the rest of my body. My hole clenched briefly around the base of Luca's cock before I swung my hips back and forth, making Luca moan in a much higher pitch than before.

While I rode the fuck out of him, Luca moaned and groaned, and my legs slowly spread to either side of me. Years

of yoga came in handy when I wanted to really shine.

My lover hissed and slapped my cheeks with both hands while I stretched my legs in a perfect line, spreading myself for him and bouncing on his crotch deeper than he could have hoped.

He grabbed my cheeks and spread them wide, taking charge when he lifted me a few inches higher. He dug his heels into the carpet and thrust his hips with lightning speed, up and down, fucking the cum out of me in no more than a minute.

My moans were all the warning I could have given. He rammed the ability to speak out of me with the first thrust and pushed me over the edge soon after.

My breath hitched.

My voice choked.

My hole clenched rapidly and cock pulsed until a huge, dark circle spread over my jockstrap.

“Fuck. Yes,” Luca was hissing as he continued pumping into me with swift and ruthless determination. He was a man with a goal in mind.

My toes tingled each time his cock rubbed against my prostate. I soon stopped throbbing, my hole relaxed and loose from merciless use. Just a few heartbeats later, warmth spilled through my chest together with relief when I felt him throb inside of me, filling his condom and dragging me all the way down, careless about the pain that the impact may cause him.

He held me on his dick while he throbbed and calmed, then I heard him inhale.

When he released me, panting and shaking, I slid off his length and disposed of the condom in a tissue under the coffee table. Then, I lay next to his slick, sweaty body and dragged a lungful of his musky, woody scent. It was mixed with the scent of our sex and sweat as well as the tiniest whiffs of smoke from the fireplace.

Luca looked into my eyes and took my chin in his hand. “You and me,” he said. “We’re going to have a lot of fun.”

In a perfect world, I would have curled up in my lover’s arm and allowed myself to doze off. I would have slept on the floor, my cheek on his chest, and he would have held me like it was all that mattered.

But this world was far from perfect.

And I was merely a rent boy.

Rent boys didn’t have happy endings. We weren’t cuddled after sex. We were thanked politely, paid fairly, and sent away.

After a few minutes of breathing silently, I turned and got up, expecting Luca to send me off any minute now. We hadn’t agreed on staying over tonight. And Friday was still days away.

I began to gather my things slowly while Luca sat up. “Do you...?” He paused then cocked his head at me. “Do you need to go immediately?”

“I...No. Do you want me to stay?” I asked.

Luca had that air of relaxed, easy confidence that made me want to touch him in hopes of taking some of it for myself. His shrug was guileless and boyish. “I didn’t ask you ahead of time. Not sure if you have any plans.”

“I don’t,” I said. Holding my clothes in my hands. The wet jockstrap was bothering me.

Luca hopped onto his feet and extended his arm. He was unashamed of his nudity after sex. I liked it. I liked it a lot more than when men grew shy and sheepish and quick to part ways.

His torso was all tight, rippling muscles and his arm was long, hand open and palm facing up. His cock, soft now, was still thick and long and deliciously inviting.

I took his hand without another thought, my clothes dropping from my arms.

“Let’s get you out of the mess you made,” Luca purred with that darkly handsome smile. He pulled me in until our torsos pressed together and I gasped. “I bet you’ve never been in a hot tub like this.”

I blinked twice and grinned. If he was determined to treat me like a prince for an evening, I wasn’t going to object. But when he started walking, pulling me to follow, I barked out a laugh. I only wore a jockstrap and socks while he wore nothing more than a grin; but we still headed for the elevator.

There, when he packed us inside, he typed in a code and pinched my chin again. I expected him to tell me what we

were up to or to praise the way I'd utilized yoga into our game. Instead, he leaned in and kissed me deeply.

When the door opened a few seconds later, a flurry of snowflakes made me squeal, but Luca laughed out loud and stepped onto the roof of the building.

"We're naked," I said as I glanced at the flickering city lights and the thick, white flakes falling persistently over the roof.

"Don't worry," Luca said, heading away. He turned back to me from a few paces away. "It's mine."

I laughed and followed, shaking my head at the shameless flaunting of wealth before remembering he had tripled my daily rates like he was tipping his barista. But then, as I came near him, he grabbed my hand again, playfully, and pulled me to the side. There was a bubbling hot tub with shifting lights that melted from blue to violet to red by the time we reached it.

"Is that thing always on?" I asked as if wasting electricity was a factor in the life of Luca DiMarco the way it was in mine. My skin prickled at the thought of his energy bill more than it did at the freezing air.

Luca laughed. "No," he said and shuddered.

He'd planned this, I realized.

"Get in," he said, his voice playful, but as commanding as it had been when he'd told me to kneel.

I hooked my thumbs inside the waistband of my jockstrap and slid the whole thing down to my ankles. There was something funny about Luca watching me undress completely long after he'd fucked me already. Next, I got out of my red socks, which were soaked from the snow on the roof.

We stepped up together and entered the bubbling tub before I turned into a snowman. There was an overhead canopy shielding us from the worst of the elements, for which I was eternally grateful. And the bubbling water was hot enough to make me hiss at first.

We dipped ourselves neck-deep and the rising heat from the water warmed my head within moments. Not even a memory of being cold remained as we settled on the underwater bench and Luca directed his gaze at the city beyond his roof.

I let out a moan of joy that made Luca chuckle under his breath. "I don't know how you ever get out of this thing," I said softly. When he remained silent, I glanced at him. He wore his little smirk and his ridiculously good looks, gazing into the distance.

Luca shrugged. "I always think I'll have the rest of my life to kick back and unwind."

"Where have I heard that before?" Sarcasm was more than a little apparent in my voice. It was human nature to always run after the next big goal.

"We're all just dogs chasing wheels," Luca said with a strained sigh and a little frown. He didn't let us fall into a philosophical discussion. Instead, he reached over the edge of

the tub and a tray on wheels grabbed my attention. “Sorry. You said you didn’t drink.”

My heart doubled its size. He didn’t need to remember these details about me. I would have no right to be offended had he forgotten. “One will be fine, I’m sure,” I said and watched him pop the cork out of the champagne bottle.

He poured us each a glass of golden, bubbly liquid. We’d already done the work so I decided not to chide myself for having a drink. There was something eerily easy about trusting Luca. He was business-like, but he also didn’t hide too much. At least he seemed like he wore his heart on his sleeve. Just from his eyes, I could see he was tired and hurting from something.

Weren’t we all? Maybe he was right. Maybe we all just chased that wheel without a clue about what to do with it once we caught it.

Luca raised his glass. “Enjoy this night, Austin,” he said. “We’ll have many more like it.”

I let my glass clink against his, a grin stretching the corners of my lips far too wide. I tried to conceal it by taking a sip of the dry champagne, but it failed, and Luca noticed. He seemed to know the exact moments when to look at me and catch me smiling.

I found that I didn’t mind it one bit. It was me, peeking through the cracks of the persona clients normally saw. Luca lured me out with his intense, piercing gaze and his deep,

husky voice. He made me just a little warmer inside. He was nothing like my other clients.

Even Jack, who'd been a kind man to entertain, hadn't bothered to spend time with me afterward. And I'd never expected him to. But here was a man who didn't bat an eye to the price of my exclusivity — as if my exclusivity had ever been a thing before — and wanted me all for himself.

God. I hadn't been wanted by anyone like that since...I couldn't remember how long. And even if it was all under the NDA and done for a thick envelope of cash, it was more than I had ever been given by a guy before.

Luca didn't only want my body; he wanted my company.

And that much I could definitely give.

CHAPTER FOUR

Luca



A SPLITTING BOLT OF headache made my eyebrows curve and eyes shut. “Anna?” I called, ignoring the droning that came from my computer screen.

Anna appeared at the door of my office. “Sir?”

“Would you mind bringing me an aspirin?” I growled.

“Right away, Sir,” Anna said in a huff and disappeared. I could hear the water run and a long cocktail spoon mix the powder in the glass.

Everyone stopped talking. They looked at their screens, waiting for my disruption to pass before they could continue spewing bad news.

Anna returned with a small, round tray and a glass of chalk white water, set it on the desk, and looked at me. “Now, don’t go sipping it like it’s a martini, Sir.”

A snort-chuckle burst out of me, but sadly it didn’t soothe the headache. “Yes, ma’am.” I lifted the glass and was halfway finished with it by the time Anna reached the door on the way out.

I sighed once I’d downed the entire thing, then turned my cold gaze at my paralegals and father’s partners on the call. “He did what?”

One of the older men shook his head uncomfortably, cheeks jiggling, beads of sweat glistening on his enormous forehead where his hair was receding. “We can’t say exactly at this time. I believe he may have tried to, ah, persuade Bill Miller to sell his land the...old fashioned way.”

“Men,” I muttered with disgust. I could see Albie thinking he could talk to Bill, man to man, and reach a verbal agreement. I could also see him floating vague threats. “My brother has no finesse, unfortunately,” I told everyone. My paralegals were furiously taking notes and browsing obscure regulation for loopholes, but their talents were wasted at this moment. They weren’t going to solve this problem by quoting a forgotten law. This was personal. “Tell me if I’m wrong, but I believe we have blown our chances with Miller’s land and

our best course of action is to step back and consider alternatives.”

The throbbing headache was starting to ease ever so slightly. It had been lingering in the back of my head for days, announcing its arrival, and waiting for the right moment. It just so happened to come every time Albie made a macho blunder.

“Easier said than done,” the jiggly-cheeked man said.

“Thank you, everyone,” I said with a sigh after I glanced at my wristwatch. It was close to six in the evening and my stomach felt a little fluttery when I remembered I was about to leave all of this behind for the next two days. “I will need to speak to Albie, of course, and my father. Let’s schedule a call for, say, Monday afternoon. I hope to have more to say then.”

One by one, Father’s partners said their goodbyes and quit the call. My paralegals lingered until we were alone, asked if I had any tasks for them, and were delighted when I told them to enjoy their weekends without any workload. They weren’t going to help me by losing themselves down a rabbit hole of legal precedents.

Right now, I needed to somehow lock this part of my life up. I needed to bury it deep within my mind and feel a glimmer of freedom. Without it, I wouldn’t be able to face Albie or convince Father that abandoning Miller’s land was the wisest course.

I could already hear Albie’s arguments. Faulty, cry-baby arguments. He was now more concerned about losing face and

taking a hit at his pride. He was my brother in all but blood, but he was also a fucking moron from time to time.

It felt a little like those closing walls in adventure movies. Like I had tripped over a trap and triggered some ancient mechanism that would mince me if I didn't find an exit soon. Except, there was no exit for me. There was nothing on the other side for me.

The best I could hope for was a weekend of distractions. And my helper was very good at making me forget about everything else that was going on in my life. Well, perhaps not forget exactly, but to lighten the burden.

Low simmering anger made itself known in the depths of my chest. I didn't like getting angry. Men did stupid things when they were angry. I had always made it a point of pride that I could keep my head cool in difficult times. I was reliable and I had made myself invaluable to my family as a payment for the riches I had been given. There had been a time in my life when ending up on the streets had been a very likely path for me. Until Father swept me up, gave me the best education there was, and earned my loyalty.

I sighed and tapped the tip of my index finger against the tip of my thumb. It was steady and rhythmic. It helped me let go of my anger and seek out the cool-headed Luca that had stepped back inside of me.

“Sir?” Anna called from the door. “Martin is in front of the building.”

I cleared my throat and inhaled a deep breath of air. “Thank you, Anna.”

She walked away while I stood up and walked in circles. The strong, expressionless facade was returning to my face and my blue eyes weren’t shooting icicles any longer by the time I walked into my spacious bedroom and looked into the mirror standing in one corner.

I took off my tie and hooked it to the edge of the mirror, then unbuttoned the top two buttons of my plain white shirt. My blue pants and suit jacket combined nicely with my brown belt and shoes.

After a final glance in the mirror to make sure I looked the best I could, I walked out and told Anna that I wouldn’t need her around until Monday. She nodded, thanked me, and said she would finish up while I was away.

“Finish up what?” I asked. “I’m having dinner outside and the place is pristine.”

Anna gave me a knowing look. “And what will you do at midnight when you wake up peckish?”

I snorted and shook my head, but a grin spread across my face despite my best attempt to feign a scolding expression. “Am I so obvious?”

“You will be less obvious when you replace the lid on the mayo jar, Sir,” Anna said matter-of-factly and opened the fridge to make snacks for my midnight feast.

I sighed in surrender. “Well, if I don’t have a say in this, then could you make extra? I expect to have company tonight.”

“Way ahead of you, Sir,” she said with a cheeky grin. She was a solid ten years my senior but I had never felt any gap or distance between us. For that reason, she had been with me for the past four years.

I thanked her and headed for the elevator. On my way there, I picked up my long, black coat and pulled it on, then prepared for the cold air outside the building.

Martin waited in front of the main entrance to the building and nodded at me from his seat. The back door was unlocked and I got in. It was warm inside the car. Classical music played softly from the speakers and a gorgeous young man sat on the other side. The glass window between us and Martin was up and the car began moving as soon as I shut the door.

“Well hello,” Austin said with a teasing smile. “Miss me?”

I inhaled deeply and left all my other thoughts behind. They were welcome to wait for me in the freezing cold; they most definitely weren’t coming with us. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” I admitted.

That provoked a very bright smile from my companion. It almost increased the temperature inside the car. “You’re looking very handsome today,” he said softly.

“Am I?” I asked, half jokingly. I didn’t feel very handsome at all today. I was exhausted.

“Tired looks good on you,” Austin said with a shrug.

“Oh really?” I asked incredulously, unable to resist a laugh. “That’s lucky, then. Tired is my default state.”

Austin chuckled and shook his head. Though I had seen him on Tuesday, for the ‘sampling,’ as he had called it, it felt as though a lifetime had passed between then and now. My days had been filled with one stress after another and my nights were full of dark premonitions. I dreamed of nooses and my bed was cold and empty.

It’s the price you pay for all you’ve been given, a cold, calculated voice of reason told me.

“You look well rested,” I told him and scanned him shamelessly. He wore a light blue shirt with a darker blue embroidery and black pants, crisply ironed and tight in all the right places. His accent color was orange, judging by his socks, and I wondered if they matched anything that was for my eyes only. I was very sure that they did.

Instead of the suspenders, he wore a sleek, black belt and his short, black coat. “That is because I am,” Austin said knowingly. He met my gaze with a teasing look. “I wasn’t sure what to expect. I figured, we might not get much rest over the weekend.”

That made one corner of my lips drag up lazily. Yeah, I had some plans to keep us busy. Not that I was going to spoil them by telling him.

“Or, perhaps you might want ten hours of good sleep,” Austin said with a guileless shrug. “I’m a certified cuddle cub.” He grinned and the combination of his teasing looks and his sweet and sexy words turned me on enough that I was half tempted to tell Martin to turn the car around.

No, I decided. Patience makes for a better payoff.

I reached over and caressed his smooth, light bronze cheek with the back of my fingers, then pinched his chin and held it. “You are mine until Sunday,” I said in a low voice. “There’s plenty of opportunity to put all your skills to good use.”

Austin pressed his thighs together and licked his full, sexy lips. “You know, when you say things like that, I only want it more.”

There was a mere sliver of doubt in the truthfulness of his words. I pushed it aside. It didn’t matter whether he was completely honest or not. I knew what I was doing. I was buying these words and he was very good at giving me value for my money. But still, a flicker of hope that he really meant it flew through my chest.

Everyone liked being wanted.

“Patience, sweet boy,” I said. The glassy quality to his look at the sound of my voice and the choice of my words had already shown me how much he liked it when I called him that.

Just because this transaction was mainly about my pleasure, that didn’t mean I wouldn’t want to shower him in it, too.

Austin grinned as I released his chin and made myself comfortable. The ride wasn't going to take too long.

“So, where are you taking me?” he asked.

I wondered if he knew exactly what he was doing when he phrased it like that. Simply the word choices reminded me on some level that he was mine for the moment. I was the one taking him somewhere, as if he had no say in it.

I glanced out the window, then smiled. “You’ll see soon enough.”

Minutes later, Martin pulled over in front of our destination. A crease appeared between Austin’s eyebrows when he realized we were in front of *Viceroy Central Park* hotel. *The Roof* was a stylish, contemporary establishment on the twenty-ninth floor, fully enclosed and heated in the winter months.

Austin opened his mouth at the building before us once he stood by my side, then closed it and nodded. “Impressive,” he said after a moment.

I hated to admit it, but impressing him suddenly felt very important to me.

I bent my arm for him to take, which he promptly did with an elegant move of his hand.

“I was under the impression that getting a reservation up there takes six months,” Austin said as we entered the hotel and were escorted to the elevator. His eyes widened when the valet called me by my name.

I smirked. “For most people, that is true.”

“Ah,” Austin said, tightening his grip on my forearm as the elevator carried us to the top of the building. “How lucky that Mr. DiMarco is not most people.”

“Let’s just say I am a friend of this establishment,” I said cryptically. They owed me a few favors, to be ever so slightly more precise. Besides, they had a table they kept empty exactly for this reason.

When the door opened, I felt Austin hold his breath. He walked into *The Roof* holding my arm like he was at risk of getting lost if he let go of me. “Luca, this is...” His murmur faded away as we were greeted by a server who addressed me with my surname.

Austin gave me a surprised look, which I met with a playful one, while the server led us to the window table in a far corner of the perched balcony. Along the way, the server was asking if the ride had been pleasant and commenting on the breathtaking view of the falling snow they’d had the night before.

Once he had seated us, he offered us a rundown of the specials and Austin and I exchanged a brief look. He bit the inside of his cheek as he grinned, without looking at the menu, and I felt like I understood the message. “Chef’s choice,” I told the server of the food and ordered us two Smoke and Mirrors.

Austin’s gaze drifted to the view of Central Park and the city skyline beyond it. His pupils dilated like they had on

Tuesday when I'd begun undressing. That was something he couldn't fake; this pure, innocent awe.

It made me grow with pride. It had been ages since I'd done something as careless as a date in a very public place such as this one. With Daniel, things had been very different. For one, he was from these very circles. He wasn't wowed by a nice view. It meant nothing to him. Worse still, things like these had always been the minimum requirement for showing the least bit of affections. He'd expected me to fly him to London on a whim for a romantic weekend or to hold a reservation for a month just so we could come to a place like this on a whim.

I saw the irony, mind you. Tonight, I'd brought my escort here on a whim, calling in an old debt. It was eerie how unashamed I was about the entire affair.

"Luca, darling, I thought that was you," a familiar voice came from just behind me. Before I could turn around, Austin choked.

"Mayor Silverman," he squeezed through his constricted throat and I wanted to bend over with laughter. He was stunned.

"Elizabeth," I said, taking her hand in mine and getting up before she pushed me back into my seat.

"Oh, don't be silly," she said, then shook hands with Austin and exchanged names politely. "I didn't mean to intrude," she said to Austin more than to me, then faced me again fully. "I only wanted to send love to your father. I hope to see him at our New Year's gala."

“He won’t miss it,” I promised.

“That’s wonderful,” Elizabeth said. “Now, don’t let me keep you. Enjoy your evening, darlings.”

Austin gaped after her as she retreated to the inner part of *The Roof*, then looked at me accusingly as if I’d staged this fright.

I started chuckling without control. “God, you should have seen your face.”

“You’re on a first name basis with the mayor?” Austin asked, both incredulous and thoroughly amused.

I shrugged. “She wasn’t always a mayor. Besides, I studied law with her daughter.”

Our cocktails arrived just then and Austin let our glasses clink together before taking a sip. “Whoa, this is good. Mezcal?”

“And lavender honey and grapefruit,” I explained.

He savored it for a moment. His expression slowly shifted toward apologetic. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to imply that you’re, uh...”

I waved my hand quickly. I didn’t care what he thought he had implied. “Don’t apologize to me, Austin.”

He licked his lips. “It’s just that I’m not exactly used to, er, being taken out. If you know what I mean.”

I stretched my lips into a shadow of a grin. “It’s no bother. I enjoyed seeing you surprised.”

“Oh, you did? I mean, I’m not easily spooked, but…”

I barked out a laugh and finished for him. “Unless a random senator pops out of my wardrobe.”

Austin snort-chuckled. “That’s a scary thought. Do you often keep senators in your wardrobe?”

“Eh, probably more often than you imagine,” I said with a shrug.

We shared a laugh and Austin’s eyes dazzled.

“I, uh,” I tried saying, but it felt somewhat odd to speak so boldly now, here. “I understand the nature of our relationship,” I pointed out, closing my fist for strength and focusing on keeping cool and composed. “It’s simply that I appreciate honesty. We don’t need to pretend. You see, I prefer seeing you startled than putting you in a position in which you need to act in a way that would make you uncomfortable.”

Austin narrowed his eyes in thought and pursed his lips a little. “In translation, you want me to be myself.”

I laughed at the simplicity of it. “Unless you’d rather keep that separate.”

“Luca,” he said softly. “I’m going to need you to stop worrying about my comfort. If you happen to put me in a position like that, I won’t play along. I’ve been at this for a while. I’m a big boy. I can handle uncomfortable situations and take care of myself.”

“I didn’t mean to say you couldn’t,” I explained quickly.

“And you haven’t said it,” Austin pointed out, leaning in. “I’m saying this to avoid any misunderstandings. I promise you, if I find your actions questionable, you’ll know. If you cross a line, I’ll tell you. Until then, feel free to take me to any otherworldly restaurant you can think of and have as many senators tumble out of your closet.”

We laughed again and I couldn’t help but let myself be pulled into the intensity of his warm, brown gaze. His eyes were so incredibly big that there was nothing left for me to do but to trust him.

Not that I would involve him in the intricate balancing of legal kinks I performed for my father’s company. It wasn’t that kind of trust. This was something far more raw and personal. It was the intimate sort of trust that I could fully exhale in his company. We dropped the pretenses and agreed to simply be this. Ourselves.

“Tell me about yourself,” I said. Based on what we’d just agreed on, I didn’t find it improper to ask that. He would tell me however much he wanted. And I wouldn’t be offended if he simply said he would rather not.

I liked having these boundaries set. It gave us plenty of room to play.

Austin took another sip of his cocktail. “My story is not that interesting.”

“I find that hard to believe,” I said. “Everyone’s got an interesting story and I imagine yours to be more interesting than most.”

His lips stretched into a smile, showing me his pearly white teeth. He was so utterly beautiful that I wondered why he wasn't a professional model instead. He would easily catch the attention of most talent scouts. He had the graceful movements and a sort of elegance mixed with confidence and determination that made him a perfect model for all the high end brands I could think of.

Austin bit his lower lip and let it slide out slowly. "I'm not sure where to begin. I'm a pretty ordinary guy with an unusual occupation." He laughed. "Not to shatter your fantasies, but I wear sweatpants and plain white T-shirts around the house. And let's not kid ourselves, there's always a lasagna stain somewhere on them."

His laughter was infectious. I filed it into my memory. It made my heart ever so slightly warmer and I wanted to remember what it felt like. Odds were not great that I would genuinely feel it with someone any time soon. Perhaps, if Austin enjoyed himself greatly with me, I could just keep him. It would solve a great many problems for me. Gone would be the hassle of dating. Gone would be the troubles of feelings. And, most importantly, he would never need to get more involved than he wanted. There would never be work talk and curiosity about my family's business.

"I like lasagna," I pointed out.

"Why didn't you say so? You could have saved me the trouble of ironing this shirt. And trust me, this shirt is a bitch to iron." His teasing smile grew brighter and I couldn't resist

laughing out loud at the idea of Austin strolling in here with a greasy T-shirt and sporty sweatpants.

“You’d want to scandalize the upper echelons,” I mock scolded, shaking my head.

Austin lifted his cocktail and closed his teeth around the long, thick straw. His eyes sparked with mischief and his lips were still stretched into a grin, but slowly moved and sealed around the straw. It was a surprisingly erotic experience to watch him suck a sip of his cocktail. And the fucker knew it. He looked at me as I watched him.

Austin set his cocktail down and swirled the straw through ice. “Your turn, Mr. DiMarco.”

I lifted one of my eyebrows.

“Tell me about yourself,” he said.

I blew out a breath of air. “I don’t think I’ve put a pair of sweatpants on since college,” I admitted gravely.

Austin found it funny and that, somehow, made me happy. He laughed and blinked slowly, his long eyelashes framing his brown eyes. His wavy, dark brown hair was freshly cropped. Everything about him was sweet and sexy with a pinch of naughtiness.

We teased each other without giving away much. Perhaps trust was something that came with time. Not that it was a necessity for our arrangement. But there was a vacuum in its place. Neither revealed much personal information while at *The Roof*. Instead, we enjoyed the oysters and duck breast and

another round of cocktails when Austin said he was good for more.

And, as fresh snow began falling, reflecting the city lights on each thick flake, we sank into comfortable silence and enjoyed the view of the greatest city in the world. For a little while, I had the feeling of truly having forgotten about everything else.

“Should we go?” Austin asked me softly. “Not to rush you, but seeing you gaze out so dreamily makes me want inappropriate things.”

I cocked an eyebrow and stretched my lips. “Inappropriate?”

Austin hissed slightly. “Oh yes. Dirty, passionate things. Definitely not something you’d want the mayor sharing at the New Year’s gala.” He chuckled, but his eyes were ablaze as I hopped out of my chair and grabbed his hand.

I would show him dirty, passionate, and inappropriate.

We were only just beginning.

CHAPTER FIVE

Austin



GASPS AND SIGHS AND a whirlwind of desire defined every moment I spent with Luca. His hunger for my body was insatiable and his stamina was such that it impressed an escort. He knew precisely how to kiss me to fan the flames of lust. He knew exactly when to pin me against the wall and wrap his slender fingers around my neck to show his strength and dominance. And then, he called me his pretty boy and made me tingle until I found some sense in myself and took back control.

That night, I rode him in the bedroom; then I lay with my legs around his waist and let him ram me until the headboard of his bed was slamming against the wall louder than I could moan.

Luca wasn't eager for my company purely for the release of all that sexual frustration that he carried. That was simply one aspect of our relationship. He wanted more than to nut and sleep. With him, this was as far away from a transactional act as it could be. There was passion in the way he held his hands on my chest and spoke filthy things into my ear before biting me gently. There was lust and attraction that didn't come from a place of loneliness, but from the pull we both felt toward the other.

It was physical, of course. I knew the separation better than anyone. I had given up all the silly, boyish hopes of being loved by a man. But liked? Desired? Luca could give me that effortlessly. And I could return it honestly.

I liked this man.

I liked his husky voice and his subtle humor. I liked his elegance and the shadow of tiredness that never really left his eyes.

It made me want to be all that he desired, in and out of the bed. In another life, in which I had been born to wealthy parents like Luca, maybe I would have allowed myself to like him even more. But this wasn't such a life. And I welcomed the thick envelopes of cash that would give me the security I

so desperately craved and give Maddy a chance at happiness in her own body.

After we showered that night, as the clock neared midnight, I made myself comfortable in Luca's kitchen. After I found all I needed for a partially successful attempt at mojitos, I joined Luca by the fire. The tiredness he'd carried since he had entered the car seemed to be gone. He appeared fresh and rested despite using a great deal of his strength just an hour earlier behind the closed doors. Now, wearing a pair of pajama bottoms and a pondering look, he sat in his armchair.

"Don't expect much," I warned him as I handed him his mojito. Instead of joining him either on the sofa or, preferably, in his lap, I walked around the armchair and rubbed my hands.

When I touched his shoulders, he tensed. It was only a momentary reflex because he relaxed slightly in the next instant. He sighed as I made circles with my thumbs over the taut skin and firm muscles of his shoulders. He was still tense, but I believed that this was the sort of tension he was never without.

"You carry a lot, I think," I said softly.

"Mm." He sighed again as I increased the pressure of my thumbs. I wasn't a masseuse, but I could dabble.

"It's good for you to relax a little," I said without much thinking.

"I don't think I relaxed once in the last ten years," Luca said with a dry laugh. He mumbled again when my thumbs struck a

particularly hard knot in his muscles. “Feels so good.”

I wasn't exactly sure if the fact I was wearing nothing but a towel around my waist — as Luca had hinted I should; I didn't mind it one bit — contributed to his pleasure. He couldn't see me, but he was aware of it, I knew.

So, my lover liked me near naked and up close.

I felt as though he was making a gigantic leap in his personal life by letting himself indulge in this. He struck me as someone who never gave in to temptation. His gaze was always reading people and his mind seemed to be always spinning, weighing, and measuring.

“I want you to close your eyes,” I said.

Luca lifted his chin a little and I saw his eyes slide shut.

“Imagine yourself on the deck of a ship,” I said softly. “It's just you, leaning against the railing, watching the frothy sea water. The sun is flaming orange, nearing the horizon, and you are watching its fire spill over the calm sea. Feel the warm breeze and the salty drops on your face, Luca. Inhale deeply and smell the ocean. Hold the railing as the ship tilts left and right, slowly, gently.”

“You're putting me to sleep,” he growled softly as he rested his head against the back of the armchair.

I smirked, but before I could say a thing, my stomach let out an embarrassing growl.

Luca laughed and my cheeks burst into flames. “Fuck,” I said. “So much about relaxing.”

“Hungry?” Luca asked, opening his eyes and saying it to me so gently that it made me hold my breath for a moment.

I bit my lip for a heartbeat, then smiled. “Not exactly. I munch in the middle of the night. Calories don’t count after midnight, right?”

He laughed. “That they do not.” And in one move, he was free of my hands and up on his feet. He gestured playfully with his head in the direction of the open kitchen, then made his way to the fridge. There, he pulled out a plate of canapés and grinned. “Anna saves the day again.” He met my awed gaze. “Snacks?”

“Holy shit. You call that a snack?” I set my hands on the black marble top of the kitchen island while Luca set the plate between us. He leaned on the island, forearms resting on the surface, and I mimicked the gesture unknowingly. “You are full of surprises.”

He popped one canapé into his mouth and grinned as he chewed. “Do you like surprises?”

“Who doesn’t?” I snorted. “Wait. No. Depends on what they are. A surprise utility bill increase is on the naughty list.”

He let out another *mm* sound of contemplating. “Do you struggle with your bills?”

I didn’t answer immediately simply because I wasn’t sure what to say.

“Sorry,” he blurted half a moment later. “Is that too personal?”

“Not really,” I said. “It’s how people live. Some struggle more than others. And...” I shrugged. “We’re lucky that it isn’t a life or death difference to us.”

“You and your friend?” he asked. There wasn’t any information gathering in his questions. I was dead certain Luca was simply keeping the conversation going.

“Mm,” I said and realized I’d mimicked another one of his quirks. “Maddy,” I mused. “She’s like a sister to me. Always has been.” Then I remembered the DiMarcos photographed from behind a bush at some reception and headlining *The Scoop*. “You have brothers, right? You know what it’s like.”

Luca nodded shortly. “We, uh, get along well enough, I suppose.”

“Ah. Sibling rivalry?” I asked and enjoyed another of Anna’s canapés.

Luca looked into my eyes with a ghost of a smile on his lips. “I don’t think you understand how correct that statement is.”

I laughed with my mouth closed as I chewed. “Never had that,” I said after swallowing. “It was always just Maddy and I against the world.”

“No family?” Luca asked, a shadow of seriousness crossing his face.

“She’s my family,” I replied.

He didn’t ask more.

The weekend flew by in the blink of an eye. Luca played with me in ways that brought us both near divine pleasure, then treated me to a spa day that he said was inspired by the massage I'd given him.

With slices of cucumber on his eyes and a fluffy bathrobe, he spoke to me from his lounge while a young man rubbed his legs with some tranquilizing cream. "I should do this more often."

"I can't believe you don't," I replied, my voice so soft and relaxed that it was barely audible.

"I need someone to show me how," he said.

I was that someone. And I was very good at it. And for my contributions to the tranquil state of Luca's weekend, I received a deep kiss as a goodbye at the elevator door.

Of all the things Luca had done this weekend, from the rooftop dining to watching crappy reality TV in his bed, this kiss was the most peculiar and welcome thing of all. It bloomed in me and left me heated and glowing long after I'd gotten into Martin's car.

I kept smirking to myself even as I received the envelope from Martin and tucked it inside my coat, then walked the rest of the street to my apartment. I kept grinning with the memory of Luca kissing me when I entered my building and climbed the stairs.

He was an impossible man. Who the hell simply kissed their escort goodbye? That just didn't happen to boys like me.

Maddy was in the kitchen, boiling a portion of ramen, when I peeked in to greet her. I had to bite my tongue to distract myself from the fizzy fountain of odd feels and stirs that Luca had installed in my chest.

I pulled out the envelope and waved its thickness in Maddy's face. I hadn't told her the details after my first meeting with Luca so that I wouldn't get her hopes up. But now, I was a lot more sure this would be an arrangement that lasted. "I tripped and hit my head against a gold mine," I said, my voice drenched with excitement. In truth, a great part of that excitement was coming from the way Luca had made me feel, but I wasn't so foolish to take that too seriously. It was safer if I merely directed it all to what this was all about for everyone involved.

"Holy shit," Maddy said, taking the envelope and glancing inside. "For a moment, I thought these had to be all one dollar bills."

I laughed out loud and watched her toss the envelope on the tiny dining table. She threw her arms around me and held me tightly. As I hugged her back, I allowed myself a joyful smile while Maddy couldn't see it. She would know I wasn't just smiling about the cash. She knew me too well. "We're safe," I said softly.

"So, he likes you that much, huh?" Maddy asked as we parted.

And my damn lips betrayed me instantly. I was going for a cryptic 'Perhaps,' but instead I smiled so broadly I almost

blinded my best friend. I tried concealing my smile with a nod, but the nod ended up too eager so I looked like a crushing fool.

Maddy shook her head and laughed. “He must be nice if he makes you glow like this.”

I pushed that away immediately. My heart needed to forever stay warded. “I’m just very lucky with this particular client.”

“Ah, yes, of course. I can see how you are merely glad.” The smile she wore slowly faded and gave way to a shadow of concern as Maddy turned away and finished preparing the bowl of ramen. She sat at the dining table and I crashed on the couch of our multi-purpose common room. I sighed dreamily before I caught myself and Maddy glanced. “I trust you when you say you know what you’re doing.”

I shrugged that off. “Of course you do. I’m brilliant.”

Maddy snorted. “I wouldn’t call you that exactly, but I still believe you. It’s just...” She shrugged. “I don’t want you to get hurt while doing something for me.”

“I’m doing this for both of us. Besides, have you ever known me to do anything I didn’t like?” I asked, lifting my eyebrow at her.

Maddy flattened her expression and rolled her eyes. “Fine. You are Eros himself.”

“Pfft. Eros watched me and took notes, my love,” I said pompously.

Maddy ate, her legs folded under her butt, and eyed me innocently. “So? Who is he?”

I had always told her things like these. No NDA in the world had ever come between me and my best friend. I’d shared the girths and lengths and usage skills for her curiosity and I’d told her the nice bits as much as the nasty. I’d told her about the wild requests I’d received and whether I’d accepted or denied them. She’d giggled madly at the story of a guy who’d only been interested in sucking my toes and nothing else at all, back in the days of true street work.

But now, it felt as though Luca had entrusted me with a glimpse into something raw and personal; a passion that lay buried beneath his mysterious burdens. To talk about it felt dirty and dishonest.

“He is,” I started and gave it some thought. My voice drifted and my eyes went out of focus as I pictured him the way he had been the other night, sitting in his armchair, his back turned to me, and his shoulder relaxing under my hands. “He is a very sweet man,” I said at last. “The sweetest I’d ever worked for. And if you think that makes it any less sexy, you can’t be more wrong. He’s like fire and ice. Can there be such a thing as flaming ice? If there could, that’s him.”

Maddy stared at me, then blinked, mouth hanging open. “Wow. That’s...something.”

I snorted. “Something, yes. Nothing important or serious, though.”

“Are you sure about that?” Maddy asked. “Because your pupils look like you accidentally took a heroic dose of mushrooms.”

I tossed the small pillow I’d found myself caressing thoughtlessly at Maddy and braced myself for the return fire. It didn’t come. Maddy set the pillow in her lap and gazed at me. “What?” I asked at last.

“It’s nothing, babe,” she said softly. “I just haven’t seen you like this in a long time.”

I didn’t need to ask. She’d just throw the pillow at me if I pretended I didn’t understand her meaning.

“And I’m glad to see it now,” Maddy added. “Us outcasts don’t get a lot of chances to be happy. And when they come, we should grab them by the balls and hold them for as long as we can.” Her soft, caring voice was in contrast with her fiery words and I loved it. “For as long as it lasts.”

It was a silly thing. All of it. This was a working arrangement and I was a professional with integrity if I was anything at all. My personal thoughts and feelings had never mattered in that regard in the past.

And yet, after three days of Luca, I just couldn’t wipe this goddamn smile off my face.

CHAPTER SIX

Luca



IT RANKED AMONG THE biggest reliefs I could recall in recent memory that Albie flew away on a whim on Sunday evening. The news of it only reached me the following morning, when I went with a heavy heart to face him on the Miller problem.

The remainder of my week, albeit slow and boring, was a blessing.

I directed some of my attention to a project that was very dear to my blackened heart. It was one glimmer of light in an otherwise dark life I was leading. It was one spark of hope that I wasn't just another villain.

My life hadn't been easy before my parents had adopted me. But, despite the wealth and influence, it wasn't much easier these days, either. I paid a price and wasn't completely sure it was a bargain.

My parents had lifted me out of poverty. My mother had given me a family. My father had given me education and prospects. But I was also burdened with the sins that ran through generations of DiMarcos.

I learned not to sneer at money that was stained with the blood of past generations. I learned to clean it, legitimize it, make it into something other than what it was. But not all the sons of my parents shared the sentiment. While Anthony preferred to woo and party, Albie had grown up on his grandfather's tales of strength. He had listened to the stories of men being gunned down in broad daylight and the war between the most influential families of New York. These stories had shaped him into the man that he was today and he looked at himself with pride.

Me? Not as much. Not truly. My exterior was composed and cold like steel. But no matter how much I washed my hands, they were never completely clean.

But I was a hypocrite who still enjoyed the fruits of other people's misery. I didn't often wish that my life had gone in a

different direction. And the best I found myself doing was this; a project that probably made little difference to people's lives, but one I always returned to when I felt particularly dirty.

It was something I couldn't physically visit. I was far too recognizable and projects like these shouldn't be affiliated with people whose names were as well known as mine. But I knew it existed and I knew it was expanding. I knew that there was good work being done and I happily funded the majority of it through back channels. Still, I had no way of knowing whether *Sunrise Village* ever made an ounce of difference. Not truly. Such things didn't come through in quarterly reports. Such things needed to be experienced.

I kept telling myself that if one gay man found a warm bed for one winter night in *Sunrise Village*, then it was all worth it. And as for the number of people finding beds in the shelter I had made, there were plenty.

So I allowed myself a little luxury of feeling good about myself. Until I remembered that nothing would ever outweigh the sins of our family and bitterness coated my tongue again.

The only true annoyance of the entire week was Daniel. He pestered me again and again. Late night voice messages vaguely threatened me with things he thought he knew; morning texts apologized for the drunk messages and begged me to see him. He tried enticing me with talks of sex as much as anything. But the truth of it was, I never even considered it.

Before, I would have thought about it, at least. I would have imagined inviting him over for a quick release, served with a

platter of mixed messages, and I would have gotten off on the daydream of it without ever acknowledging his propositions in reality. But not anymore.

In a short while, Friday came around. And with it, my entire life was tucked away into a safe box. Walls came up around the terrible things I knew and carried with me and I allowed myself to simply be Luca DiMarco, a socialite lawyer with a trust fund that made practicing law for more than one client an unnecessary bore.

Austin arrived in the late afternoon, just after Anna had prepared the midnight snacks and left for the weekend. They might have even run into one another. I had barely poured scotch over ice when the elevator gave a soft ding and bit my lip to force the grin away.

You're not a schoolboy, I chided myself for letting my heart trip the way it did.

“Good afternoon, Mr. DiMarco,” a soft voice came from behind as I gazed out the large window at the snow-blanketed Central Park.

And again, a flicker of something foreign but so very bright came to life in my chest and stretched the corners of my lips. “When did I stop being just the old Luca?”

“When you became this stylish,” he said. His soft footsteps feathered the dark, hardwood floor and his elegant hand touched my shoulder. His fingers hooked beneath the suspenders I hadn't realized I had been wearing. “It's an

improvement, if you ask me.” Austin’s voice was cheeky and amused as I turned around to look at his gorgeous face.

It made me laugh. It had been a random decision this morning to go with suspenders over my usual belt. Just now, I realized why I had done it. “Mm,” I mused. “It seems you are a very good influence.”

“Am I? That’s a first,” Austin gave a soft chuckle that made my fingertips tingle and my ears perk up and focus on it. It was all I wanted to hear. And his white teeth shone and his dark eyes glimmered.

Austin moved his hand along my upper back until he reached the back of my head. He ran his fingers through my hair and looked like he was examining every detail on my face.

“You’re a very good looking man, Luca,” he said. “Like, ridiculously good looking.”

I nodded. It wasn’t vanity when it was true, right? Who was I kidding? It was probably vanity. And I liked standing near Austin. “Together, we can totally walk the red carpet like we belong.”

“A red carpet?” Austin asked, dazzled. “Where are you taking me?”

I chuckled. I had really enjoyed taking Austin out to *The Roof* and in front of many pairs of eyeballs. Deep down, it had felt like something I could be proud of even if I knew I was

hiring him for that purpose. But I had different plans for tonight. “Actually, we’re not going anywhere.”

He raised his eyebrows and smiled one of those naughty smiles. He knew what I was planning, vaguely. “Even better.”

“I got you something,” I said and watched the surprise on his face. “In the bedroom. On my bed.”

Austin cocked his head as if to ask whether he should go right away.

I nudged him with an open palm on the small of his back. So, he walked carefully to the other side of my apartment and pushed the bedroom door open, scanned my bed, and threw his head back with laughter. “And I went to all this trouble to look good for you.”

I couldn’t resist laughing with him. He truly was stunning, wearing a light cream shirt and dark brown pants on dark olive, ankle high boots. Every hair on his head had been thoughtfully put in place, eyebrows manicured in a way that didn’t make them seem unnatural at all and the slight shade above his lips and over his chin had been allowed to grow this far, but no more. I knew he was deliberate about every facet of his appearance.

And here I was, nodding for him to go and change.

It amused me to my core as I waited for Austin to return to the living room. The lights were subdued and music played softly like always from the discreet speakers mounted to the walls.

I set my drink on the tray and returned to the window.

When Austin came back, he wore a mock pissed expression with a smirk pulling the corners of his pursed lips. “Happy?” he asked. His eyes shone with mischief.

I took my time scanning him from head to toe. His hair was still perfect, even if changing clothes had moved the thick, wavy locks around. The cotton sweater I’d gotten him was pale, light blue with a pink art deco print over his chest. It fit him well thanks to my deliberate glance at the sizes he wore the last time his clothes had been scattered all over the place. And the sweatpants, darker gray and ever so slightly tight, emphasized the curves of his hips and legs. And when Austin gave me a spin, his ass looked firm and big, fabric stretched over it tightly. In front, the bulge was pronounced in the middle of his crotch, so I wondered what it was that he wore underneath.

“Depends,” I answered his question. “Are you comfy?”

Austin paused for a beat, then relaxed. “Fuck yes.”

“Then I’m happy,” I said. My left arm stretched out, hand open, palm facing up.

Austin took a few light paces toward me and placed his right hand in my left. In an instant, I lifted his arm high above his head to the rhythm of tango that played from the speakers.

Without missing a beat, Austin caught the rhythm, too, and spun under the arch our arms had made, then whirled into me, his chest pressing against mine. He lifted his chin high,

looking into my eyes from below. His lust for me was unmistakable — I refused to wonder if it was a practiced look — and his smile was enough to drain my lungs of air.

I placed my right hand on the small of his back and made a quick step to lead him into our impromptu dance. Austin followed as skillfully as if he'd done this for a living. He danced with the same kind of seductive determination that he applied to everything he did. And I led the way.

What had begun as just a simple gesture, arising from my need to feel his body against mine, soon became a passionate exercise in skill and devotion. We danced, gazing into one another's eyes with growing sureness. His other hand held onto my shoulder and I let my right palm caress the small of his back, pressing him lightly now and then to feel him closer to my body.

Sighs and curving eyebrows mixed with Austin's sexy way of biting his full lower lip woke up something primal and possessive in me. It was the same thing I had felt when I had first laid my eyes on him.

I hadn't planned it, then. It had come out of me with a terrible need to be in charge and to keep him all for myself. The jealousy hadn't even occurred to me earlier, when Jack had given me Austin's number. It had roared to life as blazingly as this moment of dancing. I had met him, then needed him all for myself, no matter the price.

I would have paid tenfold for it. I would have done more costly things than giving him money if that was his price of

exclusivity.

The music reached its banging conclusion and I spun Austin around, leaped forward with my right foot, and leaned down until he was all straight and swept off his feet, held by my arms a mere foot above the floor, and gazing up at me in surprise.

His face was glowing hot and his eyes were wide as I used my strength to seemingly effortlessly lift him back to his feet.

Austin, now free of my hold, swayed a little, then fanned his face. “Where have you been all my life?” he sighed.

“Right here,” I answered his hypothetical question. I had the strongest urge to tell him that. “Waiting patiently.”

His eyes widened for a split second. Everything about him lit up. Whether it was the husky quality of my voice or the words that had left my lips, it didn’t matter. The important thing was that Austin seemed to struggle inhaling. And finally, he whispered: “You don’t have to wait any longer.” And with that, he gave me his hand again and I took it.

I took all of him.

Suddenly, five days that I had lived through since I had last seen him seemed like an eternity. I was like a starved man who was finally seated at the head of a banquet table, or a thirsty one who had been shown a mountain stream. The pleasure that was within my reach was immeasurable; all I had to do was reach out for it.

Finally, the week was over. Finally, he was here.

I hadn't realized how badly I had been missing his company.

My lips pressed hard against his and Austin moaned into my mouth. His breath was minty fresh and the scent of his cologne wasn't too different. There was a clean crispness to everything he did. Every trace of his fingertips over my cheek and neck felt exactly right.

I kissed him deeply, my tongue sliding between his lips and reaching for more of that minty taste. And Austin embraced it. He toyed with me, pressing the tip of his tongue against mine, sighing dreamily in between kisses, and shivering all over.

It felt instantaneous that I was completely hard and aching for him. He, too, was hard judging by the firmness of the bulge pressed against my leg.

"I want to pleasure you for once," I purred, pulling my head back to look at his glassy gaze.

His lips stretched into a smile as he shook his head. "Do you really think you don't pleasure me every time I'm with you?" he asked.

"Mm," I pondered. "Perhaps, but I want to *only* pleasure you. Tonight."

He looked right about ready to collapse. "Okay," he whispered.

I took his hand and led him to the bedroom. The lights were dim there, too, and the music was a little quieter. It was just perfect.

I glanced around the room. Austin's nice clothes were neatly folded and placed on top of my dresser. A silly, boyish thought crossed my mind but I pushed it quickly away. He didn't need a drawer here. He was here to be naked, if we were being honest, so he had no need for more. Offering it would only be odd.

I forgot all about it, temporarily, and kissed him again. My hands slid under his sweater and found his smooth, heated skin delightful under my fingertips. It made me tingle with excitement and desire as I lifted my hands along his torso and dragged the sweater up.

Austin showed me mercy in that he grabbed the sweater and pulled it over his head, throwing it messily on the floor. He bit his lip and watched me expectantly, so I did exactly what he thought I would. My hands reached for the top of his chest and I pushed him hard, provoking a small moment of surprise followed by a big, inviting smile.

Austin landed on his back on my large bed. His arms fell above his head and he twisted his hips left and right, the bulge even more pronounced.

"I want to pleasure you," I said softly. "But I want to do it my way."

Austin considered it, his bare chest rising and falling as he breathed. "If my experience taught me anything at all, it's to trust your way."

I watched him under the subdued yellow light. Every feature was made to perfection. He looked as if God peeked

into my deepest desires and said: “Alright, then. You get this one. Don’t ask for more.” And I replied: “I will never need more.”

He batted those long, black lashes at me and it made my knees shake.

I reached for the knot in my tie and pulled it loose.

Austin’s eyes flashed as he observed me. He watched as I untied the knot and ran the silky fabric through my left hand. “Hm?” It was all I needed to say.

Austin heaved a breath of air, then whispered: “Hell yeah.” His eager nod was quick and jerky as he tightened his fists and scooted higher up along the mattress. When he stopped, I knelt on the bed by his side, and carefully tied the tie around his right wrist, threaded it through the metal bars of the headboard of my bed, then tied his other wrist.

Last week, we had agreed on safe words after a lazy discussion of limits of interests. He’d confided in me that he liked certain things, although he hadn’t even hinted that he wanted me to do them. Being tied up was one of them. And the other was such a simple, sensual thing that I had instantly vowed to do exactly that.

I spread Austin’s knees a little so I could kneel between them, then leaned down to kiss him. His breaths were growing shallow already and a light swing of my hips brushed my crotch against his, showing me exactly how excited he was.

Slowly, I kissed his lips, chin, and neck. Lower and lower I went, kissing his chest and licking his nipples. I feathered his torso with kisses until I reached the waistband of the sweatpants I'd gotten for him. Afterward, he would get to lounge around in his favorite clothes, I promised to myself.

I yanked the sweatpants down his legs ruthlessly, discovering a delicate piece of work that he wore for underwear. A light, silky piece of pale pink fabric shaped like a little triangle packed his cock and balls tightly. From its three corners, a thin, elastic string of darker pink went around his waist and down his taint, disappearing between his cheeks.

The faint, sweet scent of his musk and precum tickled my nostrils and I felt myself salivate. The little dark spot on the fabric of his underwear made me dizzy with wanting. It was so inviting. I wanted to press the tip of my tongue hard against it and feel him throb. I wanted to make him spill his heat quickly, with a total loss of control, and whimper as he did so.

But I also wanted to make this last. I wanted him to suffer under my touch and beg me loudly to make him come.

I opened my right hand and cupped his big, packed balls with my palm. Austin hissed in reply and bared his teeth, tension rising all over his muscled torso. *You are all mine to do what I please*, I thought to myself.

I released him, then pulled his sweatpants all the way off and threw them on the floor. I parted his legs nicely and bent his knees, revealing the path between his cheeks where the

single strip of fabric separated me and the thing I wanted the most.

I placed my hands on his thighs and slid them slowly up toward his groin. He was smooth up there, his skin bronze and soft. “You pretty thing,” I purred, catching the way his eyes sparked at the sound of my voice. “I bet you’ve been craving this for ages.”

I lifted his chin and he murmured something unintelligible.

It made me want to smile, but I forced myself to remain cool. My thumbs slid under his groin, rubbing his taint, while my other fingers pressed against his body; his cock and balls were trapped between my flat hands and he throbbed as I dragged my thumbs along his taint.

“I bet nobody’s ever served you the way you served them,” I said and watched his composed facial expression slowly crumble. “Nobody even thinks about what escort boys want, do they?”

He whimpered and confirmed it.

I chuckled softly, darkly. “I do,” I said. “And I’ll show you, pretty boy. I’ll show you what it’s like. I want you to feel what I feel when you take care of me.”

He whimpered again, saying nothing more than ‘uh-huh.’

I didn’t want him to undress completely. I wanted this to be messy and careless. I still wore my shirt and pants, my suspenders tight over my shoulders. So, I lifted the tight fabric off his cock and balls, then moved it only to the side. His cock

leaped and balls spread down his taint like the time they had spent in that silky cage had been more than a little painful.

The tip of his cock was slick with silvery precum and I gripped it with my left hand, sliding my fist along Austin's length slowly. He moaned and I seized the opportunity to slide two of my fingers into his mouth.

Over my fingers, his voice was muffled, but he moaned for a short while longer. Slowly, he closed his lips around my knuckles and sucked my fingers like he had never known anything more satisfying.

“Easy, boy,” I whispered, dragging my fist over his cock sensually. Each time I felt him pulse in my grip, I slowed down by another degree.

He whimpered through his nose as my fingers reached deeper into his mouth, pressing his tongue for the slickness of his saliva and showing him the firmness that he reacted well to. He liked having a strong hand guiding him, despite repeatedly pointing out how independent he was. He liked when someone took control from him, and with it all the responsibilities.

I pulled my fingers out of his warm, sexy mouth and caught his gaze. He watched me expectantly as I pressed the tip of my index finger against his hole. It pulsed and tightened and Austin thrust his hips to fuck my fist roughly once.

“Naughty boy,” I said, gripping his cock tighter and thrusting my fist down to practically pin his hips against the

mattress. My index finger rubbed his hole slowly, teasingly, until I felt it relax.

Of course, Austin had expected this. So, when my finger entered him by an inch, he was already slick and loose enough not to wince. He didn't need time to adjust to the sensation and the thought of him fucking himself with a toy before coming here just to be readier for me excited me in ways I had never before considered. He had prepared himself for my size; but he was getting something better.

Austin had a deep desire to be fingered thoroughly and ruthlessly and I was the man for the job.

Sliding my middle finger to join the first, I made Austin coil and tighten his trapped fists. He grunted, relaxing his hole for me and leaking precum with the effort.

I watched, fascinated by the way a thin layer of sweat glistened on his bronze skin, welcomed by the warmth of his body as my fingers reached deeper. And when I rubbed his prostate, a cry of pleasure burst out of him.

Austin moaned softly as I jerked my hand back and thrust it deeper in, rubbing his prostate all the same. He forced himself to stay relaxed, his cock no longer pulsing. But, at times, when my fist moved in a particularly pleasing way over the head of his dick, he throbbed and tightened, making himself whimper.

“Is this what you like, pretty boy?” I asked.

“Yes,” he cried. “I love it.”

I thrust my fingers inside, adding pressure against his prostate and watching him spill more of his precum. Then, as if I was starving, I released his cock and watched it stand upright at full mast.

In an instant, I found myself bending down, fingers sliding in and out of my lover and my lips closing around his dick. He'd sucked me off so many times already and I wanted badly to return the favor.

Austin moaned and jerked his hips, sliding his thick cock into my mouth and coating my tongue with his slick, sweet and salty precum. The flavor drove me mad; riled up like a fighting bull, I rammed my lover with my fingers, forcing him to throb and moan and shiver.

I swallowed him deep into my throat, savoring each moment when his cock stiffened and pulsed inside my mouth, hoping that one would be accidentally too much and that cum would spill out of him. I wanted to taste him and swallow him; I wanted to kiss him with my steamed lips and watch him taste himself. I wanted him to think of this night every time he woke up with an erection and needed help getting his cock down. I wanted him to compare every future lover with me and always shut those thoughts down because none of them would be nearly as good.

This transcended all the bodily pleasures and the shadow of payment. This act shattered all the prejudice and brought us into being one and the same. He served me; I served him. We were beyond the bounds of rules.

This was companionship and desire.

I thrust my fingers into him; I impaled my head on his hard cock.

It didn't matter that I was achingly hard and that I had decided only to pleasure him. It didn't matter that I was exercising self-control and postponing my release indefinitely. It wasn't even about pleasure itself, but about me doing this for Austin.

There was more to him than I cared to admit. There was more to this arrangement and I had been selectively blind to it. I had asked him for entire weekends. I had asked him for exclusivity. I practically bought myself a part-time boyfriend.

I sucked him harder, this realization fanning the flames of lust.

For a moment, I feared I had tipped him over too soon. He was moaning, voice growing higher in pitch, and I pulled my head back. His cock stood upright, barely moving. His hole was tight around my fingers now that he was no longer able to keep himself relaxed. He was edged near madness.

I spat on his rim, scooping it with my ring finger and impaling him in the next jerk of my fist. Austin whimpered as I stretched him, his cock pulsing and his fists holding the metal bars above his head.

“Harder, Luca,” he begged. “Harder, please.”

I didn't need to make him beg again. My thrusts intensified and I opened my mouth to take him in again, but as I did, his

hole clenched rapidly around my fingers and his cock stiffened, moving just a little off course to my mouth.

Large drops of hot cum splashed against my chin and I hurried to close my mouth around the head of his cock. As I did, the hot wetness of his orgasm filled me and I buried my three fingers as deep as I could inside of him.

I'd played his body to an explosive finish that rewarded my patience and left Austin panting.

My fingers slid out of him, but I kept sucking his cock as it throbbed long after I had drained him.

Abruptly, Austin coiled, as senses returned to him, and I released him from my mouth. I swallowed once, a big gulp of heat, and crashed on top of him. "Lick my lips," I purred.

His eyebrows rose and mouth opened. "Fuck yes," he huffed and extended his tongue all the way out, licking me from my chin to the tip of my nose. The sheer filthiness of our sins was so delicious that I wanted to do it all over again.

Later, I would swap our places, and I would lick myself off his face instead.

I reached up with my hand and untied his wrists swiftly, seeing just how easily he could have done that had he wanted to.

Austin licked his own lips, smeared with his cum after I had kissed him, and bit the lower one.

The pressure of desire tightened my chest as I watched him. I wanted to do so many things to him that a million weekends

wouldn't be enough.

“Let me help you with that,” he said after rubbing his wrists and reaching down to touch my painful erection.

I grunted. “Don't,” I said. “We'll do it later.”

His eyes widened, flashing with desire that seemed so genuine that I had no choice but to trust it completely. “I admire your stubbornness.”

I chuckled at that.

“How much can you take before your will breaks?” he asked me teasingly.

I arched one eyebrow. “Is this a challenge?”

Austin's round shoulders lifted. “It might be.”

My heart inflated. *Fuck*, I thought. *My will is breaking already*. “I can do this all weekend,” I lied.

Austin mock-scoffed. “And let me leave without lending you a helping hand? Wait until next Friday?” He shook his head dismissively. “You will break by midnight.”

“Try me,” I whispered, biting the bait of his lustful game just like he wanted.

Austin swung and turned me onto my back, lying flat over my entire left side. His right arm was over my chest and he moved his right leg to rest on my hard crotch. The little cheat. I chuckled softly and shook my head to scold him, but Austin only grinned. “You're so sure about this,” he said with wonder in his voice. “But I know for a fact that you're gonna break in

a few hours. You're gonna grab my hips and throw me over the kitchen island and fuck my brains out. You won't be able to resist it. And I don't even have to do anything." He gave a cheeky grin. "All I have to do is..." Without finishing the sentence, he hooked his thumb under the string that held his underwear around his waist, then pulled the scrappy piece of cloth down his legs. With his right foot, he kicked his underwear off the bed. "...stay like this."

Desperate hunger for him zinged through my chest. It seriously hurt to imagine him remaining completely naked all this time and staying true to my word.

This game was going to be fun.

"And now," Austin said and ran his hand through my hair. "My beautiful Luca, I'm going to take a shower. I dare you to come and watch me." He ran the tip of his tongue over his pearly teeth as he grinned. "And if you decide to concede, you can join me, too."

He hopped out of the bed, his cock soft and balls big and heavy, his ass a perfection of divine creation. He looked at me over his shoulder as he walked toward the bathroom, smiling seductively, swinging his hips in a way that would have made anyone want him.

And my heart throbbed hard. It murmured and filled my chest with warmth and fear in equal measures.

I followed him so I could watch him and show just how strong my will was. I followed him and became aware that I

would have followed him had he walked off the edge of the earth.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Austin



THE LARGE, DUSTY YELLOW tiles in the bathroom were heated when my bare feet tapped along and I entered the large shower. It was bordered by a single block of glass on one side and walls in front and on the left. There was no door and the floor was slightly tilted for water to drain away. The shower head installed right above mimicked rain and hot water splashed against my skin an instant after I'd stepped inside.

The soft footsteps that followed me were Luca's.

He was stubborn and sexy as hell. I had a weakness for sexy, stubborn men.

As I looked over my shoulder, Luca was leaning against the wall and crossing his arms at his chest. He watched me; lips sealed, eyes narrow in thought. He was easily the most beautiful guy I'd ever laid my eyes on.

I pretended not to see him. I turned away from him and busied myself with plenty of soap that foamed and bubbled over my skin. My fingers moved naughtily in places I didn't want Luca to fully see just now. I gave him enough glimpses that he could put the whole picture together in his imagination. My right leg was in front, crossed over the left, and I had my back to Luca, so he only saw my shape and my big, firm butt.

When I looked at him again, his breathing seemed slow and controlled. And when I glanced lower, he was freely exhibiting the consequences of my teasing. His pants struggled to keep him inside, but he only watched me without any movements.

Gazing up, I realized he was biting his lip.

It was the sweetest torture I was capable of. The best part of it was that Luca was doing this to himself simply to show me how strong he was. He had decided to treat me royally tonight and he wasn't going to go back on his word.

He could have taken me here against the tiles if he wished. I was his to play with. We had agreed, for his comfort, on a safe word if our games became too much. He could have grabbed

me and pinned me in the shower and had his way with me. I would have welcomed it.

But no. Luca DiMarco wanted to test his own limits. And he wanted to shower me in unholy pleasures for my sake alone.

I almost chuckled, lost in thought. How lucky did I have to be to come across a man such as this? I was going to build a shrine to Jack for introducing us.

When I was squeaky clean and not a trace of sweat or sex remained on me, I turned the water off and kept ignoring Luca. Being watched by him was starting to turn me on. So, I picked up a big, white towel and, once again, marveled at how soft and fluffy rich people's towels could be. It caressed my skin slowly, soaking up the water on my body.

“Was this fun for you?” Luca growled.

“Immensely,” I said, amusement dripping from my voice. “And you?” I asked, hanging the towel back to dry and stepping up to Luca. I rested my hands on the wrinkled shirt covering his chest, then pressed him gently and let my leg brush against his hard cock. “Are you ready to concede?”

Luca snorted. “It takes more than this to shake my resolve.”

“Such a stubborn man,” I mused. “What will I do with you?”

I pushed myself to the tips of my toes, my hands sliding to his shoulders, thumbs tracing his stiff collar. My lips brushed against the corner of his mouth and I felt a new wave of

excitement and surprise. I, a date for hire, was kissing my host's lips on a whim.

This was nothing like a normal arrangement.

We were playing with fire and I would be smart to remember that. It was hard, though, when Luca was as nice and generous to me as he was.

I didn't know what sort of pleasure he got out of being a real gentleman for most of the hours we spent together. He was a beast in bed, for sure, but he could have done that on an hourly rate and had the rest of his free time for himself.

"I'll show you mercy," I said teasingly and walked out of the bathroom to where my new sweatpants and sweater were thrown in different corners of the room. Luca followed me and his breath hitched when he saw me pull the sweatpants on commando and ignore the sweater altogether.

I turned around and met his gaze, my grin too wide to battle.

"You are a cruel man, Austin," Luca said in a purr.

I chuckled and pulled the waistband a little lower around my hips, revealing another inch of my skin and the V line of my abdomen.

"A cruel, cruel man," Luca growled, shaking his head in mock disappointment, but his eyes were ablaze and his chest shuddered.

He sucked his teeth and gestured at the living room with his head. "Come."

I didn't need to be told twice. He had the command in his voice defined to perfection. He could tell me to kneel on the hardwood floor patiently while he watched TV and I would obey.

I followed him out to his spacious living room and hummed softly to the tune of instrumental music that filled the air. Meanwhile, Luca cleaned up the glass he had abandoned when we had danced in the spur of the moment.

“A drink?” he asked.

He was making my hard rules impossible to follow. I enjoyed nothing as much as sharing a drink with him. “Where has my professionalism gone?” I asked rhetorically and Luca chuckled, then set up a glass for me.

“How long have you been in this...industry?” he asked conversationally.

I laughed out loud at his choice of words. They were very respectful of me, which was hilarious considering he had fed me my own cum out of his mouth less than twenty minutes earlier. “A while,” I admitted. It took me a moment to do the math. “A little over six years.”

“You weren't even twenty,” Luca said. There wasn't a trace of judgment in his voice. And, more importantly, there was no pity. I hated pity. This was a simple statement on his part.

“Yes,” I said. “We struggled a lot after we turned eighteen. Mindless sex was the only distraction while we hustled for every penny. I was on Grindr when a man messaged me with

an offer.” I laughed out loud. “A measly offer for a weird thing he wanted. I refused, but it got me thinking. There was a moment, before I said no, when I seriously considered it. Had he offered twice as much, I might have done it.”

The space between Luca’s black eyebrows creased a little. An amused smirk touched the corners of his lips as he squeezed a lime into the strainer. “What was the thing?”

I chuckled. “He wanted to order a cake to be delivered to my address. You can imagine the rest.”

Luca laughed and shook his head. “I, uh, really can’t.”

The way his face lit up with laughter made my heart trip. I laughed harder. “Really? I never thought of you as so innocent.”

“He wanted you to...eat the cake?” Luca asked, raising his eyebrows curiously, while skillfully bruising mint on a wooden cutting board with the butt of a knife.

“He wanted me to sit on the cake,” I said, still chuckling. “And send him a video.”

“What?” Luca asked, laughing but incredulous.

I nodded. “Yep. He sent a document with instructions in his third message. He was particular about the room being well lit. I think he really wanted to see the cake spread out on the chair. Interestingly, to this day, I don’t know if he wanted me to do it naked.”

Luca threw his head back and roared with laughter.

I shrugged casually. “Maybe I’m dumb for saying no. It sounds like the easiest fifty bucks I could have made.”

My lover was shaking, wiping his tears away with the back of his hand. “Would you at least get to keep the cake?”

“Oh. I never considered that,” I said with mock disappointment. “Oh God, I’m full of regrets.”

“See? That’s a missed opportunity if I ever saw one.” He measured small portions of white rum. “I hope you learned something tonight.”

I shook my head sadly. “I learned what an idiot I am. That’s one cake I’ll never get over.”

Luca grabbed ice and sparkling water, then returned to the kitchen island and finished preparing mojitos that were far more elaborate than mine had been last week. “It’s never too late to change careers,” he mused. “You’re still young. You can learn cake-sitting in no time.”

“I bet there’s a course,” I said.

“We’re in New York, pretty boy,” Luca pointed out. “There is definitely a course.”

I shrugged. “Sounds like a Vegas thing to me.”

Luca grinned so hard that I wanted to leap over the island and kiss that grin away. Instead, I accepted the mojito and followed him to the sofa. Not so deliberately at all, I sat down right next to him, so that when he spread his arm over the back of the sofa, his hand touched my shoulder.

Had he been any other client of mine, I would have positioned myself there intentionally and consciously. I would have done so to appear close and create the air of attraction. The proximity would be irresistible.

With Luca, it was different. I was driven by the urge to be near him.

“And you? How long have you been practicing law?” I asked.

Luca frowned. “I’ve never felt as boring as I do right now,” he said. “You want me to follow your story with the story of land ownership disputes.”

“Land ownership disputes? Stop. That’s too exciting for this early in the night,” I teased.

Luca bared his teeth at me in a mock growl.

“But seriously, I’m curious,” I said, softer.

“A little over three years,” he said, cogs turning in his head and a big smile spreading across his face. “Which means you have twice as much work experience.”

I laughed out loud and let our glasses touch briefly before wrapping my lips around the straw and sucking the sweet, fizzy cocktail. Luca watched me as I did this, his pupils dilating.

“You didn’t finish your story,” he pointed out after a moment of holding his breath. “How did you get into sex work?”

I nodded. “Well, when this cake business fell through, I realized how easy it was to find clients. A little grooming and I looked pretty much like this, except scrawny. After that, it was just a matter of hinting at what I did, even if I hadn’t done it before. But it was the world of Grindr.” I laughed a little at the way Luca understood my exact meaning. “We would agree on a location. I’d show up and wait. We’d go to a motel and I would leave with cash. But in waiting, I realized there were other guys doing the same thing. On the street. There’s an entire industry under everyone’s nose.”

Luca raised his eyebrows and shook his head in slight disbelief.

I shrugged. “So I did a combination of both, until I attracted the attention of a wealthy client. That guy...” I shuddered, pushing the memory of him out of my mind. “He had connections. Weird ones. And the word slowly spread, but he pretty much owned me. He had people who wanted time with me and...ah, I was naïve enough to fall for his stories. He was a pimp for the rich.”

Luca frowned and listened intently.

I sighed. “Well. I got myself stuck in this underground world of cigar clubs and whiskey, in debt to a guy whose wristwatch cost more than my entire wardrobe. But some clients were more generous than the others. And, uh, Jack was one of them. I still don’t know how the word reached him. He didn’t know any of the men from the club. It must have been a word from a friend of a friend and so on. But he was nosy like

you.” I laughed at that and Luca joined. “He found out and offered me a sum to pay the debt back and free myself from that guy.”

Luca swallowed thickly. “Jack is a caring man.” He cleared his throat. “He never said anything.”

“He is caring,” I said. “I think, maybe, that’s the reason he sent me your way.” That was what changed everything for me.

I met Luca’s gaze. He was looking into my eyes deeply, his lips parting. He seemed somehow raw and open, but the cool and composed look quickly returned. He cleared his throat again. “I’m glad you’re here.”

I lifted one corner of my mouth. “You know what? I’m glad I’m here, too.”

After a little while, Luca asked another question. “Do you ever wish you were doing something else?”

And again, the way he spoke removed every sense of stigma I might have expected from a question like that. When you were a sex worker, people asked that question when they felt sorry for you. Luca, on the other hand, was gathering information. I might as well have been a painter and he would have asked me this the same way.

I shrugged. “I ask myself the same thing a lot.” After a beat, I countered. “Do you?”

He nodded in earnest, then quickly returned his mannerisms to subdued and controlled. He cleared his throat. “I do. Sometimes.” He let a moment of silence pass. “In law school,

you often learn about these great moments that shaped the course of time. The lawyers who stood in court and argued their way to victory against impossible odds. And then you go and fill out contracts for a living.”

I looked around his place pointedly. “A very good living, if I might say.”

Luca smiled. “My family is my only client. I can barely say I practice law.”

It was bizarre to imagine that I was more satisfied with the work I did than this ridiculously wealthy lawyer.

Silence settled between us and I mulled over his original question. After a while, I sighed. “I enjoy what I do,” I admitted. “Sometimes more, sometimes less, but I enjoy it. It wasn’t always like that. When that man controlled me, I hated myself and everything I did. With him, I longed to go back to the streets on my own. But now, I’m in a better place. I get to be picky if I want to. I don’t have to do anything I don’t like.”

Perhaps it was the subtle confirmation that I liked being near him that made Luca smile. Whatever the reason, he warmed up the very air of the room.

“And you...” I shrugged. “This deal is very good to me, Luca. Too good.”

He lifted an eyebrow.

“When we met, you asked me to drop my other clients. You told me you would triple my rate for it.” I bit my lip and narrowed my eyes. “I owe you the truth. I didn’t have any

regular clients since...our mutual friend. One offs, but nothing like this.”

Luca was silent for a while.

I wasn't sure if I had done the dishonest thing. I wasn't sure if he had offered to pay me this well specifically for severing contact with other clients. But his silence was torturous.

He cocked his head. “So?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

He shook his head. “It just sounded like you had something important to say.” He smirked.

“I did,” I pointed out. “I just said it.”

“What? That you didn't have regulars? Good. I don't care.” He took a sip of his cocktail. “I'm keeping you for myself all weekend, every weekend, Austin. And I'm not letting you take up other...jobs. Besides, if I couldn't afford you, you wouldn't be sitting here.”

Relief washed over me. It felt as though something heavy had rolled off my chest and I finally breathed freely. “Good,” I said. “Because I like this arrangement a lot.”

It had to end someday, I knew. Nobody stayed with their escort for too long. Luca would go to a place where he had the time to do all these things with a man he liked. He wouldn't need me to play the part of his weekend boyfriend.

“I like it, too,” he said. “You've quickly become something I look forward to.”

His forwardness surprised me.

“And I don’t wish to change anything for the foreseeable future,” he said. “My job takes a lot of my time and energy. And before, my only company was Jack. Even that was getting less and less common. We are heading in different directions; our schedules keep conflicting. Not to mention the rest of what you provide for me.”

My throat knotted a little as I listened. He was very deliberately telling me that my future was secure. He was telling me I had nothing to worry about for a while to come.

And then, he frowned with determination, reaching with his hand over my shoulder, then cupping my cheek. “You won’t go back to any man who’ll take advantage of you. Even when you’re done with me, someday, or I with you. I’ll see to that.”

I bit my lip and smiled for him. “That won’t be necessary, but I appreciate the offer.”

Luca lifted his eyebrows.

“Don’t think about what comes after,” I said. “Have fun with me here and now.”

He smirked. “You’re trying to break my resolve. Ah, but I see through your schemes.”

I lit up, heat rising to my face. Whenever he allowed himself to joke and laugh, every trouble in my life seemed a little easier to bear. “You foil my plans,” I accused theatrically.

“You won’t corrupt me,” he retorted.

We laughed and I threw my legs over his knees, playing the part of a good little boyfriend far too effortlessly and ignoring the murmurs of my heart that warned me about the pain on that unknown day that was still ahead of us. The day when Luca no longer needed me.

I hadn't suffered any pain when clients dropped me. Sure, there had always been some wounding of my pride, but that had always been inflicted by me on myself. I had always wanted to be wanted and discovering I no longer was had never come easy. But Luca...

This was far too different than any deal I'd ever made.

I didn't want this to end.

"I wonder what it'll take for you to lose control," I mused. "I don't even know how you're doing it."

He smiled questioningly.

I shrugged. "I'm getting horny already," I admitted, looking at the skin of his chest where his shirt spread open, then lifting my gaze over his pronounced Adam's apple, his pointy chin, and his high cheekbones. "Oh, but I guess I'll just have to pleasure myself while you watch."

I sucked the straw between my lips again and dragged a long sip of my mojito. Luca watched with a cold fire burning brighter in his eyes.

I was starting to get through the walls.

And I knew nothing more fun than that.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Luca



AUSTIN WAS MORE THAN a toy.

His body was a place of worship.

His witty mind was my refuge.

His personality was a warm embrace after a long day's struggle.

He curled his toes and set his cocktail on the coffee table, then slid further away from me along the sofa until his feet were in my lap.

My gaze was glued to him as he rubbed the back of his head against a pillow and sank into it. He closed his eyes, a hand circling the right side of his chest. He moved his fingers around his nipple until it was small and hard.

I watched all of this with shallowing breaths and growing tension both in my chest and in my pants.

Austin dragged his hand down his torso, feeling his defined abs and sliding lower, lower, lower. When his palm caught the outline of his hardening cock, Austin hissed and pushed it further down.

I salivated already, but decided to see how far he would go.

In no time, Austin slipped his hand inside his sweatpants and opened his eyes. That fiery brown gaze caught my look and held it.

I dropped my gaze lower, letting him watch me watch. I wasn't going to miss the show. His fist was around his cock, the tent of his sweatpants already up. He stroked himself with his right hand, feeling his torso with the left. The low murmurs and moans that escaped him turned me on as much as the exhibition he was putting together for my pleasure and pain.

I shifted in my seat, dragging a sip of my mojito while a shudder passed through Austin. "So good," he whimpered.

"You're such a bad boy," I said in my smokiest voice.

"Me?" he asked, voice strained with all the pleasure his body was experiencing. "You're the bad one, Luca." He bit his

lip shortly, wincing as he jerked his hand inside his sweatpants. “You don’t want to play with me.”

“Who said anything about not wanting to?” I pointed out, then pressed the tip of my index finger against his bare foot. As I dragged my finger up, Austin hissed louder and twisted his foot, but found the strength to keep it in my lap.

So, he was ticklish. I added that sticky note to the thickening folder of Austin tidbits.

“If you wanted to play with me, you would,” Austin accused. “And see? I have to do everything myself.”

I breathed calmly, although not very deeply. I couldn’t. His beauty was enough to leave me gasping for air. And when he was using his body like this, so freely and openly, it made me dizzy.

He apparently released his cock and pushed his hand deeper down his sweatpants. Briefly, it looked like he was playing with his balls, then thrust his hand lower. The moves grew small, so I figured he was rubbing his finger over his hole and massaging his taint with his palm.

“But it’s just not as good,” he complained, but his heated face and glassy gaze begged to disagree. “Not even close to what you can do to me.”

“What can I do to you?” I asked.

He moaned. “You can wreck me,” he whispered. “And make it the best sex of my life.”

“Is that so?” I asked.

Austin nodded, then pulled his hand out and peeled the sweatpants down his smooth legs. He threw them off the sofa and sat up, shifted, and crawled toward me.

I set the cocktail on the table, then leaned back. Watching. Waiting.

Austin shamelessly threw his leg over mine and sank into my lap, hands on my chest, shoulders swinging slowly back and forth to the rhythm of the music. He sat on my hard cock, unbothered by the layers of clothes between us. His hips moved gently back and forth, rubbing me and adding pressure.

“You’re cheating,” I said, but the will to fight was gone from my voice.

“And you are giving in,” he pointed out, methodically unbuttoning my shirt. He revealed more and more of my chest and his naughty smile was growing. “God. Why are you so beautiful?” he asked rhetorically.

I narrowed my eyes and looked down his perfect body. His cock was at full mast, glistening, painfully swollen. But so was mine.

Austin untucked my shirt and pulled me up so he could take it down my back and arms. When he threw it away, he busied his hands with exploring my muscles.

Giving in and forgetting everything else, I took his hips and helped him swing back and forth against my trapped hard cock. I grunted with ache and Austin shared such a sinister smirk that I suddenly found myself drawn to him like a moth

would be to flames. I wanted him twice as hard as in the heartbeat before, and the wanting doubled with the next heartbeat again.

I swung around and threw Austin on his back again, then stood up and unzipped my pants. When I stepped out of my pants and underwear, Austin's gaze was locked on my hard cock. In an instant, the tension halved. But only halved. I was still painfully hard and desperate for him.

Austin bit his lip in expectation and I gazed into his gorgeous eyes. "Is this what you wanted?" I purred. "What was it? That I take you and wreck you and make it the best sex of your life?"

Austin wheezed and licked his lips. "That's exactly what I wanted."

He didn't need to repeat himself. I was already on my knees and between his legs, grabbing his ankles and lifting his feet over my shoulders. It took no effort to bend Austin over. His ass lifted as I leaned down and kissed him deeply. My cock settled between his cheeks and Austin pushed his knees apart to give me space as I leaned in lower, pressing my chest against his.

His feet hooked together on the back of my neck and he sighed into my open mouth. I inhaled it, then kissed him deeper, swinging my hips and sliding my hard dick between his spread cheeks.

If he wanted to be wrecked, I could make it happen.

The waiting had only spiced the act and I soared as I kissed him, releasing the beast that had slept in me for so long. I gave in to all my most primitive urges and I loved it. I loved biting his lip until he whimpered and I loved thrusting my hips so hard and slamming against him that it kicked air out of his lungs.

Everything I did to him made him smile a little more. He was a lustful creature, desperate for me as evenly as I was for him. And now, with every word that we had exchanged, I was closer to him. I had never wanted to come so close to another human being. I had never been this curious or interested in someone for their own sake. My interests had only ever been another tool in securing that my family got what it wanted.

But not Austin.

He was mine and mine alone. They couldn't interfere with this. This wasn't done for them, but for me. It was the only thing I had that was only mine and I wasn't going to surrender it freely. Nobody was going to take him away from me.

I pushed my tongue into his mouth, savoring the sweetness of the mojito that was still on his lips. He licked me back, mind just as filthy as mine. He was my match in every regard.

Austin took my hips and pulled me close. He held me, not letting me pull back, and moaned over my lips. Then, he whispered the sweetest words: "Wreck me already."

I pushed myself back, straightened my torso, and flipped Austin onto his front like he weighed no more than a feather. Snatching his hips, I toyed with him any way I liked. I lifted

his ass and made him kneel and push his hips back. I pressed the small of his back so that it curved. And then, I drew saliva to the tip of my tongue and leaned in, pushing my mouth between his cheeks and licking him while he shuddered and trembled.

Austin's moans were muffled by the fold of his arm where he buried his face. He lay, whimpering so, and thrust his hips back at my face harder and harder while I ate him.

Each time I was with him, there was less I wouldn't do. I paid less attention to artificial reasons to rein myself in. So, while the litany of pleas and profanities left Austin's lips, I let my saliva pour down my tongue and slick his hole, taint, and big, smooth balls.

I reached between his legs with my right hand and took his dick, sliding my fist along Austin's length and feeling all of his body react to me.

And when his whimpers and pleas became too desperate, I spanked him hard several times, making my own palms tingle with warmth, before I slipped the condom on.

Austin perched his butt up for me and reached back to spread his cheeks like the good boy that he was. Sliding into him was as effortless as breathing, but it gave me so much more satisfaction than oxygen. He embraced me as I sank deep into his body. It was as if I only truly existed when we merged and became one.

Moments spent with him had become the only moments in which I knew any happiness at all.

Austin cried out with satisfaction as I impaled him deeper, swinging my hips slowly back, then charging again to bury myself in him.

“Fuck me harder, Luca,” he begged, his voice a strained whimper and his fingertips sinking into his thick, firm cheeks.

I placed both my hands on the small of his back, denting the curve of his lower torso and leading him into a particularly satisfying angle. He was open to all my moves; it was as though we were of the same mind and identical desires flared in each of us simultaneously.

And when I pushed myself balls deep into him, Austin purred much the same way I caught myself doing. He released his cheeks and punched his fists into the sofa below his shoulders, then pushed himself up.

Tension doubled on my dick as Austin kept rising. He knelt straight, throwing his left arm behind his head and mine, resting his hand on the back of my neck. His back pressed against my front and I moved my hands around, resting one on his chest and the other low on his tight, hard abdomen.

Austin leaned a little further back, resting his head on my right shoulder, and moaning practically into my ear. I turned my head, biting his ear instead.

He was rock hard when I pushed my right hand down, his body pulsing with each thrust of my hips. As I fucked him harder, but not faster, the intensity of his throbs increased. It matched the loudness of his cries and moans.

We pushed against one another, getting closer and closer long after it became impossible for us to do so. Austin was pushing his back against my front so hard that our entire bodies were rubbing, up and down, while my cock penetrated him under a tense angle.

I knew, almost as if I could feel it in myself, that I was rubbing his prostate mercilessly as I fucked him so. I knew he was fighting back his orgasm for me and I loved every second of it.

I loved feeling the knotting in his muscles and the shuddering of his chest as he fought for air. I loved how he matched my pace, slow but more intense than a supernova.

“Just like that,” he whispered, voice choking. “Make me come, Luca.”

I snatched his wrists and wrapped his arms and mine around his torso, holding him hard against myself and ramming into him harder and just a little faster. Fast enough to lead him to the very edge, then tip him over it.

He cried loudly and his hole clenched around the base of my cock, tightening and relaxing countless times in the span of a few seconds. Each time it closed, it brought me closer.

I pushed into him, keeping him in that hazy, lust-filled place of utter splendor as he spilled his heat over the sofa and rubbed his entire body against mine like it enhanced the experience.

With the sensation of his joy somehow spreading into me, I no longer could hold back. My thick cock throbbed and I grunted and bit his ear again, spilling into the condom and exhausting every drop of myself.

Even so, I wanted him for a moment longer.

Although my moves were slow, I was still sliding back and forth, my toes tingling and my breaths so shallow it was a wonder they sustained me at all. We were both trembling, but I persisted, fucking him slowly until we were both soft and spent and panting for air.

Austin swiped his hand between us as I pulled out, slipped the condom off me, then put it away in a tissue below the coffee table. He did it swiftly enough that it seemed like I had only blinked once before he was next to me, pulling me to lie on top of him and catch my breath.

“I ruined your sofa,” he whispered.

“Ruined?” I purred into the crook of his neck. “No. You just made it better.”

I could feel him grin more than I could see it.

“I’ll never be able to sit here and not remember this,” I admitted sleepily. Darkness was gathering around the corners of my consciousness. The fire crackled and radiated heat that I was sure I felt on my naked body. Austin breathed slowly, humming a little every now and then. We were a tangled mess of limbs with no way of knowing where one ended and the other began.

Of all my memories, this one imprinted deepest into my mind. It took root and redefined every other memory of mine. Long ago, when I had first entered this apartment and bought it, this sofa had been here. Nobody could have predicted how brilliantly my soul would collide with another on this very spot. But now I knew.

And fear gripped my heart so suddenly that I had to hold my breath so as not to hyperventilate. It felt near a goddamn panic attack.

I was tangled in too much of a mess that I never wanted Austin to know about.

My time was stretched thin between all my duties and the intricate balance that was kept between us and all the other powerful families on the East Coast that was always under threat.

And here I was, opening up a weakness.

But a weakness I was quickly and surely becoming very unwilling to live without.

CHAPTER NINE

Austin



ALTHOUGH I MAINTAINED MY close relationships with Maddy, Parrish, and Levi — and, perhaps, improved them by some now that smiles came easier to my face — it was the weekends that I looked forward to the most.

One weekend, I arrived in Martin's car, got carried up to the penthouse of all my pleasures, and discovered Luca sorting through his wardrobe. When he saw me, his cheeks showed a touch of pink that was very unlike him. And when I looked a little better, he stammered briefly, scratched the back of his

head, then pulled all the composure he could before informing me that for practical purposes only, it was better if there were a shelf and a drawer in his bedroom which I could use for my own things.

That, however, failed to explain why there suddenly were three pairs of everything occupying ‘my’ shelf and drawer.

“Better than if you have to carry things back and forth,” Luca said, his throat audibly dry and raspy. “Drinks?” he suggested with so much eagerness that I threw my head back and laughed until the ceiling cracked.

Another weekend, Luca wasn’t in, but there was a note.

Running an errand.

Be a good boy and get the hot-tub started.

Xx

It was the sign-off that made me chuckle and perpetually grin all the while I went around his place, getting the water hot and bubbling on the snowy roof, preparing a simple Moscow Mule, and lounging on the sofa in front of the TV while waiting.

That night, Luca appeared near midnight, disgruntled but cute as a kitten. His hair was a mess and his tie loose, his shirt unbuttoned at the top and half untucked. Were he not so exhausted, I would have assumed he’d had a change of style and was rocking a French tuck these days.

But when his cold, blue gaze landed on me, he lit up. “It’s so fucking good to see you,” he huffed, throwing his briefcase

on the kitchen island and stepping toward me until I tore off the sofa and practically threw myself into his arms.

He dragged me outside a while later, holding my hand as we walked through the park. He wined and dined me like there was no tomorrow, then revealed his love for nineties' sitcoms, resulting in a weekend of *Friends* reruns until my brain was fried with the familiar intro song.

Just a week later, I arrived as usual, only to discover his apartment veiled in darkness. There was no music coming from the speakers and there was a trail of scattered laundry on the floor leading from the office to the bedroom, all around the kitchen island. I followed it, knocked lightly on the bedroom door, and listened intently.

“Shit,” came a raspy voice from the other side. “Austin?”

“Er, yeah?” I called through the door. “Can I come in?”

“No,” Luca said, panic touching his voice. “Wait. Wait.”

“Luca, are you alright?” I asked.

Silence.

“Fuck it. I’ve seen you naked. I’m coming in.” Just as I said the words, I pushed the door and found his room cloaked in darkness, the waning outside light creeping in just enough to reveal Luca’s figure under the thick duvet on the bed. “What happened?”

He moaned and sniffed. “Shit, I’m sorry,” he said, voice distant. “I forgot to tell Martin...cancel...Austin...”

Alarm blared inside my head and I crossed the room before he could protest. With the back of my hand, I touched his forehead and sucked my teeth. “You’re burning up, for fuck’s sake.”

He mumbled something and wheezed as he inhaled. “I’m fine.”

I snorted. “Like hell you are.”

“Austin,” he whispered with effort. “You need to leave.”

“Why is no one here?” I demanded, ignoring his words. “Where’s Anna?”

Luca whispered something briefly, paused, then seemed to have a moment of clarity. “Sent her away. Can’t get sick. Son coming to visit.”

I took a moment to decipher his meandering words, then crossed my arms over my chest. “Alright. I guess I’m in charge, then.”

“Gotta go,” Luca said. “Away.”

I sighed as I looked at him, something incredible and powerful welling in me and threatening to pour out. I watched him as he dozed off, then checked his brow again. He was burning up, but not too much. Maddy had had worse and I’d nursed her back to health effortlessly.

Luca seemed to fall deeper asleep, so I slipped out of the bedroom and flicked the lights on in the rest of his apartment. After a short while of rummaging through the kitchen cabinets and his fridge, I decided I needed Martin’s help. It took the

briefest of phone calls to send Martin with a shopping list to get me what I needed. Then, when I descended to the garage, it took some convincing to let me handle Luca on my own. Finally convinced, Martin went home, and I returned to the apartment after Martin punched in the pass code before leaving.

Upstairs, most of the prep was done. Now, I added the missing ingredients into the pot and let the soup simmer. In the meantime, I brewed a cup of chamomile to get Luca to drink something. Water had been my first pick, but Luca had made a disgusted face like a spoiled child after just one sip.

I carried the mug of hot tea to the bedroom and turned on one distant lamp for light. Luca emerged from shallow sleep and blinked at me. “Austin?”

“Still here,” I said gently, setting the mug on the nightstand. I checked him over again. “Fever’s going down.” That one immediate Tylenol had won us a battle, but the war raged on. I scanned the rest of Luca’s body. With his fever going down, he was starting to sweat. The duvet was pushed aside when a heatwave washed over him.

I considered all this, then made him drink his tea. He was losing his fluids, his pajamas drenched and the bed damp with sweat. “How long have you been like this?” I asked, but didn’t get an answer beyond a grunt.

When he’d had half of his tea, I helped him get out of the bed.

“Can you shower?” I asked.

“Uh-huh,” Luca groaned.

I led him to the bathroom, helped him take the pajamas off, as well as his underwear and socks, then made sure the water was at perfect temperature before I helped him into the shower. Luca grabbed the bar and let the water pour down his back.

I watched him for a while. He was managing, on shaky legs, to wash himself and stay steady enough so I didn't fret. I decided he could stay in there on his own for a few minutes while I changed the linens in the bedroom.

I returned to the bathroom and found Luca drying himself fairly confidently. The water was off and he seemed to be better for a moment. “Hey,” he said.

“Hey yourself.” I couldn't help but smile at him. “Feeling better?”

“Ah, I touched something and the water turned cold. It woke me up a bit.” He laughed, but the strain of it was obvious.

“Hey, hey,” I called softly, closing the distance between us. I grabbed his arm. “Take it easy.” I said those words at the same time as I took the big towel from him and turned him around to wipe his back. Slowly, I worked my way down to his feet, then tossed the towel away and led Luca out into the bedroom. “Let's get you dressed.”

The thing about Luca DiMarco was that ninety percent of his wardrobe was made of suits. But there were odd bits and

pieces of more forgiving fabrics that I managed to dig up from the depths of his closets. A sweater and a pair of pajama bottoms were the closest I could get to making him comfortable.

When he was dressed, I forced him into the living room, then opened all the windows in the bedroom to air it out. I watched Luca as he struggled with the soup for a few minutes before his appetite got going. After that, I was half considering making more.

“I think it was mostly hunger,” I pointed out. “You look better already.”

He didn’t need to say anything. I figured already that he’d sent Anna away to protect her in case it was flu, then got knocked out by fever and starved himself quietly in the bedroom. He’d made his illness worse by protecting others. “You really shouldn’t be here,” he said after he emptied the second bowl of soup.

“Oh? Let me just go and let you starve, then,” I said cheekily and received a reprimanding look that poorly disguised his gratitude and the relief in his face that he wouldn’t stay alone. “Next time, just call me sooner,” I said.

“Won’t do, but thanks,” Luca said.

That weekend, I stayed until Tuesday evening. Luca had his ups and downs and a visit from his doctor when all had already passed. He insisted on working on Wednesday, but from his home office, and I took my leave till next Friday.

The gratitude that he had mumbled in his sleep while sick, Luca showed in reality over the weekend that followed. He took me out again and kissed me casually in public like I wasn't just a hired escort. And when we returned to his place, all the energy I had helped to restore was directed at mind-blowing sex that seemed to last the entire night.

Until the week after, I had no idea how much I was truly looking forward to seeing him.

Luca informed me on Friday morning that something had come up and he needed to travel to DC. He would have taken me with him, he said, if he expected to have a minute of free time. And so, with a cohort of helpers and paralegals, Luca left and I found myself idle and going crazy.

It was while I was walking through the streets that my phone rang and I picked up quickly before I even looked at the caller ID. Alas, it wouldn't have shown me anything, as the caller was none other than *Unknown*. It was only when I heard his voice that I recognized him.

Jack.

My former client and Luca's close friend.

"Been a while, Austin," he said cheerfully.

"Uh, erm, yeah," I stammered. "I, uh, didn't expect you to call."

"I didn't expect to be calling," he said.

My mind came up blank. If he wanted to meet up, it was out of the question. Luca insisted on exclusivity, for one thing.

The other reason was far more sappy and personal; it was embarrassing how little I wanted to be anyone else's these days. And the fact that Luca had filled up my safe box with wads of cash in all our time together was the least of the reasons why.

I wanted him with me. It was Friday evening and, by right, he should have been holding me from behind and whispering the sweetest, naughtiest things into my ear.

“Where are you? Got a minute?” Jack asked.

My heart sank. A sliver of doubt rushed through me. Could this be a test? Had Luca put him up to it just to see what I would do? My heart leaped as I firmly decided he would never do such a thing. We had built a unique sort of trust. We each had things that were off limits, things we didn't discuss. But I trusted him and I earned his trust back.

“Look, it's nice to hear from you, but I really can't...”

He didn't even let me finish. “Oh, God, no. That's not why I'm calling. Our friend left something for you. Apparently, I'm his delivery boy.”

I blinked twice, then composed myself and agreed to meet Jack in a local bar. It was fairly empty at this hour when Jack came around.

“You look better than ever,” he said with a smirk.

“You too,” I said honestly. He was building up some more muscle, I could tell, and his face was bright and cheerful.

Jack sat down and ordered us two tall beers, blending in with the regular crowd like he had grown up just around the corner. It was only the fact that his suit was most people's net worth that put him in a different category.

“What's up?” I asked.

Jack licked the foam off his lips and pulled out a very thick envelope from inside his pocket, then slid it discreetly over the table. It was sheer luck that I had sat down in the poorly lit corner. Or it was the opposite of luck; perhaps it only made us look more suspicious.

My eyes widened. “I don't want it.”

Jack snorted. “Believe it or not, he said you'd say that.”

I frowned. “He is away. There's no reason he should pay me.”

“Consider it a paid vacation,” Jack said, his smile mischievous. “Our friend looks out for those whose company he enjoys.”

I pushed the envelope back. “That's nice, but I'm not really on a payroll.”

Jack sighed, ignoring the cash on the table. “That's another thing. Not sure if it's up to me to tell you, but since you're being so stubborn, I'll go ahead. We might have discussed some possibilities of, ah, legitimizing your income.”

I frowned. “Oh really?”

“Really,” Jack said. “For the sake of security, we considered some options. One was that you might be on payroll for me.”

“Why you?” I asked.

Jack shook his head. “Obviously. We’re not affiliated. It adds a stop for anyone who might be looking. Besides, our friend is better known in many circles, so there’s prying eyes where you least expect them.”

I glanced around. Suddenly, I was very suspicious of everyone at the bar.

Jack smiled. “Not likely that paparazzi would linger around here. You’re at more of a risk at *The Roof*,” he said. And when I lifted my eyebrows, he chuckled. “See how the word travels? I heard it from an aide before our mutual friend confirmed it.”

I sighed. “It’s beyond me why you are the messenger here.”

Jack leaned in, his features softening. “I’m not. I’m telling you this so you understand that he is looking out for you.”

My heart tripped in size, but I contained the grin that threatened to spill over my face.

“I shouldn’t have said any of this, I think. I might be in trouble with him,” Jack said humorously. “But we go back a long time.” I didn’t know who he meant. The gaze said it was us who went back a long time, and that was true. He had gotten me out of a very nasty predicament I had led myself into before. “Even if Luca finds a reason not to move forward with this plan — and really, let’s face it, that would only be the

case if there was some glaring problem I can't see at the moment — I think you should get the security of a paper trail.”

I inhaled softly and looked from him to the envelope, then back at him. “Why?” I asked. And when Jack shook his head slightly, I elaborated. “We have been affiliated for a long time. Why worry about me now?”

Jack sighed. “Would it be enough if I told you I had a very good reason.”

I snorted. “It would be enough to spark more curiosity.”

“Guessed so,” he said softly, surrendering. “Very well.” He settled in his chair and lifted the murky, unfiltered beer.

I did the same. The bitter flavor of hop melted away at the second sip, revealing a rich palette of lesser scents and flavors that made craft beers what they were today. I watched Jack intently as the wheels turned in his head.

He nodded and inhaled. “He’s a very good friend to me,” he said. “We’ve been close for a long time and I care about him the way you care about your friend.”

There was almost a sliver of unease that Jack knew of Maddy. I didn’t think Luca had told him anything. After all, I barely ever mentioned Maddy to Luca at all. But I wasn’t a great liar, so it was possible that Jack had gathered the pieces himself a while ago.

Still, the comparison struck the right spot in my heart and I clearly understood the nature of their relationship.

“When you and I spent more time together, it was different,” Jack said, smiling a little. “What was it? An hour or two at a time? It was strictly professional.”

I frowned. “What makes you think this isn’t?” I asked.

Jack gave me a flat look of ‘Seriously?’ and shook his head. “You didn’t know Luca before. You can’t see the change. Suffice to say, he hasn’t been like this since college days. And even then, he hadn’t been like this nearly as often.”

“Like what?” I asked.

Jack sighed. He was starting to understand he would need to spit it all out if he wanted me to cooperate. “Happy, dammit,” he said. “Whatever you are doing to him, it’s making him happy. So, pretty please, don’t stop. Unless...”

I shook my head before he assumed anything incorrectly. “I don’t intend to stop.”

“He pays you well, I know,” Jack said. “But it’s still not enough for what I see him getting. And that’s why there’s an idea floating around. Something for you to consider and not be taken aback if and when he proposes it.”

Just the fact that there was an envelope of cash on the table made all of this a tiny bit less special. I made him happy. That was nice to hear. Except, I was hired to make him happy.

I swallowed and nodded. “I won’t be shocked,” I promised. “It’s a...very thoughtful thing to do. Thank you.”

Jack shrugged. “Wasn’t my idea. But I jumped on board when I saw the chance.”

“Still, thanks,” I said.

And then, Jack put a hand on the envelope, and slid it over. “Take this,” he said. “He’s not giving it to you because he thinks he has to. He’s doing it because he can and wants to.”

“I didn’t earn it,” I argued feebly.

“Oh, but I’m telling you that you did,” Jack insisted, then pushed his chair back, emptied his glass, and grinned. “Thanks for the beers.”

I snort chuckled as he left, finished my beer, paid the millionaire’s bill, and headed home. It was just as I entered the apartment that Maddy appeared from her room and scanned me.

I waved the envelope a little, but I wasn’t smiling as I usually would.

Her face crumbled in shock. “Austin, you didn’t.” I only managed to give a little frown before she continued. “Didn’t you say he was away? Why? He’s being so kind to you. Did something happen?”

Only then did I realize what it looked like. “Shit, no. I didn’t go out with someone else,” I said. Even the thought of doing it made me feel guilty. I knew, for a fact, that Luca wouldn’t do that either, while away, even if he had every right to. “His friend brought it. Paid vacation, I think.”

Maddy’s eyes turned heart-shaped. “I don’t know what magic your ass is capable of, but you should make an altar to it.”

I laughed out loud and walked into our common room, opened one old cabinet, unlocked the safe box, and tore the envelope open to pack cash on top of all the cash I'd already stacked there. Every weekend, I had less need for it. The debts were cleared after the third weekend, when Maddy and I had realized we hadn't spent half of what I'd made the first time.

There was still that poor boy living inside of me. The one who only spent money when necessary and who suppressed all wishes and wants for the sake of saving. Except, now that I was stacking the bills neatly, I tried to think of things I wanted. I had plenty of clothes thanks to several of my past clients. I had all the devices I needed or wanted. And though it was old and ugly, I loved the apartment, too. The only thing I lacked was a thing I couldn't ask for.

More.

More of Luca.

More of his time.

More of his heated breath leaving his lips and feathering the tender skin of my neck.

Among the tens and hundreds, there was a little piece of paper, ripped in haste from the corner of a notebook's page. It was folded in half. I dropped everything and opened the note.

I haven't even left the apartment and I already miss you. Sorry about this one. I'll make it up to you when I'm back.

My heart leaped in my chest and I brought the paper to my lips before I knew what I was doing. I kissed it because his

fingers had touched it and folded it. I kissed it because it was drenched in his voice and handwriting.

Dammit.

I wasn't getting out of this one unscathed. And neither did I want to.

CHAPTER TEN

Luca



THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE who delighted like this when they laid their eyes on me was so small I didn't need an entire hand to count them on my fingers. But when I saw Austin after far too long apart — and, at this rate, being apart from Monday to Friday was becoming too long; I didn't need to mention the weekend I had been forced to miss — his smile seemed to make everything worth it.

As always, his desire for me matched my own for him, and we more than made up for the time we had missed. Then, he

told me everything about the time he had spent without me. He had doubled his efforts at the gym, posed for a friend who was a portrait artist, and had his yoga classes so that he would stay flexible and more than a little exciting in my bedroom.

“There’s something so charming about the way you live your life,” I said idly, holding his naked body in the fold of my left arm.

Austin chuckled. “Oh, the simplicity of the common man.”

I laughed out loud. “That’s not what I meant.”

“I know what you meant, oh royal one,” he teased.

It earned him two full minutes of torturous tickles. In the end, it turned out that tickling only managed to arouse him, and I reaped the rewards.

But it was on Saturday evening that I got out of the shower with a towel around my waist and found Austin lying on the sofa in his underwear.

“Let’s go out,” I said.

He jumped up eagerly. “Let’s.”

I wondered if he really wanted it as much as he appeared to. There was always a trace of fear that I was making him do things he would rather not do.

I scanned his face and found nothing other than sheer excitement. “Any wishes?”

He narrowed his eyes, then nodded. But he wouldn’t tell me what they were. Instead, he instructed me to dress warmly, but

nothing flashy.

“Flashy?” I asked.

“Oh, you know. Nothing to Luca DiMarco,” he said in a way of explaining.

I laughed out loud and let him pick through my wardrobe. In truth, I didn’t even know I owned a pair of rough denim jeans and a holiday themed brown and green sweater that could have been a gift from a distant aunt. But that was what I ended up wearing.

More shockingly than that, Austin insisted that we should walk a couple blocks away, then waved at a taxi. When one pulled over, he grinned at me.

“You do realize that this will be a mortal wound to Martin’s pride if he ever discovers it, right?” I asked pointedly.

Austin dragged me inside the yellow cab and laughed. “Cheating on your personal chauffeur is a whole different level of first world problems.”

I laughed with him, then settled back in the tiny cramped space of the car. The ride seemed endlessly long, but my patience was as iron-made as ever. And when we finally reached the Bronx, I shot Austin an incredulous look.

He calmed me down with a smile that never failed to take all my worries from me, pack them neatly, and shelve them somewhere where I couldn’t find them.

We got out of the car and Austin spread his arms, then twirled in a circle, looking up at the few snowflakes that

fluttered through freezing air. “This is where I live,” he said.

I looked around, my heart thumping without any rhythm. “This street?” I asked, voice low, almost as if I was in awe.

Austin met my gaze and grinned. “This neighborhood.”

“Are we...going to your place?” I asked, my heart tripping.

He shrugged. “I was thinking we could walk around and see what we feel like doing.”

I swallowed. The purity of his wish blew every rooftop restaurant out of the water. This was something else completely. Where my mind always considered a new way to surprise him with the things that I took for granted, Austin managed to shake me to the core by showing me something as simple as a walk around the block.

I hadn't been a pedestrian in the Bronx since my childhood. Back then, I had been a completely different person. I'd had a different name and no prospects.

I took Austin's hand without quite realizing what I was doing. It was only when he squeezed it back that I became aware of it. It was a simple gesture that meant more to me than I could put into words.

Austin led the way, walking around the block and stopping for hot dogs just as the scent of them wafted in the air and made me drool. We bought one each and ate them as we walked down the crowded sidewalk.

“This is Erik's bar,” Austin said, pointing across the street. “It's where we sometimes get together. And my friend,

Parrish, has a tattoo parlor just around the corner.” We stopped again by a stall where an elderly couple were selling mulled wine in plastic cups. Austin knew their names and their granddaughter, which earned us free drinks to warm us up on our walk. Even so, my heart was getting warmer without any external efforts. Austin’s passionate telling of stories of his life was more than enough to keep me warm. “Maddy doesn’t really come out that much. Didn’t, actually. She comes around the parlor more often these days.”

“Why?” I asked.

And he told me, in short, what the situation was. And he also told me that he had been able to help her much more in recent months, with her hormones and the preparations for surgeries that were suddenly a real possibility. He also told me that Maddy was finally seeing a therapist who was helping her battle the excruciating fears of being ridiculed.

My throat tied as I listened and clung to his hand. I had no clue.

“Austin?” A growly voice called and all my body tensed.

But Austin turned his head over his shoulder and smiled. “I was just talking about you.”

The growly man caught up with us. He wore a trimmed beard and I spotted tattoos on his neck as soon as he approached us.

“Uh, this is Parrish,” Austin told me. “And this is...”

“Luca,” I said, thrusting my hand forward for a shake. Parrish took it. “You must be the tattoo artist Austin told me about.”

Parrish gave a little frown, then a corner of his lips cocked up. “The one and only.” He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, then jerked his chin up. “What are you guys doing out here?” To Austin, “I thought you said you’d be away.”

Austin shrugged. “I was. I am.” He glanced at me and there was something so warm and alluring in his eyes that I wanted to pin him against the window of the shop behind him and kiss him.

“We’re just walking,” I said.

Parrish grunted his approval. “If you’re cold, all your friends are at Erik’s.”

Austin’s hold on my hand tightened abruptly. “What are you...?”

“I saw you through the window,” Parrish explained. “And I ran after you.”

Austin seemed to have trouble inhaling. “For real?”

Parrish nodded, sharing a smile between Austin and me. “If you want a round of drinks, see for yourself.”

Austin lifted his gaze at me as if to ask for my approval. He very much did not need it, but I encouraged him quickly. “I’m down for a round of drinks.”

Austin thanked me with a slow blink, silently, then followed Parrish back the way we had come. He seemed to be tingling as we reached the bar and he slapped a hand over his mouth when he saw someone inside.

It took me a few more moments, as we approached the table, before I put the pieces together. Parrish dragged two chairs to the table, then sat down next to a young, blond guy who gazed at him lovingly. A pang of jealousy threatened to spread through me, but I pushed it away. The third person was the one who made Austin gasp and grin. “Look at you, out and about.”

Maddy, I realized.

Austin’s sister in all but blood.

Parrish invited us to sit with them, and we did a quick round of introductions. Parrish’s boyfriend, Levi, was the artist I’d heard of, and Maddy looked at me with eyes of wonder. Then, she nodded as if approvingly. “I’m trying not to stare,” she said.

Austin laughed out loud. “She’s the owner of *The Scoop* issues that printed your face on the cover,” he informed me.

“Ah, glad to be reminded of that,” I said. Laughter rippled around me and I watched four friends welcome me and embrace me as their own. It was too easy to slip into chatter and jokes. They were all talkative in their own ways, comfortable with each other.

“I only went to the parlor,” Maddy was explaining after Austin pressed for details. “But these two wanted beer.”

“It’s a thirsty business,” Parrish said.

“Tattooing?” I asked.

He chuckled. “Putting up with these two.” He gestured at Levi and Maddy, then laughed at Levi’s mock hurt expression and pulled him over for a kiss.

A while later, Levi was explaining the relationships between the four of them and how they came to be the group that they were.

Austin, like I’d already gathered, was the model for Levi’s portrait practice. What I hadn’t realized was the exact niche of Levi’s art. “Nude?” I asked, intrigued. “I would pay good money to see that on the wall.”

Austin gave me a sneaky, naughty look that pretty much reminded me I was already paying good money for the real thing. I winked at him, then began asking Levi about his work and what he was doing. It turned out, he’d had a little exhibition at this very bar, just a few months earlier.

I made a little mental note to see what I could do to contribute. Owning a Levi Bartlet original featuring Austin James without a scrap of clothing soon became the most important thing to me. It made me smile to imagine it.

What had started off as a round of drinks soon turned to three, then to parting of the ways. Maddy said she was glad she had met me.

“See you tomorrow night,” Austin said as he hugged her.

Parrish and Levi left a little later, and all that remained was us and another round of drinks. Topsy, I lost myself in thought. Austin had this wonderful group of people surrounding him. It was a life as detached from my world as it could be. Was it any wonder that I had the deepest craving to lose myself in it? To leave my own life behind and be in this moment forever?

But I also wondered if there was a place for me here.

“Do you miss out on these nights when you’re with me?” I asked abruptly.

Austin looked shocked. “What? Of course not.”

“Because we could make room for it,” I said.

“Luca, there’s nowhere I’d rather be than with you,” he insisted.

Those words right about shut me up. They were so large and extraordinary that I didn’t know what to say to him in reply that would even scratch the surface of what he made me feel. Besides, some things were better left unsaid. And this was firmly in that category. “You seem a happy group,” I said instead, a while later.

“We are,” Austin confirmed. “And lucky, considering everything.”

I raised an eyebrow.

He shrugged. “Dark stories at midnight,” he mused, a sad smile feathering over his lips. “You don’t want to know.”

“I really do,” I admitted.

Austin met my gaze and I discovered a sadness in his eyes that I hadn't been aware of. “You really do, don't you?” It was like he didn't believe me.

“I'm not trying to be polite,” I said. “If it matters to you...” I shrugged. “I want to hear it.”

He lifted his eyebrows and sighed. “Dark clouds gathering, I guess.” I chuckled softly, humorlessly. “Brace yourself for the story of my life, Mr. DiMarco.” And, with a sweet smile, he inhaled and leaned in. “Maddy saved my life. I'm not being dramatic. I'm not exaggerating this. I mean it literally when I say that she is the reason I am alive today. She is the reason I am alive and the person that I am. And there were a few people who really changed the direction of my life, like Jack when I'd met him and confided in him about the problem I was having with that other man. But nobody truly changed the river's course the way Maddy had. And she never thought of it once after the fact. To her, that had been the thing friends did for each other when I had been the worst friend to her you could imagine. A vampire of everything that was good in the world. A black hole where happiness went to die.” He shook his head as my heart sank. “That didn't stop her. And it didn't stop her when I tried pushing her away. I was too lost in my own self-pity to even consider what she was going through. I hadn't even realized she was Maddy. To me, she'd still been Marcus, and I was too busy wallowing in sadness over being gay in a church orphanage that I hadn't noticed the thing that had been eating her.”

I lifted my beer and swallowed a gulp in order to force my throat to untie and loosen. My heart was sinking fast.

Austin was such a strong presence wherever he showed up that I had never considered the hardships.

“So, when she followed me to an overpass not too far from the orphanage, she saved me from myself. Selfishly, as she thought, because she begged me to step away from the fence and stay with her. She couldn’t go on without me.” Austin blinked quickly as my chest tightened more. There were tears in his eyes and mine, too. “I thought she was in love with me. Even then, I wasn’t aware. I was thinking about myself. So I told her to go away and be happy that she’s free of me. To which she shouted at the top of her lungs that she was a girl and couldn’t live her true life without my help.”

Tears stung my eyes and I growled deep in my throat. It had been some years since I had last seen how tears blurred the world around me.

Austin wiped the tears out of his eyes and shot me a brave smile. “I owe her everything. And it’s a debt she isn’t interested in settling. So, I made her take it.”

“You are a good friend,” I whispered hoarsely.

“She is,” Austin said simply. “When she took my hand and led me back to St. John’s, everything changed.”

My heart split at once and alarms blared in my head. For a moment, I didn’t know why, but there was panic filling me to

the brim. It shattered me. It splashed through me and soaked every nerve ending in my body. “St. John’s?” I whispered.

Austin waved his hand. “The orphanage.”

“I know,” I whispered. The very one that filled me with dread. The one that had installed in me my deepest fears of rejection. The one that had made me hate myself for years and the very one that still held me back from discussing openly who my romantic interests were at family gatherings.

“You know my orphanage?” Austin asked. He murmured something else, but I didn’t hear him over the beating of my heart. Words like charity and galas and raising funds tickled my ears, but I shook my head.

“I was an orphan there,” I said.

I hadn’t said this to a living soul in over a decade. Jack knew I was adopted; but he had no clue where I had been before it.

The bottom of Austin’s lifted glass touched the wooden table, his mouth opening, frown distorting his face. “An orphan? At St. John’s?”

I tried to swallow. “That horrible place,” I murmured, feeling myself returning to the cage of it all. The cage from which a wealthy couple had lifted me when I was six years old. Someone old enough to play with their sons, they’d said when people had asked why a grown child and not an infant. “I lived there for two years,” I said quietly, shock still washing over me. “I don’t remember anything that came before it. They

said I was in the car when they died. Trauma. Maybe a hit in the head.” I shrugged, disjointed words falling over my lips and finding their way to Austin’s horrified face. “Nuns are my first memory. Four years old.”

“Four?” Austin whispered. “Until six?”

I nodded, not realizing why the math of it mattered.

And then, I understood. It was as abrupt as a hit to the back of my head. It slammed me and shut me up. It left me opening my mouth apologetically, but no sound was coming out.

Austin said it a fraction of a second after I figured it out for myself.

“We lived there at the same time,” he whispered.

Disbelief was apparent in his eyes and his voice. The corners of his lips stiffened.

We thought the same thing because of course we fucking did. We were two bodies with one soul. One heartbeat united us, although two hearts pumped the blood. But they did so in unison. And Austin understood the same unspoken truth as I did.

Our places could have been swapped.

He could have been the lawyer in his Manhattan castle.

And I could have been his escort.

It was a joking twist of fate that pulled me out of the orphanage and left him there.

“I’m so...” I whispered.

“Don’t,” Austin said. “Please.”

I swallowed and shook my head. “I don’t know what I am, but it’s not fair.”

“Life’s never fair, Luca,” Austin said.

“I didn’t choose to be adopted any more than you chose to stay behind,” I said. “I never knew...”

“I never said that,” Austin said, choking up.

Had I known him? So little of that orphanage remained in my memory that it was impossible to say. I remembered that the building was small enough so that we all ate together. I knew I had been in the same room as Austin.

“Kids were being adopted all the time,” Austin said. “You were just one of them. And I was one of those that...stayed behind.”

That nobody wanted. I saw the words float behind his eyes before he chose to phrase it differently.

But I wanted him. I wanted him with every fiber of my being.

“I...” He blinked rapidly, tears spilling down his cheeks. He quickly wiped them away and groaned.

But it was me who had lucked out, in spite of everything I went through in the years since.

“Can we go back?” Austin whispered.

I grabbed his hand and rushed out like our lives depended on it. I stopped a taxi on the street and got us inside. Of course

we could go back. Of course we could.

Guilt ripped through me with every breath. It stretched the strings of my heart thin, near breaking, and I struggled to inhale.

It was my fault as much as it wasn't. Had it not been for me, perhaps he would have been adopted into the riches of the DiMarco family. Perhaps he would have supported Maddy from a position of power, rather than by selling himself to bored men like me and Jack. Perhaps, perhaps.

I wanted to apologize for having been born.

I wanted to defend myself against the attacks that weren't coming.

"Do you blame me?" I whispered, a long time later, when we were all alone in my apartment, standing quietly on the opposite ends of the kitchen island.

"For existing?" He let out a bitter laugh. "That wouldn't make any sense."

"Emotions rarely do," I said.

He was silent.

My chest collapsed on itself.

Carefully, Austin shook his head. "I don't blame you."

Silence, again.

"But?" I asked.

He lifted his gaze and met mine. "Exactly."

I understood it. His mind worked just like mine. And when he said he didn't blame me, I knew he was telling me the truth. But I also knew that things weren't the same any longer.

"Maybe, if you had time to let it all sink in," I suggested.

He swallowed. "Maybe."

Even if he didn't covet it, he knew that every item his gaze touched in this apartment could have been his instead. Had the world been fairer to him, he could have been a DiMarco.

I knew what he was thinking. And I knew he was trying not to.

And I knew that the struggle, the push and the pull of it, created a wedge between us. One that was far longer than the marble top of the kitchen island. One that ensured our two worlds were as far apart as they had ever been.

And if there was a way to bridge this gap, it was as thin as a rope. But it was all I needed. And I knew, just then, that there was only one way to go.

Austin inhaled.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Austin



I EXHALED.

The welling sob of injustice without someone to blame for it choked me.

I blinked and saw Luca's insecurities rise to the surface.

His lips pursed and he warded himself like I had seen before. He had this immense power to protect himself behind the walls of steel.

My heart broke for him. His guilt was tangible and I wanted to cry out and beg him not to feel this way, but I couldn't. I couldn't no matter how much I told myself his life was the product of chance as much as mine.

But why? Why had the fates decided to bring him into my life now? Why did I have to see the world that could have belonged to me? Of all the people in this city, why had I run into Luca's arms? And worse yet, why had I let myself fall for him?

Now, seeing the messy threads of fate, I knew twice as well how impossible it all was.

How could I hope for anything to come out of it when he was a constant reminder of all that I was not.

"Austin," he said softly.

God, I wished I could help him erase that guilt. But how, when I couldn't erase the judgment off the corners of my lips. If I could carve a smile to my face, I would.

I nodded. My throat had tied into a knot and sounds weren't willing to leave me.

"I envied you. Tonight," he admitted, licking his lips carefully and narrowing his eyes in thought. "I hadn't realized what you had gone through. And I'm sorry, Austin. Truly. But I envied the friends you have and the love around that table."

I swallowed.

Luca moved to the front of the kitchen island, his right hand on the polished marble that probably cost more than

everything Maddy and I had together. Luca walked slowly toward me.

“I know,” he said. “I know what it must feel like. Even if you don’t want to, you can’t look at me without resentment. Like I couldn’t look at you without envy three hours ago.”

The corners of my lips pulled down. I shook my head. I didn’t want to feel this way. Why couldn’t he have been just another rich man of New York’s old money? Why did he have to be the boy who I had dreamed of being back when neither of us had yet become it?

“I thought how great it must be to have your own free will,” he said. “Because I never had the chance. And if this comes as a slap in your face, I am begging you to give me a chance to explain.”

“You don’t owe me explanations,” I said, my voice barely even a whisper.

He shook his head firmly. “I want to. And this isn’t a lecture. It’s something I should have done already. My life is far from perfect.”

I winced despite myself. I trusted him when he said it wasn’t a lecture, but to hear these words come from the ivory tower stung no matter how much benefit of the doubt I allotted him.

“They adopted me and gave me everything any child at St. John’s could have wished for. For a time. But they also indebted me. It was never intentional, but it was never far

away from my heart. I'd always know that I owed everything to them. So, when my father suggested law, I took it up. I studied it. I was the best at it. And when he suggested that I should represent our family, I did. What else was I supposed to do?"

He had never had to whore himself, I thought bitterly and shattered that idea with all my might. I didn't want this bitterness and these thoughts. I didn't want to blame Luca for anything. He was the kindest man I had ever known.

But the thoughts came of their own accord. They surfaced before I could swat them all away.

"So I dug the hole deeper and deeper until I saw no way out. My family..." Whatever he was about to say, it made him choke up. "We are not good people."

I frowned a little. My ears were buzzing ever since Erik's bar.

"We do things that hurt others as often as not," he said. "In the generations before us, there were DiMarco men who bullied and killed. And if they no longer kill today, threatening people into making choices that are favorable to us isn't uncommon. And I'm part of that machinery. I'm what stands between my family and the judgment. I'm a cleaner, Austin. A cleaner with a noose around his neck because of his brother's rash decisions."

"Christ, Luca. You shouldn't be telling me this," I said.

"I want to."

“Why? So I can consider myself lucky?” I barked out a bitter laugh.

“So you understand what it means to me to have your company,” he returned, his voice intense, almost commanding. I was peeling the composure off his face, dismantling his defenses without intending to.

“What it means to you to have my company,” I echoed.

Luca seemed panicked, almost frantic, when he crossed the remaining distance between us. “I don’t want that life, Austin. But I don’t know how to leave it behind. These moments with you are all I have for myself and to think I might lose it because fate had dealt us this hand terrifies me. I won’t let it.”

“You won’t let it?” I whispered. Strength was leaving me fast.

He shook his head firmly. “I’ll do whatever I can to keep this tiny slice of life I’d carved for myself.”

“That’s me you are talking about,” I reminded him harshly.

“Yes. You,” he said, almost as if he saw nothing wrong in what he had said. “Tell me what you want me to do, Austin, and I’ll do it. Tell me how to make this right.”

Tears welled in my eyes again.

If something had offended me in his words before, I was fast forgetting about it. He wanted me for myself. He was desperate in the fear of losing me.

But then, he said the worst thing of all. Just as my heart inflated, he said the words that shattered the tender hints of hope that had glimmered deep in my chest. "I'll pay more," he said. "However much you want. I don't care."

Tears spilled down my cheeks as anger tugged at my lips and I bared my teeth. "Pay more?"

He blinked, taken aback.

I pushed myself away from him and spun so I wouldn't look at him. Seeing the hurt expression on his face made all my determination crumble. "It's not about the money, Luca. And if you don't see it by now, then you don't truly care." I ran my hands through my hair. I didn't know where to turn and where to go. "God! My safe box is full, Luca. I don't know where to put all that damn money anymore. And if you think it was your money I kept returning for, you are mistaken." I spun back to look at him. His mouth was open and eyes wide. I had never seen him appear so hurt before.

"What is it, then?" he asked.

I scoffed, though it came out choked. "Is there any point in telling you if you don't know already?"

He licked his lips and stepped closer to me. He was slow but deliberate about it. And he looked deep into my eyes. "I don't know already."

He wasn't lying.

He'd never lied to me; not directly. He'd hidden things; terrible things that even now I regretted I knew. But he wasn't

a liar. And he definitely didn't know how I felt about him.

Somehow, he must have read fractions of these thoughts on my face. "You can't really feel something for me, can you?"

"Why couldn't I if I wanted to?" I asked defiantly. As if love had anything to do with wanting.

Luca stepped back. He wasn't pulling away, exactly. It was more like he stepped back in surprise. "All my life, people wanted something from me. Everyone I had ever known, they wanted me for a reason. My family needed a bright mind to protect their interests; a son to protect their sons impartially and without any ambition of his own. Someone who would be in their debt and loyal to their heirs. My friends, the few that I had had, wanted a DiMarco in their contact list. Jack's the only one I had ever known who didn't give a damn about it. My lovers wanted me for my money and my looks and a chance to be interviewed by *Forbes*. So, when I tell you I would give you the world for another night with you, can you blame me for thinking it's the world you're really after?"

"Yes," I barked. "I can blame you all I like for *that*. Because I would let that world burn down for a chance to be with you. And I know I never can. What would a DiMarco do with a rent boy, if not rent him?" A sob burst out of me abruptly. All of me shuddered. "I took your money. I wanted it, I confess. I needed it for myself, for Maddy, for safety. It's what an escort does. But tell me this: would you ever consider being with me were I not your escort?"

He looked hurt more than words could describe.

“Nobody dates boys like me, Luca,” I said. “Nobody looks at me and sees boyfriend material. I’m for hire. You wouldn’t have noticed me otherwise, Luca.”

“You’re wrong,” he growled. “You’re dead wrong, Austin. Maybe we never would have crossed paths had you not come to me this way. But that doesn’t mean I don’t want to be with you.”

My heart thumped once, hard. He was going to kill me with these words. They were too good for my wounded heart to accept as true. “Be with me?” My morbid curiosity put my life at risk.

“I want to be your boyfriend,” Luca said, closing the distance between us and grabbing my waist.

He became very blurry in an instant.

“And if I insulted you when I offered more money, it’s only because I can’t believe you would still want me, Austin. Not after the way all my relationships ended. And not after all I’ve told you tonight. But I am sorry.”

I bit my lip hard.

“I can only promise to do better. If you give me a chance.” He was tearing up, too. His icy blue eyes shimmered with tears. He sniffed and waited.

“A chance?” I whispered.

“That’s what you want, right? A boyfriend. A partner. Someone who wants you for your own sake.” He shrugged. “Well, that’s exactly what I want, too.”

Whatever storm raged within me, it paled away. The rays of sunlight shone through the thick, dark clouds. He wanted to date me.

Maybe we had a chance.

“You want us to be...in a relationship? Boyfriends?” He kept saying yes and I kept asking again and again. When I took his words and intentions and tried to reconcile them with how the entire fucking world worked, it just didn’t add up.

“Yes, Austin,” he said patiently.

“Then...” I opened my mouth, closed it, and inhaled. “Then, we’re boyfriends.” The words tumbled over my lips and I nearly couldn’t believe I had truly said them. I’d never had a boyfriend. I’d never told this to anyone because nobody had wanted to hear it.

Luca lifted me off my feet effortlessly. My legs wrapped around his waist and I yelped in fright before I felt safe in his arms, my own wrapping around his neck. And I leaned in just as he lifted his head.

Our lips touched and the world was ablaze.

I didn’t give a damn. Just now, in this one moment, I let it all fall off.

Not for a moment did I stop doubting the immensity of all the challenges that lay ahead of us, but I put them to rest for a moment.

And I kissed him like I had never kissed him before.

My lips explored his, then traced over his nose and eyes and brow, his cheeks and his neck. I kissed his ear and returned to his mouth, pushing my tongue in to seek his. And he allowed it, murmuring and grunting as he carried me to the kitchen island where he placed me on my back. He leaned over me, kissing me harder, promising to be all I wanted.

“A lover, a friend, a partner,” he whispered between his ferocious kisses. “Just ask, Austin, and it’s yours.”

For now, I silenced the fears of what tomorrow would bring. I had never been a boyfriend in my life.

We were about to enter far and foreign lands.

But not tonight.

Tonight, we played.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Luca



I TOWERED OVER HIM, his legs around my waist and his arms folded, hands beneath the back of his head.

He sprawled on the kitchen island as I leaned in and kissed him.

Though we were still the same people, things changed forever. The man I was about to have my way with was not the escort, but the person I had fallen for. He wasn't just my

refuge from all the burdens, but a willing accomplice. He took the worries knowingly and halved their weight.

“Kiss me,” Austin whispered and I obeyed.

The kisses felt hotter than ever before. His body seemed warmer, eyes shinier; though that may have been all the crying. My chest shivered as I drew shallow breaths and kissed him intensely and slowly, soothing the pains of our pasts the best I could.

Austin threw his arms around my shoulders and pleaded for more all the while kissing me back. And more he got.

Again and again and again, I kissed him deeply, thrusting my hips forward and pressing our bodies tightly together. There was nothing holding me back in this instant. He was all mine. Knowingly. Willingly. Happily.

To think this was what he had wanted all along surprised me to my core. And to think he'd believed it impossible for me to fall for him broke me nearly irreparably.

Of course I fell for him. Who else could it have been? Our fates had been tied to one another since we had been children. We hadn't known it then, but we had traveled for decades, wandering aimlessly, until our paths collided.

Austin grabbed my ugly brown sweater and pulled it up my torso, undressing me in one sweeping move of his arms.

I pushed back, towering tall, and let him watch my chiseled torso a moment longer. The pleased smile on his face turned

me on just as much as the bulge in his pants and the firmness of his ass.

I dived in again, immersing myself in the sweetness of his lips and the heat of his breath.

My heart throbbed with longing for him just as much as it murmured with sadness. All he had gone through and all that this journey had cost him, I would make it worth his while. I didn't know how, but I would. I would make it alright. The fact he had been trapped in the grip of a ruthless man, the fact that he had remained in the orphanage when I had been rescued, that he had gotten near harming himself when the walls had gotten too hard to break through. I would wipe those troubles away if it took a lifetime.

Austin pleaded and begged as I undressed him carefully, teasing his nipples mercilessly and kissing his torso as I lowered myself to his boxer-briefs. He was hard as hell when I yanked his underwear down and his precum sweet when I took him in my mouth.

Austin grabbed my head with both his hands and shoved himself deep into me, filling my mouth and throat, then holding himself firmly there as he panted and gasped.

And when he was close, he was quick enough to push me away and take a moment to cool off. "I'm not letting this finish until you fuck me," he said seductively and a wave of lustful dizziness washed over me.

Austin hopped off the kitchen island, then dropped to his knees. There, he reached for my denim jeans and freed my

aching, tightly packed cock, soothing it with gentle strokes before taking me in his mouth.

Be it the fact that we had been playing like this for weeks and weeks or the freedom that came with the mutual wanting for a closer, more intimate relationship, I wasn't sure. The reasons didn't matter, after all. What mattered was the intensity of the sensation and the freedom to try with which Austin worked me, swallowing me deep down his throat until tears glimmered in his eyes and slivers of panic showed on his face.

Rashly, I grabbed him under his arms and lifted him, spinning him around and bending him over the kitchen island. He let himself be handled like he was made of rubber, and all with a grin on his face.

I ate him ruthlessly, making him moan and hyperventilate, until he couldn't contain himself any longer and grabbed my head to press it harder against his firm butt. I knew now how desperate he was for more, so I showed mercy.

Slipping the condom on, I twisted his arm behind his back just enough to keep him firmly in place. The other, Austin bent under his head, and he spread his legs wide, having to push himself to the tips of his toes to keep at the same height as the island.

And when I probed him, he purred and moaned.

My cock slid into him. A single, constant, satisfying note that wasn't ending left his lips as I eased myself into him. "Fuck," he dragged once I reached deep into him and took his

left hip in my left hand, tightening the grip of my right hand on his wrist.

I yanked him back, impaling him down my length, and making him cry out with joy.

Neither of us lasted this evening, despite all the practice we had had the night before and all the weeks so far. Perhaps it was because of the changes that excited me more than I was able to admit. Perhaps it was the passion with which Austin embraced me. Perhaps a combination of both.

I slammed into him firmly, massaging his prostate constantly and without exception, lifting his torso a little up for a more satisfying angle. All the while, Austin's voice filled the room and my ears. It flooded me like a river of lust. I was drowning happily in it, letting it take me away.

And when he flickered all over, his body tensing, his hole tight around me, I knew he was done. His voice choked in his throat and I rushed toward my climax, which wasn't far at all. In a heartbeat, I was exploding with sensations that were so familiar and yet so very new, throbbing inside of him until Austin dropped flat on the island and laughed softly, catching his breath. "Fuck, Luca," he whispered. "How does it keep getting better?"

I couldn't resist him. I couldn't resist the adoration in his eyes whenever I surprised him with a gesture big or small. I swooped in, spun him around, and lifted him into my arms. The laugh that burst out of him was pure shock and the panic

in his eyes came from a place where he didn't believe me capable of carrying him.

But I was more than capable.

I carried him to the sofa, then lay down with him and kissed him as thoroughly as if I had something to prove. I kissed his lips and eyelids. I kissed his fingertips and the smooth skin of his lower abdomen. I kissed him everywhere until he pulled me up and held me in his arms.

“The first time I spent a weekend with you,” he mused. “I returned to my place and couldn't stop smiling. I tried convincing Maddy it was about the generous tip, but she didn't buy it. I couldn't wipe that grin off my face.”

I kissed him again for that. “And I stayed here, incapable of focusing on anything else but the passage of time. All I thought about was the coming Friday and what to do with you when you came.”

We dozed on the sofa a while later, naked and heated by the fire that gave most of the room's light. And when Austin next left my place, I knew it wasn't for long. He wouldn't need to wait until Friday to see me again. For one, he left with the elevator pass code written on a piece of paper. And he went away with an open invitation to come and see me whenever he missed me for a second.

“But I miss you as soon as the doors slide shut,” he said with a cheeky grin.

I would have told him to simply stay, but he had a life of his own, and I had family matters to think on and settle. So, I let him go. But only for a short while. From now on, he was mine forever.

That thought left me smiling on Sunday evening. It kept pulling on my lips as I dialed up the volume of music and mixed a cocktail for myself. I longed after him already, though he had been away for just over an hour.

I squeezed lime into the shaker, added bruised mint, crushed ice, and lost myself in thoughts.

For a few blissful moments, I forgot who I was. Just now, I felt like only Luca, Austin's boyfriend. But the thoughts of Albie returned to me. Father might see reason. Anthony I was sure of. But Albie would see this as an attack.

I didn't know how to approach the matter but cautiously. Because whatever anyone wanted, there was only one path forward.

I needed to get out.

I needed to leave this whole wretched business behind. Even if they legitimized themselves so cleanly that there wasn't a speck of blood on their accounts, I couldn't go on being a part of it. Not when Albie was incapable of modernizing and not when generations of violence preceded it.

I needed to leave the business.

A sense of loyalty to my family roared to life when the thoughts crossed my mind. It was wired into me.

I sipped my cocktail and watched the night draw over Manhattan. My heart tripped as I thought of Austin again. It didn't matter how I got out of the mess, so long as I did. Because it was Austin who I wanted. It was Austin that I chose.

You could take away the penthouse and the trust fund. You could take away my suits and my gadgets. You could leave me bare and cold and hungry and I would still be the happiest man alive.

I only wanted him.

Somewhere far from here; somewhere warm and lonely, up some hill with a little garden, with cats and dogs and a chicken or two. I wanted to run away with him into the perfect fantasy that had never crossed my mind before, but was suddenly the source of all the warmth in my chest.

I lifted my phone and dialed Dad before I knew what I was doing.

It was only when his concerned voice answered that I knew. My body was making the choice for me.

“What is it, Son?” Dad asked, his voice a little tired like it had been for a while lately. “Is there news of Miller?”

I frowned. “Oh, no. I...don't think so.”

“Ah,” Father said and waited.

I let the silence linger as fears slowly uncoiled in my stomach and began rising to the surface. “Maybe I should have

done this face to face,” I said, realizing my terrible mistake only as I spoke the words.

“Done what? What is the matter, Luca?” he asked.

“I, uh...” I sighed. “Listen, Dad. I...met someone.”

Dad sucked in a breath of air, then stopped himself from whatever he had been going to say. “As in?” he asked, not unkindly.

“As in a man. A man I like.” My throat knotted and I suddenly felt like a little boy. I was shy and insecure out of nowhere. I was vulnerable. Years of character building faded away as I bared my heart and felt all the dread of having it broken.

“Ah,” Father sighed heavily.

I tensed, hackles rising on the back of my neck. “It’s the twenty-first century, Father,” I pointed out in a tight voice. “You can’t tell me you didn’t know already.”

There was a moment of confused silence before he spoke again. “Know? Of course I know. Most of us know, Luca. And don’t you accuse me of intolerance in my own family.”

I opened my mouth in surprise, but no words came out.

“You’ve met a man. I knew this day was coming. And I know what you’re going to say next, too.” His voice was grave, but he paused and sighed, then inhaled. “It’s not your preference in gender that disappoints me, Son.”

And there it was. The tiniest crack that went right through my heart. But it was masked by the acceptance of my sexuality which I hadn't truly expected. "I...what?" I asked, disappointment and excitement mixing at the same time. How could I be so glad and so terribly wounded at the same time?

Father's tone grew colder. "You are right. We should have done this face to face. It's cowardly to tell me over the phone, Luca. And I didn't think I raised a coward."

"What?" I demanded, annoyance joining the complex palette of feelings. "What are you even...?"

"You are going to tell me you are leaving the family," Father said flatly.

I swallowed and fought for air. "Father, I...I'm not leaving the family. I only mean to step away from the business. If I'm going to have any chance of finding happiness..."

He didn't let me finish. Perhaps it was for the better because my words were going nowhere with him. I should have known. He was a strong man with values that differed those I cherished. "This business is the family, Luca. My great-grandfather built it from nothing. A poor, hungry man with only clothes on his back, built the comforts you enjoy today. And for generations, we sacrificed ourselves for a better future. For the safety of all our family members. For those at risk and for those we loved. You can't turn your back on the business that keeps our family together and convince yourself it isn't personal."

I had lost count how many times tears welled in my eyes tonight. “Father, what are you...?”

“Enough. You are no traitor, Luca,” he growled. “I won’t hear of it.”

Before I could protest, he hung up. And my heart sank so low and quiet that I wasn’t sure if it was still beating.

A sob welled up in me, inflated, and hurt everywhere in my chest. I had hoped Father would understand. I had hoped to make him an ally. If he was so impossible to convince, Albie would feel free to treat me however the hell he liked. And there was nothing I could do about that.

Except, maybe, I could run.

Maybe I could take Austin with me and run the hell away.

We could go to Italy, somewhere remote, and live the rest of our days there. We could swim and cook and make love until the day we died.

But that was a pipe dream if I even knew one. I couldn’t uproot Austin from here. He had people who loved him here. He had a life. And I wasn’t going anywhere without him. Without him, I might as well serve the family until the end of my days.

No. That wouldn’t do.

I had to find a way to break free and keep the peace.

I had to stand up and fight. For us.

Perhaps, if I took Austin with me, and sat with my father, I could persuade him to be on my side.

I scratched that thought, too. I wasn't going to take Austin anywhere near my family so long as I wasn't completely free and peace was secured.

I knew too much. And I needed to make sure they knew they could trust me. Trust was a fickle thing among people like us. Even within the family, when one wished to leave, trust stood on glass legs.

I shook my head and watched the night sky.

Austin inevitably returned to me in my thoughts. I longed to hear him chuckle and to see his teeth flash with a grin. I wanted him here to run his hand through my hair and whisper that everything would work out. I would believe him if he told me that. He would make it happen. He would set fire under my ass until I fought and found a way.

And when the elevator bell dinged softly, I forgot all the pain Father had left me with. My silent prayers had been answered. He would do what I wished. He would pull my head down on his shoulder and caress my back and kiss my neck. He came back to me.

I smiled, gripping my glass tighter. I had made a double portion of the cocktail as if I had known he would return this very evening. "I was secretly hoping you'd come," I purred, turning on my heels.

My blood curdled at the sight before me.

For one heartbeat, I didn't understand what I was looking at.

Then, the frozen moment melted and time moved again, speeding to catch up with itself.

"I'm so sorry, Sir. They know my son. They know his name." The panicked whispers from Anna were cut short when one of the two men with white, grinning masks lifted his arm and let the butt of his gun fall on the back of her head.

"Don't," I heard myself yell as I leaped, but Anna's head jerked and she tumbled down into a small pile.

I saw myself more than I knew consciously as I threw the cocktail glass at the two intruders, but the other man had his arms stretched out before him, aimed at me.

Something clicked.

I didn't hear a bang.

I didn't hear the glass shatter and the ice spill.

All I knew was a white flash before my eyes, a red vignette around it pulsing in the rhythm of my heart. Once. Twice. And the world darkened.

In the darkness, as if lit by a candle, Austin's face hovered before my eyes for an instant before it faded.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Austin



THE KNOCK WAS LOUD enough to jerk me from the sweetest dream I had ever dreamed. In it, Luca had confessed his feelings to me, and I cried tears of joy and we made love.

I blinked myself awake and perked my ears.

Nothing.

Warmth spilled over my chest like someone had poured hot water from a bucket when I realized the dream hadn't been a dream at all.

Luca was my boyfriend. Gone was the wedge that money had created between us. Gone was the past that had placed us at opposing ends and made it impossible.

Someone's fist slammed on the door.

I jumped out of the bed and raced out of my room. The knocking was persistent, but not loud anymore. Something terrible must have happened. What time was it, anyway? I didn't have a spare moment to answer any of that.

It was urgent, whatever it was. It was urgent enough that the knocking continued louder and louder.

Maddy, who was staying with Parrish and Levi as part of her exercise of self-acceptance, would have startled before me had she been here. But as I unlocked the door, I realized my mistake.

You didn't even ask who the fuck it was, I hissed at myself as the lock turned and the door flew open under the immense pressure of the visitor in the night.

I jumped back and yelled in protest, but three men poured into my apartment in a cacophony of shouts and commands. They were armed, though their guns weren't in their hands. They warned me, yelling, that that would change if I didn't cooperate.

They had flashlights that blinded me temporarily and I saw nothing except the mass of bodies surrounding me suddenly.

"I'm cooperating. Fuck." I was yelling, trying to show I could stay calm, but it was as though dark winds fell over the

land and threatened to whisk me away.

“Nobody will hurt you,” one of the men was saying loudly, harshly, as the other two pushed me to my knees. “Stay calm. On your knees. Don’t speak. Don’t say a word and you’ll be fine.”

I yelped when my vision was blocked and I realized they pulled something over my head. It was soft and allowed air through, but it blocked my eyes.

They twisted my arms behind my back, harsher than Luca had just the night earlier, and I obeyed their commands. I listened and moaned in pain, then bit my lip hard to keep myself quiet.

The two men lifted me back to my feet, telling their leader I wasn’t armed or dangerous.

The leader was saying something fast that I didn’t pick up over the tight fabric moving against my ears. I was dragged out of the apartment and down the stairs as much as I was carried. My feet hovered over the stairs as two beefy men strained to carry me down. Then, cold winter air washed over my bare arms, and the warmth of my bed disappeared. I considered myself lucky, in all this hell, that I had worn my pajamas this night.

As soon as the lighter thought crossed my mind, I scolded myself and remembered to panic. “Where are you taking me?”

“Shut up,” someone growled.

The world tilted and something landed against my side. And when the sound of a car door closing reached my consciousness, I realized I had been thrown into a car's backseat.

“Keep your mouth shut or I'll shut it for you,” another man threatened, pushing me around the back of the car until I knelt on the floor and my torso rested on the leather seat.

I did what I was told, but an occasional whimper of pain and shock erupted from me. It was usually followed by the tightening of the man's grip on my wrists.

The car moved quickly. Dangerously quickly.

My heart finally found time to thump loudly in my chest and fill my ears with its beating. Everything made less and less sense the more I tried thinking.

And if I asked them a question, they would hurt me, I knew.

What was this about?

Luca had told me what his family business was about. But...

How did that make me a target? I didn't know anything other than what Luca had said.

“If you want money...” I whimpered.

My arm twisted until I cried out and the man snapped at me to shut it. I did and his grip relaxed a little. Just enough so that the searing pain subsided.

So, not the money, I deduced.

But what else could make me valuable to anyone? Unless I was never supposed to know what his family did. But he had told me this in confidence and in the moment of passionate panic that I would leave him. He had admitted it pleadingly.

This made no sense.

It seemed ages before the car came to a halt and I was dragged out into the cold that woke me up completely if the heated car ride had managed to make me sleepy at all. I was dragged over snow and frost, my feet kicking into something like stone, and the creaking of hinges made me think we were entering some cold, dark place. Some warehouse where they would beat me, torture me, and kill me.

Would they?

They could have done as much an hour ago.

I tried to keep the voice of reason loud and clear inside my head, but it was drowned by fears that lurked from all sides.

And when I was thrown from the firm grip of the man who had led me in, the last thing I expected was to land into a big, soft cushion. Even less did I expect what was revealed to me when the black textile was pulled back from my head.

Lit by the fire in an open fireplace and lamps built into the rustic walls, the room was warm and dim orange. The furniture appeared old, but well kept. The silence was deafening.

There were footsteps behind me. It was the man who had blindfolded me and dragged me inside. I jerked my head to

look at him, making another stupid mistake in the process. His hand was firm and heavy on my shoulder when he pushed me back into my seat. “Sit or I’ll tie you, I swear to God.”

The growl was enough to make me think twice before making another move. I sat tight and focused on breathing. Breathing was good. I needed to breathe.

The door flew open and someone stormed in. I didn’t dare look. Instead, I stared at the elaborate weaving of the thick, old carpet that was soft under my bare feet.

“Where is he?” the man yelled as he stormed in, then stopped abruptly when he presumably spotted me. He slowly approached me. “That’s him? The man who was in his apartment tonight?”

The man behind me said a single, flat ‘yes.’

The other man leaned in, then grabbed my chin in his hands. I had never wished for Luca to be near me as much as I did now. Although there always existed a part of me that wanted him close by my side.

This guy that was leaning in was tall, handsome in a strong and fiery fashion. He wore a suit and guns strapped under his arms. He was dominant in every way I could imagine; from the posture, to the way he breathed slowly, to the way he narrowed his dark eyes. “Who do you work for?” he dragged out darkly.

“Freshly unemployed,” I said, lifting my chin in a stupid moment of defiance.

The handsome man looked over me to the beefy one behind me and gave a quick jerk of his head. Whatever the other man had suggested to do to me, I was spared.

“I’ll ask you again,” the handsome one said. “Who do you work for?”

Did he want Luca? Through me? He wasn’t getting him. If only I could figure out a way this all connected. If only I could know for sure what this man wanted with Luca, then I could start planning how to protect my man.

Because that was my only option, right?

I’d run out of luck tonight, but only after I got the best fucking thing I could have ever hoped for. Luca was my boyfriend.

I’d had my life saved once.

I owed a debt to the universe. I had been rewarded for this and it was time to pay up.

“I’m not telling you anything,” I growled back at the man whose dark eyes flashed with anger.

“You have no idea what kind of mess you got yourself into. Tell me who you work for. Tell me where they are. Tell me every goddamn move you made tonight or I swear to God I’ll watch this man behind you break your fingers.” There was so much venom in his words that I was tempted to believe him.

Don’t, I whispered to myself. If I let him scare me even a little, my resolve would fall apart. And I wasn’t intending on betraying Luca to this maniac.

So, I bared my teeth, since I couldn't trust my voice not to crack.

Rushed footsteps outside the door alerted everyone in the room except me. I glanced at the window, planning an escape route instead. As if I could run away.

I nearly chuckled bitterly.

My stupid brain was planning ways to protect my body from the shattered glass if I jumped through it. And I didn't even have a pair of fucking slippers. I wasn't walking out of this one. Or talking my way out, either.

The door of the warm, rustic room they had assigned me to lounge in flew open and my jaw nearly shattered against the floor. The familiar face was horrified when his gaze caught mine. "That's his lover, you morons," Jack Holloway whined. "What the hell did you do?"

The only thing I could focus on was the fast tightening of the knots of fate. Was Luca in danger? These men wanted him and Jack was helping them.

The traitor!

"Are you fucking kidding me, Albie?" Jack demanded of the other man, then looked at me. "Are you alright? Did they hurt you?" He rushed across the room and pushed the man he had called Albie out of my face. "If there's a hair missing from his head, Luca's going to break your neck."

"Is he?" The Albie person demanded. "Because where the hell is he?"

Whatever I had assumed was happening, wasn't. All I thought I knew was falling apart. "Jack?" I whispered.

"Shh," Jack said, lifting my chin and examining my face. Worry on his face somehow spread and infected me like the plague.

Something bad. Something very, very bad had happened.

That was as much as I could tell from Jack's weary gaze.

"You said lover," Albie growled, crossing his arms.

"Yes," Jack snapped. "Your brother is gay. Which you would know if you spent one minute with him without challenging him."

"Watch your tongue, Holloway," Albie snapped.

"Brother?" I gasped. Luca's brother had dragged me out of my home? "Why would Luca do this?" I whispered in panic. It made no sense. And where the hell was he?

"He didn't," Jack told me, ignoring Albie now. "Listen, Austin. These idiots made a mistake. They took you for a spy because all they think about are the goddamn Bond movies." He shot a look at Albie, who protested.

"Don't talk about my guys like that," he growled, powerless. He paced around the room, waiting, giving Jack some time for...what? I didn't know.

"Where is he?" I asked, gaze darting around the room, panic seeping from my heart and straight into my voice.

“I’m sorry, Austin. He’s missing.” Jack’s lips curved down and a frown shattered the little composure he had had on his face upon entering the room.

“Missing?” I hissed. Dread uncoiled in my guts. Luca was in danger and every fiber of my being became restless. If he was missing from his apartment, it meant he hadn’t been...No! I would not think about that. “What do you mean? I was with him this evening.”

Jack shook his head. “That’s what we’re trying to figure out. The security camera caught you leaving the elevator downstairs, coming from Luca’s level. They said a man. I didn’t realize it was you. I’m sorry.”

“You’re my brother’s lover?” Albie growled.

Even now, his look in my direction provoked fear. So, this was the crime prince of the DiMarco clan. This was the reason Luca had been adopted and raised to serve. This man? To serve him? I couldn’t imagine such a thing. Luca didn’t need to shout or twist arms in order to command.

“I am,” I said with pride.

“He is,” Jack said. “And you got the wrong guy.”

“He could still be the traitor,” Albie said, but his voice lacked the seriousness it had had before.

“I’m not a fucking traitor,” I snapped back. With anger at the suggestion and all the fears that were creeping up and up my spine, I took a breath of air and spilled the truth. “I love him.”

Albie winced at that and went quiet.

“How is he missing?” I demanded. Somewhere in my darkening soul, a flicker of stupid hope was blooming. Maybe he had just gone out for a walk. Maybe he had run out of snacks at midnight.

I knew these were silly thoughts, but I clung to them.

Until Jack spoke again. Sitting down adjacent to me, he rubbed his eyes. “Apparently he had a falling out with his father, who called Albie. Something about leaving the, ah, business.”

Guilt roared in me. If he had done that tonight, I was the reason. There wasn't a shred of doubt in me.

“Albie called several times, but couldn't reach him, so he called me.” Jack shrugged. “I'm the only friend who has the elevator code. As do Martin and Anna.”

“And me,” I whispered.

Jack lifted his eyebrows.

“He gave it to me. Tonight.” I didn't care if it implicated me in something greater. I cared that I was Luca's closest circle.

Jack shot a look at Albie. “Well, we know how they got in,” he insisted to Albie, then looked at me. “I found Anna on the floor, unconscious. She will be alright when she wakes up. Hit to the back of her head. Unpleasant, but not dangerous.”

I winced.

“They must have threatened her to bring them inside,” Jack said. “We can only hope she wakes up sooner rather than later and tells us something useful. The basement camera showed us too little to put anything together. They wore masks and they were armed.” Jack shrugged. Again, he looked at Albie. “And why your chimps thought Austin was important is beyond me. But it’s a good thing he is here.”

Before he could continue, Albie demanded: “Why?”

“A. He deserves to know,” Jack said, patience drained out of him. “B. He is safer with us. If someone is making moves, starting with Luca, they could make the same mistakes your cronies had. They might be going to Austin’s place as we speak.” He looked at me. “Does anyone live with you? Do you have anything valuable?”

“She’s sleeping at our friends’ place,” I murmured. “I need to tell her.”

“You will not tell her a goddamn thing,” Albie said firmly.

Jack shook his head. “He’s right. You can’t. But we’ll keep an eye on your place.” He sighed and rubbed his temples. “Austin. I need you to think about this. Was there anything — anything at all — that was unusual in the last few days? Anything that seemed out of place? Was Luca acting any differently? No matter how small or unimportant it seems, it might give us a clue as to who did this.”

I hated the way he phrased it. ‘Did this,’ seemed so final.

No. My mind secured walls around itself and staved off all other thoughts. I could do nothing about my ripping, beating heart, but I could ignore the thoughts of the worst.

I thought about it.

I thought hard about everything that had happened in the past few days. We had realized there had been a time in our lives that we had been alike. Two orphans; one doomed to a life of struggle and the other placed into the greatest of dangers camouflaged by all this wealth.

I frowned and went over every detail. We'd fought and Luca had told me things. Things I wasn't supposed to know. "He was...stressed," I said faintly. "About some deal that went wrong or...I don't know. I don't know what happened, but he said it could have been avoided. Something about bad choices." I lifted my gaze at Albie and pierced him with it. "Brother's choices, he said."

Jack sucked his teeth and turned his attention at Albie, who pursed his lips and stiffened his jaw. "Motherfucker," he grunted. "I know who took him and I know why."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Austin



I FOLLOWED JACK.

In the whole damn mess that was spinning out of control, he was the focus of my attention. He was Luca's friend; the only person I could trust in this goddamn house. I never once let him out of my sight and, somehow, I thought he knew. He didn't object to me trailing him.

In fact, he often turned around and glanced at me.

When we crossed the entire house that was far larger than I had imagined, we found an older man in his office, his face in his hands. His eyes were sunken when he lifted his head. “News?”

“It’s Miller,” Albie barked. “That goddamn son of a bitch. I should have dealt with him...”

The older man slammed a fist against the desk far harder than I had imagined him capable of. “Your dealing with Miller brought this on us,” he roared.

Albie bared his teeth, but quickly looked down at the floor.

“My son,” the older DiMarco whispered.

My heart cracked. The fear I saw in his eyes made this the first moment I truly believed Luca was in real danger. So far, the shock had shielded me, but seeing an old man near tears over his son’s fate broke through the shields.

My Luca, I whispered to myself, shivering. There is so much I still need to tell him. So much to make right.

“The maid?” Mr. DiMarco asked gruffly, then cleared his throat. I knew what unshed tears sounded like. There was no mistaking them.

“She will be alright,” Jack said.

“Is she awake? Has she confirmed it was Miller’s men?” the man demanded.

“No,” Jack said. “Luca confided in Austin earlier. From there, Albie put the pieces together.”

The old man looked at me for the first time. It was a measuring look. “You had information about my son?”

“Dad, Jack’s saying this guy is Luca’s...”

“Lover,” the old man finished with a nod. His lips twisted in what I first thought was disgust. But his eyes shimmered and I choked up. “He called me just tonight. He called me to say.”

I watched a man who Luca considered the head of the family and the clan break into an emotional pile of anxiety and regret. Gone was the idea of some big, bad criminal mastermind that I had come up with yesterday. Albie was ever so slightly more fitting in that image. Here, there was only a father worrying about his son.

But I sucked in a shallow breath of air in surprise. Luca had told his father about me.

I didn’t ask. I didn’t say a word.

Mr. DiMarco lifted his desperate gaze to his son. “He wanted my blessing to step away.”

Albie frowned.

“And I denied it,” the man growled bitterly. “Fool. What a fool.”

Silence settled as an old man tried to come to terms with his regrets and everyone watched. The awkwardness dispersed only when Albie whispered: “It’s my fault.”

Nobody said a word.

“It’s my fault that Miller came after us. Luca warned me and I didn’t listen.” He crossed his arms tightly on his chest.

Anger flared in me, but before I could ask the question, his father did. “And what will you do about it?”

Albie paced the office. “I’ve got my people going over everything. They’ll know the most likely places Luca is being held. Have we had any calls? Demands?”

The father shook his head gravely.

It took me a moment to understand why that was worrisome. If they weren’t asking for ransom, they were sending a message. It was anyone’s guess how far they were willing to go and how loud their message would be.

“And when you discover the location?” the father asked.

“I’ll storm the goddamn place. I’ll burn it to the ground and get Luca back to us. And then I’ll...”

“Enough,” the old man snapped. “Haven’t you learned a thing? Talking like that got us into this mess.”

Albie’s anger flashed over his face.

It was Jack who spoke after a few moments of silence. “It looks to me like discretion is the wisest way to go. Now, don’t take this as me telling you how to do it. I’m not as experienced in the ways of gun wielding or rescue missions. But if there is a way for us to get in, get Luca, and leave with minimal noise, we would all be better off. Storming the place will put Luca in more danger than he’s already in.”

I appreciated Jack's optimism. While everyone spoke of Luca with poorly concealed concern over the worst, Jack sounded as if he knew for a fact that Luca was alive and well. I decided I knew it, too.

He had to be.

"I suspect they will not shy away from using him as a human shield if we made a single mistake in Albie's storming." Jack looked at Albie with significance I didn't understand. "Perhaps a softer touch would be smarter."

"Softer touch," Albie growled. "Do you have a plan?"

Jack threaded his fingers together and sank deeper into his chair. "We first need to locate him. It will depend on the nature of the facility."

And so, the most excruciating hour of my life began.

Nobody noticed me much. Nobody noticed that, at odd intervals, such fright gripped me that I completely disappeared from reality and stared through the walls and floors of this pretty house, wishing against all odds that I could awaken some sort of belief in a higher power that would give me peace.

But I couldn't.

The most I managed was to hope I would see Luca soon. To hope I would get to tell him everything I had failed to say yesterday. Everything that had been at the tip of my tongue, but I had bitten off.

Just now, in the darkness of the night and the fears for his life, I knew exactly how much I wanted him. I'd thought I had reached the maximum, but I hadn't even been close. Just tonight, I had been ready to get whatever torture could be inflicted on me to protect him.

I wanted him to know.

And I would challenge all the gods if they dared prevent me.

So, when the news arrived, and the house was abuzz with debates, preparations, and planning, I felt the kind of restlessness I hadn't thought was possible.

I listened as they spoke, keeping to my corner of the larger office everyone had moved to. People in suits and people in sweatpants; they were all awake and alert, discussing strategies.

"A dozen guys, maybe more," someone was saying.

"Not more. Fewer," Jack said. "A smaller team will work better."

Albie clenched his jaws, then nodded at Jack. "The objective is to get Luca out before anyone knows what's happening. The warehouse where they are most likely keeping him is remote. There is only one road, leading north, that comes near it. We need a small group of people, quick and stealthy, to cross the field between the road and the warehouse, get in, do the job, and get out. It won't be easy. We're going in blind."

“The keywords are speed and stealth,” Jack added firmly. “We believe the reason no calls have been made is due to Miller’s absence.” Jack frowned. “Swift actions and, ah, Albie’s techniques gave us much useful information. Luca is likely guarded. Nothing will happen until Miller arrives at the scene. The sooner we get there, the better our chances are to bring Luca back before Miller’s arrival. We expect Miller to come with larger company.”

“Do we need reinforcements?” someone asked.

“It’s a fine line between securing our exit route and alerting them to our presence,” Jack said.

Albie seemed uncomfortable.

“Get my son back,” old Mr. DiMarco said in a sandy voice. “If fewer men will do a better job, fewer is what you’ll have.”

Jack nodded toward Albie.

It was Luca’s brother who spoke again, although he took a few moments to calm himself and make sure he spoke in a composed manner. The resemblance was uncanny. Not in the physical features, as the two shared no blood, but in mannerisms. These they had learned from their father. “I will lead the operation,” Albie said. “Three of my guys will come in with me. Jack?”

“I am coming, too,” Jack said.

“Me too.”

Silence.

It took me a moment to realize that had been my voice.

I swallowed. "I want to help."

"Austin," Jack said softly.

"Help how?" Albie asked tersely.

My palms sweat and my pulse increased. "I...What do you need?"

"What do you offer? Do you have any skill?" The questions were venomous, but they were also completely legitimate. I had nothing to offer them, but I wasn't going to let these strangers rescue Luca while I sat idly.

I inhaled. "It's off the road, right? And you expect this man to arrive any moment. If you and Jack and the rest are inside, searching for Luca, you need someone to be on the lookout. Right?"

"Why wouldn't one of my guys do that instead?" asked Albie, cocking his head.

"Because," I snapped, realizing immediately it would bring me nothing to answer sulkily. "It's something you can trust anyone with a working pair of eyes to do. If I see headlights in the distance, you'll know."

"He's right," Jack said softly. I didn't think he agreed completely with me, but I was sure as hell he knew what it meant to me to come along. If Luca was in danger, I wasn't going to sit around in the safety of his own home. I would go after him even if I had to run after Albie's procession of cars. "He can do the job as well as anyone."

“And how do I trust that you won’t turn on us when we’re there?” Albie asked pointedly.

Silence settled as I swallowed and inhaled. “You mean nothing to me,” I said, making eyes around the room go wide. “I’m not going out of the kindness of my heart that you might need help. I’m going because of him. Whether you trust me or not, it makes no difference to me. Your brother trusts me and that’s all that matters.”

Silence lingered. I had hope that my words would sway someone, but they all waited for...something.

Finally, when my gaze darted left and right, I saw Jack shift. “I’ll vouch for him, Albie.”

Albie scoffed, but didn’t say anything else.

“Let him come,” the patriarch of the family said at last. “He can be your eyes on the outside as well as the next man.”

Albie shook his head. “Fine,” he conceded. “If it all goes according to plan, it won’t matter who’s on the lookout.”

After that, everything happened too quickly to keep track of. In flashes, I was aware of a bulletproof vest being handed to me, and a young man scurrying up and down the stairs with clothes that almost fit me.

I changed from the pajamas, becoming aware once again that I had been dragged out of my home in the middle of the night and into the war zone which existed for the sake of saving Luca’s life. Fear gripped my heart, but I didn’t let it spread to my fingers. Though my chest occasionally shuddered

and shivers ran down my arms more often than not, I persisted. I dressed in a stranger's clothes and accompanied Jack to his car.

The drive was terrifyingly fast. Two black cars on a lonely, slippery road, sped north. I made myself not think of the risks to my life. And still, I worried that if we died on the road, there would be no one to save Luca from the clutches of some twisted mind.

It was somewhere far up north that I remembered to say the two words I owed Jack all night. They came out softly as my mind raced and returned to Luca again and again. But I found them and said, "Thank you."

Jack nodded as if it was nothing.

I didn't know how long it took him to speak again. We were still racing up the road, tailing Albie's car. "When we are there, you will stay by the cars. If you see any headlights coming from either direction, just call me." He pointed at the glovebox. "Look in there."

I did, fearfully expecting to be handed a gun. A counter-argument was already forming on the tip of my tongue. I was not trained. I didn't know how to. I didn't want to shoot or hold a gun. All these things floated through my mind, but then the glove box fell open, I discovered several mobile phones.

"Take any. Type." Jack was speeding up, hands on the wheel, eyes glued to the road. He dictated his phone number. "You see lights in the distance, you call that number."

“What if the sound alerts the guards?” I blurted.

“It won’t,” Jack reassured me. “It’ll buzz in my pocket silently and I’ll warn everyone that we have company.” He went on to explain the details of the plan. They would hurry to get Luca out and into the car before all hell breaks loose. If they failed, they would take cover in there and fight off the new arrivals as best they could. “And Austin, if you see the ship sinking, take my car and run. I’m leaving the keys inside.” He slowly followed Albie’s car off the main road and onto a much older and narrower one. “Understood?”

“Understood,” I said, a knot tying in my throat. “But...that won’t happen.”

Jack glanced at me and sighed. “You need to save yourself if this goes wrong. You won’t help him by getting yourself injured or worse.”

“I don’t intend to leave him behind and run to safety, Jack,” I said flatly.

He shook his head, accepting my words with slight disappointment. “You crazy boys. You just had to make it real.”

I choked on an abrupt sob that rose through my chest and blurred my vision. Dammit. I would be no good at looking for headlights on the horizon if I were tearing up every other minute.

I shivered all over and exhaled. There had never been anything so real in my life.

And the danger was real, too. It was only when the cars came to a halt on the side of the old road that I saw the warehouse. It wasn't particularly large. Outside was lit with sparse lights and inside, if lit, was subdued enough that I couldn't tell.

He is in there, I thought. For the first time, images broke through the walls around my mind that I thought what it must have looked like. I wondered without any knowledge. Was it dark and damp? Were his hands bound? Was he gagged? Was he hurt?

Stop that, I snapped at myself.

"This is it," Jack said. "Try not to get hurt."

With those words of poor comfort, Jack got out of the car. I followed, clutching the phone, and squinting away from the lights of the warehouse behind me. It was lower down the light slope that led away from the road.

Albie was instructing everyone in the kind of jargon that was completely foreign to me. When he finished that, he looked at me. "Keep your eyes open," he said flatly.

Never in my life had I felt so desperately useless as I did in the minutes that followed. Five men walked away from me, crouching as they did, and sneaking toward the warehouse. I couldn't look at the warehouse at all else I would get blinded by the flickers of outside floodlights.

So I did all that was left to me. I stood. I looked left and right, scanning the abandoned old road for signs of company.

The man I cared so deeply about was in perilous danger not too far behind me and I could do little more than stand silently.

Damn this. Damn his family for getting him involved and his brother for whatever he had done to provoke wrath such as this. And the enemy, whoever he might be, for laying a finger on Luca.

The most terrible longing bloomed within me and I suddenly wanted to wield a gun and seek out the rats that held my man hostage. I wanted to feel like I mattered a little more than this useless thing I had been rendered into. A watcher of pure nothingness on a distant horizon.

Temptation pulled at me to look over my shoulder, but I stopped myself.

A blanket of snow reflected the floodlights brightly enough that it would take my eyes minutes to adjust back to darkness.

But I did perk my ears to no avail.

I listened intently and got nothing but the howling of the winds. Though their guns had been drawn, their objective was not to fire them at the enemies. Incapacitate, shoot if absolutely necessary; those had been Jack's words.

So far, they had heeded his advice.

Albie had struck me as someone who had a hard time taking anyone's advice. I was grateful to all the gods above that Jack had gotten through to him. Whatever lowered the risk to Luca was a huge bonus in my book.

When frustration of being kept in silence was too much and when my determination wavered, I glanced over my shoulder and took a look at the warehouse. Predictably, I saw nothing, but the flashes of light remained as spots in my vision.

I focused on the dark horizon again, but white spots danced in outer parts of my field of vision. Until my heart climbed into my throat and I realized I had been a fool. One of those spots had been too constant and it was splitting into two, three, four.

Cars.

Cars gliding up the road. They had been behind us, not ten minutes late.

I scurried and grabbed the phone, speed dialed the number Jack had given me, and was disconnected before it rang. Panic moved my mind into speed mode and I dialed again, getting disconnected before it rang once.

I dismissed the thought that Jack was declining the calls. It was too exact, too quick for him to do such a thing. So there had to be another issue.

I tried calling again, running quickly out of options. And when the call failed to connect, I was absolutely certain something had gone wrong. But I hadn't heard any shots from the warehouse. Our guys were still inside, right? Had they been...No. I wasn't thinking about that. They were the only hope I had of getting Luca back.

I looked south again and found the specks of light had grown. These people were moving fast.

My heart leaped and I spun around, then ran for the warehouse. My mind took a break somewhere along the way. I thought of nothing at all. It was the only thing I could imagine doing. It was either that or hiding under the car. And hiding wasn't an option I entertained. I needed to warn Jack and make sure Luca was fine.

Fuck. Me. I muttered silently as I broke into a sprint down the slope and toward the pit of vipers where they were holding my boyfriend. At the massive doors of the warehouse, I ran through the well lit part of the snow-covered ground, realizing my own luck when I didn't get shot for it.

But when I entered the less lit interior, my heartbeat drowned the sounds of struggle. The metal walls closed in on the hallway that led down into darkness. There were doors of some tiny offices on each side and all were wide open.

I jumped when something thumped loudly not too far ahead and a body collapsed limply out the door. "Fuck," I whimpered, terrified to my marrow as the attacker walked out and abruptly lifted his gun at me.

I jumped back as if that could save me, but the attacker from the office lowered his weapon. "Don't sneak around like that," he grunted. He was Albie's man; the one who had practically carried me to Luca's family home. "What is it?"

For a moment, I forgot why I was even inside. All I could remember was that I needed to inhale. Breathing was

important. And when I shivered and sucked in a lungful of air, I told him, “We’ve got company.”

He stiffened and gestured with his head. I rushed down the hallway as the man silently directed me, gesturing with his gun.

Too many questions played out in my head to even begin asking them. But, somehow, the universe was merciful for a moment. The questions answered themselves when the man with the gun led me around the corner and I spotted Jack.

“The signals are jammed,” he said immediately.

“They’re here,” I said.

“I figured,” Jack whispered. He quickly instructed the guard on what to do and grabbed my wrist. “We think we cleared the place but if they’re coming, it’ll get hot. You need to get out of here.”

“I’m not leaving him,” I snapped.

Albie ran toward us over the open space of the warehouse, lit only by scarce overhead bulbs. He had a ferocious look on his face, like an animal stalking its prey. “They’re close.”

“Where is he, Jack?” I demanded.

Jack shook his head and cold dread washed over me. Was Albie so feral because something had happened? Was Jack telling me...something?

“Find him,” Albie grunted, dispelling the worst of my fears before they truly took hold of my heart. “Get him out through

the back before the guard wakes up. We'll hold them off.”

“Albie,” Jack gasped.

“We'll be right behind you. Go. Now.” Albie gestured for his three guys to follow and Jack grabbed my wrist and led the way a while before letting go, trusting I would follow.

Fear climbed in my throat as Jack opened each door one after another, finding nothing inside but weapons or dusty canisters of something I couldn't identify.

But it was a minute later that I yelped with fright. Gunshots filled the interior; small explosions inside the handguns echoed against the metal walls of the warehouse. Moments later, I smelled smoke.

What the fuck was happening?

“Shut up and hurry,” Jack commanded and I realized I had asked the question aloud.

He tried a door that was on the far end of the warehouse but it was locked. He stepped back, holding his gun pointed up, then ran into the metal door. It budged, but it didn't break free.

He tried again, loosening the hinges, but failing to break through.

And, in a panic I suppose, Jack pointed the gun at the lock, but I cried out against it. Somewhere inside of me, the same sort of animal woke up as in Albie. The man we both love, one as a lover and the other as brother, was trapped in here. There was nothing I wouldn't do to save him.

I pushed Jack out the way and with the risk of dislocating my shoulder, I ran into it. And when that failed, I pulled back and kicked it just under the knob, hearing a screech of metal scraping against metal.

By now, the scent of smoke was much stronger, and I struggled with the door as I finally dislodged the lock that had one tiny wooden part of the frame that had given way under our attacks.

And when Jack handed me his flashlight, I pointed it forward.

And my vision blurred and hot tears spilled down my cheeks. I might have cried out or been completely silent. I was so detached from myself and the things around me that I wasn't sure which it was.

All I knew was that Luca lay on the bare floor not five feet away.

Fear, dread, and curdling of my blood tied all my joints. They pulled me back and held me from moving to him. What would I find if I came closer?

“Luca,” I whispered.

There was nothing else to do but move on.

Suddenly, as if I skipped a few moments in time, I found myself leaping and falling by his side. Tears streamed down my cheeks as I frantically checked him. His body was limp and it seemed to take me ages before I remembered to check for a pulse.

“He’s alive,” I cried out, hearing Jack’s sigh of relief so loudly that it almost matched my own. I tried to inhale while holding my hands on Luca’s chest. He wasn’t moving. He was barely showing any signs of life at all, but he was alive. Except...he couldn’t just walk the hell out of here. “Wh-what’s wrong with him?” I pleaded to Jack.

“Can you wake him?” Jack asked, both hands on the gun, pointing up as he poked his head through the door and scanned the direction from which the sounds of violence came.

“I...” I slapped Luca and shook him, running out of ways to wake someone up in a crunch. I slapped him again, panic rising in me. “Come on. Wake up. Wake up, Luca,” I whispered. “Please, God, just wake up. Just look at me. Please.” He wasn’t responding and I desperately clutched his shirt, nearly tearing the buttons off. “Listen to me, Luca,” I whispered urgently. “We have to leave. Now. We can’t stay here. We can’t...” *Die*, I thought. “I’m not letting you die here, dammit. And I’m not leaving you. Luca.”

“Get him up, Austin,” Jack said hurriedly. “The fire’s spreading. This whole thing is gonna blow.”

I lifted Luca’s torso into my lap, slapping his face gently and opening his eyes a little. “You’re coming with me,” I said with determination I hadn’t realized I was able to channel. “I’m taking you out of here.” My muscles tensed as I prepared to lift him up. “We’re going to live. And I’m going to tell you what I should have told you yesterday. What I should have told you as soon as I knew. Because I love you, Luca.” I

hauled him up, my breath leaving me. “No matter how impossible it is for a rent boy to believe in love, I do. And I’m going to save you. And I’m going to tell you. I’m not afraid anymore, Luca.”

The weight of him shifted in my arms. The way he was leaning over me, pushing me back with his limp, almost lifeless body lightened. For a moment, I thought Jack had gotten around to help me, but he snapped from behind me to hurry up, that he would cover me.

“...love...you...” The murmur filled my ears against the distant gunfire. His head was on my shoulder and my arms around his waist, but he was rising slowly, disoriented and not even remotely steady on his feet.

“Luca,” I whispered, my heart leaping one more time as my vision blurred. This wasn’t the right time for crying. Hell. I needed my eyes to rescue the man I loved.

“Austin,” he whispered weakly. “I love...you...” Gasps for air broke his words into small bites, but they still fired me up with the kind of energy I had only heard of. Like a mother lifting an entire car to save her baby or someone running twice the speed across the train tracks to save their loved one in the nick of time, I found it in me. I knew I would pay for it later, when my body collapsed and I ached for days, but I didn’t care. It was a small price to pay.

I spun Luca around and dragged him until his feet could catch up every third step, and I ran. His arm was over my

shoulders, I held it around the wrist praying to God I wasn't hurting him more.

Footsteps and gunshots followed me as our guys retreated, covering Luca and me. And finally, the weight halved when Jack swooped in and lifted Luca's other arm over his shoulders. Together, we ran out the back of the weapons warehouse where flames spread through offices and threatened to blow a crater in the earth any minute.

We ran, Jack shouting at me to keep going straight down the slope.

The cars, I thought, then realized why we couldn't run around the warehouse toward the cars, but in the opposite direction. Our guys were shooting at the back door of the warehouse where a bottleneck formed with the enemies both unable to get out as a single target or return through the warehouse. For them, it was a question of how they wanted to go.

I shuddered, darkness kissing the back of my mind and sweeping these thoughts away.

We were leaping forward, down the slope and into our only hiding place in the drainage channel in the field. Guns blazed and I didn't even realize what I was doing until it was done. I tore Luca out of Jack's hold as if something guided me. I stepped to the left, shielding Luca with my body in that instant of jumping down. In flight, the moment seemed endless. It seemed to last a lifetime. I dragged my lover's body with me through the air and yelped when half a heartbeat later

whiteness filled my vision, my breath kicked out of my lungs, and pain I had never thought a body could sustain spread over my back.

My consciousness was kicked out of my head before we landed.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Luca



THE THUD AND THE cold blaze of snow against my cheek brought me from the abyss of a fever dream I had been trapped in for an eternity. In glimpses, I was aware of pain, of shouts, of guns firing erratically. Someone's weight suffocated me, but I was grateful for it when the ground itself trembled and the sound of an explosion ripped the skies above me.

Red, orange, yellow. The colors shifted before my eyes for an instant, then faded into the blackness I was terribly familiar with. There was nothing on the other side. Cold emptiness of

the deepest corners of my own mind were the last refuge where I cowered as my body struggled. There was a warm allure of giving up. It was like a mermaid's song, so sweet and tempting.

"I love you," he said.

I held him, my hand around his pretty mouth, his chin up and eyes wide. He was pinning me with his intense gaze and waiting expectantly. Waiting. Waiting for the rest of our lives. We stood on the roof, the hot tub bubbling near us, the snow flurries chilling us. We were naked.

"I love you," he said in the restaurant, just as the mayor walked away.

"I love you, Luca," he said as bitter tears ran down his cheeks and we tried to accept the twist of fate that had pulled us to the opposite ends of society.

"I love you," he whispered as guns blazed around us.

Breath returned to my lungs, though its coolness felt like it burned my chest. I heaved for air and laughed, then realized I had been dreaming again. These hadn't been the feverish dreams of death, but of a life with him.

Him...

Austin lay over me as fire roared toward the sky like it was trying to set God ablaze. His big eyes were closed, long eyelashes appearing darker in the dancing shadows of the hellfires that were so near us. The hum of flames and the

burning structure filled my ears as explosions of far lesser intensity continued to disrupt the dead of night.

People. People were around us.

“Austin,” I croaked, but couldn’t keep my mind from spiraling. I couldn’t cling to my consciousness for longer than a few heartbeats. If that long, at all. I couldn’t help it. Darkness took me back, pulling me far down to the bottom of the ocean.

All awareness evaded me. I tried to kick and swim back, but the comfort of shutting my brain off was too much to resist.

As I sank to the pits of my own mind, I dragged fear with me. He had been lifeless on top of me. He had been there in some cataclysm of biblical proportions. But he had been holding me and I couldn’t even stay awake for him.

I had called for people, I knew, but little comfort joined me on my dive into nothingness.

When I next awoke, nothing was familiar. In the split second before my eyes opened, I was aware of swerving on the road and a burning sensation on the skin of my chest and in my muscles. Lights flickered around me and something stung me and I was being dragged around, but I didn’t know the order of these things.

They all played out before my eyes as the lids peeled up and I winced with an instant headache from the white light above me. “Ungh. Hmpf.” I looked around, grunting and groaning. Dark red walls with brown paneling on their lower half

surrounded me. An old, wooden dresser was pushed against one of the walls. An ornate door I recognized was down to my left side.

I knew this place.

This was my childhood bedroom.

Beeping filled my ears and irked me until I realized it matched the rhythm of my heart. “Wh...where am I?” I croaked, thirsty and exhausted. It was hard to keep my mind from sinking back, but fear of losing consciousness kept me afloat.

Sudden movement in the chair that was in a corner of the room that I could not see without moving my throbbing head, sounded. The scratching of wooden legs against the hardwood floor made me wince, flashes of ache pouring through my head. “My boy,” the frail voice called. I almost mistook it for someone else’s.

“Father?” I rasped. “Water?”

A glass appeared in front of me in his steady hand before I realized he’d crossed the room. I drank a little, just to wet my tongue, and sighed, blinking up at Father. “Where is he? Where is Austin?” I remembered his body lying over mine. I remembered the limpness and the weight. The images came like bursts of pain.

“Don’t speak,” Father said urgently. “You’re exhausted. You’re confused.”

The room went out of focus briefly. “Wh-where is he?” I demanded.

“Resting,” Father said shortly, firmly. “As should you.”

“He’s...alive?” I asked, dread in my voice clueing me in to how utterly terrified I had been until this moment.

“The vest saved him,” Father said. “He was lucky. You all were.”

I put the pieces together as panic faded away and I sank back into sleep. Heat spread through me as I drifted deeper asleep with the knowledge of his safety. The vest. Everyone’s luck. It roamed through my mind as I slept, all my other thoughts escaping from my grasp.

What had happened to me? Why wasn’t I able to think?

“Is he gonna be alright?” someone asked.

The rest fell off and I heard nothing more.

When I finally opened my eyes again, there was another familiar face near me. Albie sat by my bed, whispering something to his girlfriend, Megan, and quickly cut the phone call off when I cleared my throat. “Albie?” I asked a moment after he had hung up.

“Buddy,” he said, almost patronizingly, but I ignored it for the worry in his eyes.

“What the hell happened?” I demanded. “Where’s Austin?”

Albie shook his head. “You gotta take it slowly. You’re still drowsy, Luca.”

“Tell me,” I growled.

He blew out a breath of air. “You were right, brother. I had made a terrible mistake in judging Miller. I’d provoked him, but I never thought he’d come after you.”

My heart flickered with anxiety.

“I’m sorry,” Albie said. “I should have listened to you.”

“Where’s Austin?” I asked.

It seemed to offend Albie that I didn’t dwell on his apology. I would find the time to appreciate it when I knew what the hell was happening. “Asleep. He was asking about you, but they gave him meds that knocked him out.”

“Why is he on meds?” I demanded, but my voice was frail and airy.

“Don’t worry,” Albie said firmly. “He’s just bruised is all. A bullet to the vest. It didn’t crack his rib or anything. You couldn’t wish for a better outcome.”

Anger flared in me but my body was so weak and numb that I couldn’t even ball a fucking fist. Putting Austin into a vest and in danger was already such a stretch in the definition of a good outcome. But having him get shot was not good by any means. “Why?” I growled with all the might my body could muster.

Albie snorted. “Beats me. The fucker wouldn’t let us go without him. He, uh, saved your ass.”

The beeping on the heart monitor quickened and heat flushed my face.

Albie shook his head, but a sneaky smile touched the corners of his lips. “Christ, you’re such a romantic fucker.”

I said nothing to that. Whatever he was trying to say, it went out of my mind as soon as it tickled it. But Albie leaned in and took my hand in his, squeezing gently.

“You’ll see him when he’s up,” he assured me.

“What happened to me?” I asked, then. He wasn’t going to give me more information on Austin, that was obvious.

Albie sighed. “I messed up, Luca. They took it seriously and wanted a war over Miller’s land. They weren’t gonna go peacefully. Instead, they found your maid and forced her to take them inside. She had the codes and suited them as a shield. They threatened her into it. Don’t blame her, Luca. It’s entirely my fault.”

I didn’t blame Anna. I remembered her pleas for forgiveness. They had mentioned her son which was enough to send chills through my bones. I would have done the same had someone targeted Austin.

“Ah, they tased you, then drugged you,” Albie said, shaking his head regretfully.

“Do I remember some...explosion?” I asked. It could have been one of my dreams.

Albie whistled. “The fuckers had you in an arms warehouse. My guys set it on fire to distract them, keep them on their toes.

We barely got out alive.”

I snorted. Was he serious? That was right up the list of the dumbest, riskiest things he’d ever pulled off.

“Miller’s gone,” Albie said expressionlessly. “His guys mostly retreated, but the few loyal fuckers are joining him for tea in hell.” He was almost cruel while he spoke, but I didn’t judge him. The same ones had tried putting a bullet in Austin. Were they not gone already, I would have done the deed myself. “Hey. Dad wants a word.”

My heart sank. I vaguely remembered Father giving me water, if that hadn’t been a dream, too. What I clearly remembered were his words before my life had gone dark.

I had asked him for a leave to exit the family business. I wanted clients of my own and a life that wasn’t a constant danger. I wanted Austin and I wanted a world in which the love of my life wouldn’t know how to put a goddamn bulletproof vest on. But it was already too late for that. He was bruised from a bullet that could have taken his life for the sake of mine. As if my life would be worth living without him. Even if I survived such a thing, I would return to the ghostly shell of a man I had been before I had met him.

Albie walked away, but paused at the door. “Luca?” he asked. He waited until I returned to the present and looked up at him. “I’m glad you’re alive, brother.” And, after a beat, he added, “I hope you’ll forgive me.”

I would. When I saw Austin, I would forgive him. When I made sure my love was whole and well, I would forgive him.

Though I didn't blame him for this. He hadn't known how far some men could go.

Father entered my room in what felt like a heartbeat, but also hours. My sense of time was all wrong and the pulled blinds on the window were no help at all in determining what time of day it even was.

"Luca?" he rasped, hurrying to sit next to me. "Your young man is recovering well," he assured me.

In an instant, I found myself delighted that Father had said those exact words. "Still sleeping?"

"On and off," Father said, lowering himself in the chair by my bed. "I..." He fumbled for words, then steeled himself like I had seen him do when issuing the darkest of orders. "Son, I need to beg you to forgive me. I thought I lost you forever. I thought this guilt would take me to my grave soon after you."

My lips sealed and pursed. The pain on his weary face and in his sunken eyes was evident even in the subdued lights of my bedroom. "Father..."

He lifted his hand to stop me. "I need to say this. I thought we needed you to protect us, Son. I thought Albie needed you when he took over, one day. But I was wrong. I...was so terribly wrong. You've given us all of yourself and I will never be able to repay the debt, Luca. It's the family's turn to protect you. To protect the life you wish to build."

I opened my mouth, then closed it.

“Because...you are my son, Luca. You’ve never been anything less.” Father’s words rang in my ears and I swallowed, buying myself a moment to think.

“Are you...letting me go?” I whispered.

“I never should have pulled you into this mess in the first place, Luca,” Father said. “And if it’s your wish to leave and build a different life, the family will support you. This I swear.”

Tears blurred my vision and waves of warmth rose in my chest. Father jumped up and leaned in to hug me for what felt like the first time in a decade. Still, as he let go, desperation crept into my voice when I asked: “Can I see him?”

“Of course, my boy,” he said and helped me be rid of the heart monitor’s pinch on my finger as well as the many layers of blankets that had been piled on me.

It was Father who held my arm and helped me out of the bed. The room was spinning and dizziness threatened to collapse me onto Father as he led me to the door. It was only when the door flew open that I saw Albie and Jack pacing the hallway. Jack ran up and grinned at me, giving me support on the other side. “Jesus, it’s good to see you kicking.”

“I’m not that easy to get rid of,” I said, meeting Jack’s grin with one of my own.

“I guess I know where we’re taking you,” Jack said, smiling a little more softly.

I didn’t say anything, but my grip on my old pal tightened.

“He was a real hero,” Jack whispered as he and my father left me in front of Anthony’s door. It hadn’t been Anthony’s room in ages, since he’d left the city, but I had never gotten that through to my head. “Good luck, bud.” With that, Jack turned the knob and the door swung open.

The room was much better lit than mine, not least because there was morning sunlight pouring in. I had no clue what day it was, but curiosity faded from me, too, as soon as I looked at my beautiful Austin.

His dark curls were tousled and sticking to his brow. The sweater he wore was mine, from a long, long time ago when I had been closer to his size. The sweatpants were Anthony’s and were a little loose to give him comfort as he slept. The blanket that had covered him was wrenched and tangled between his legs.

My messy sleeper, I thought and couldn’t resist smiling.

His chest was rising and falling steadily and he gave a tiny snore as I sat at the edge of the bed. My mind cleared a little as my attention focused on him. Incapable of resisting it, I placed my hand on his tousled hair and stroked it gently. “You crazy thing,” I whispered. “I was never so scared as I was in this endless night.” Though it might have been ten nights for all I knew, I saw it as one long, borderless thing of despair.

Austin inhaled a little sharper. “Luca?” he murmured.

“Hey,” I whispered softly. “I’m right here.”

Austin opened his eyes heavily, then blinked. “Fuck. The hell did they give me?”

I chuckled at the confused, smiley expression on his face. “I don’t know but I’ll ask for some, too.”

“Ah...I think you’ve been drugged enough,” he said softly. His voice was a little detached and distant, like he was floating above the bed or lounging in sunlight. “How are you?”

“Me? I’m all better now.” I stroked his hair again, then brushed his cheek with the back of my index finger. My other hand closed over his, then circled it until our fingers twined. I lifted his hand and kissed the back of it. “Maybe I dreamed it. Maybe it was wishful thinking. Or, maybe, it was the guilt that I hadn’t done it when I should have. But...I think you told me...” I didn’t know how to shape these words to be their most perfect selves. “You said...” I struggled a little more until Austin’s gaze met mine and his attention sharpened. His pretty eyebrows curved a little in expectation. “Austin, I should have told you right away. I should have said it the moment I knew it was true. I...I love you. I love you, Austin.”

His curly lips stretched and his entire face lit up. “I love you, too, Luca. I love you so fucking much.”

Effortlessly, my arms slid around him and I held him tightly, whispering against his chest how much I feared for him and how much I loved him. The dam that had held these words behind it broke now. They poured out of me as I told him everything that had gone through my feverish mind. I told him

what I had hoped against all odds and how I had never wanted him to end up in this mess. And I told him I was free of it all.

“All I want,” I said at last. “All I want is you. I just want to take you away somewhere safe and have you so long as I breathe. And...I’m free. I’m free to do that, Austin.” I kissed his hand again, then each fingertip before looking into his eyes. “I never knew how much I needed you until I feared I had lost you. And I should have told you right then, because I almost lost you again to senseless violence.” I inhaled. “Never again. We’ll never again be in danger, I swear.”

“Luca,” he said softly, reaching over to caress my cheek. “You’re worth every danger there is.”

So was he. But I would spend the rest of my life protecting him for it. “I love you, baby boy,” I said.

“I love you, too,” he said and pulled me in.

My lips touched his and heat ignited between us. I kissed him deeply, recovering as I did so. No IV or drug or rest could do what kissing the love of my life did. So I kissed him again and again, hot tears of joy streaming down my cheeks.

I held him firmly and kissed him, savoring this moment before we returned to the real world and faced all the shit that had gone down. The trauma that was inevitable would haunt us, I was sure, but I would stand by Austin’s side and help him through it. As he had been by my side when I needed him the most.

Epilogue



EIGHTEEN MONTHS LATER

Far below the quaint cottage, waves were licking the shores, sending their soft and alluring murmurs up to the backyard.

We had been swimming for half a day, floating on our backs, letting the sunshine kiss our cheeks.

“Italy,” Luca had said a long while ago. “We have to go to Italy.”

It was only now that I saw why we hadn't had a choice. It was, put simply, heaven. It was what we needed to heal at long last and leave the past behind. Not that we would stay here forever. We couldn't.

I had my life in New York. Or, to be more precise, I had a life to build from scratch in New York. And Luca had his *Rainbow Hearts* organization to captain at long last. A dream he had dreamed quietly all along.

As he distanced himself from his family's darker side, with occasional help at the cleaning job everyone was committed to, Luca had decided it was time for him to attach his name to the project he had created years earlier, just after college. It was taking off and Luca no longer needed to watch from the shadows, afraid that his name would taint it if he touched it.

And I... Well, I was searching for myself at long last. After years of giving myself to all that my survival had required, I finally no longer needed to worry if Maddy and I would starve or be evicted. Instead, I was looking for myself. And as I did, I discovered that I was eternally bound to Luca. There was no Austin without Luca, or the other way around.

He was half of my soul.

I glanced over at Luca, who lounged in the open sunshine on one wooden lounge chair. He wore a pair of swimming shorts, a size too small, and dark sunglasses above his grin.

"What's up?" I asked.

Luca kept looking at his phone, still smiling cheekily. “When we return, there’s be a new piece hanging in the penthouse.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” I snorted. “Another one?”

“Yep,” Luca said cheerfully. “Listen, this one is costing me a fortune. It’s massive.”

“Massive, is it?” I asked, dreading the return to his Upper East Side apartment. “Where will you put it?”

“Bedroom, I think,” he said. “Above the bed, most likely. It’s the only bare wall that can hold it.”

“I don’t believe you,” I said, then accepted the phone he was handing to me. On the screen was a photo of Levi’s latest creation. Made from ten separate sketching sessions and studies during last winter, Levi had painted my very explicit portrait on a huge canvas. Luca wasn’t kidding. This thing was six feet wide and nearly four feet tall. I knew the size because the photo included the canvas set on the floor of Levi’s little studio and Parrish sprawling in front of it, thankfully fully clothed, mimicking my pose.

I snorted and shook my head, giving Luca the phone back. “What is this obsession with portraits?” I asked. So far, there was a small portrait hanging in the living room, straight across from the elevator so that all guests first looked at my nude figure sitting on a wooden chair, one leg folded under my butt, and my dick and balls hanging for all to admire. Another two were in Luca’s office, one of which was an abstract sketch for

which Luca claimed was definitely me with an erection although I only saw a bunch of lines and shadows.

“Maybe I just like looking at you,” Luca said.

“So you need four nudes?” I asked.

“Four? You think I’m planning to stop now, my love?” He laughed incredulously.

I hopped onto my feet and stood next to him. If he reached over just a little, he would be able to put his hand on my stomach. A little further, and he could hold my butt. “You know, you could just ask me,” I said seductively.

“Ask?” His voice dropped to the husky purr that did wonderful things to my body. “I think I can merely tell you, my dear.”

I loved it when he was commanding. When he took all control, lust blazed in me like a wildfire. I wheezed briefly and hooked my thumbs inside my swimming shorts. “Or not say a word,” I teased, wiggling my hips as I dragged the shorts down my legs. “If you like looking at me so much, feast your eyes.”

It wasn’t exactly the same as Levi’s portraits. For one, I was already half-hard by the time I stepped out of my shorts and that made one corner of Luca’s lips quirk up. For another, he wasn’t going to stop at just looking. But then again, I didn’t want him to.

So, when Luca took his sunglasses off and threw them somewhere on the glass table, I was left breathless under the

intensity of his blue gaze. He sat up, feet in the grass, his toes meeting mine. His hands touched my hips and he pulled me closer, leaning in until his lips touched the middle of my abdomen.

I shivered all over, skin prickling down my arms and legs. His kisses were like the tip of a fluffy feather, caressing my skin as he lifted himself up and up and up. He reached the middle of my chest before he got up to his feet and kissed me from above, towering over me and opening his lips on mine to slip his tongue inside my mouth.

When he explored me with his hot, wet tongue, my cock swelled completely. There was never a time I wasn't ridiculously attracted to my man. Especially when he exhibited such lack of care in everything else but my body. He didn't give a damn that we were outside in broad daylight. Not that anyone could see us just by passing. The road was far away and the beach access was ours alone. Still, occasional guests walked around. But Luca didn't care. He closed his hand around my rock hard cock and stroked me once firmly, sucking a moan out of my mouth.

I rested my hands on the back of his neck, sliding one through his hair and closing my fist at the top of his head. Holding a fistful of his hair, I pulled him down on me harder, forcing him to kiss me with all he had.

And he didn't mind that one bit. A bulge grew in his shorts and he pressed himself hard against my body. Moving slowly,

we rubbed against one another, torsos sealed together, sliding and grinding against each other.

Luca placed his hands on the top of my back, then slid them firmly down to my butt, cupping my cheeks like I was a plaything and spreading them until I gasped. His handling of my body never failed to leave me panting, begging for more.

“Fuck, Austin, you’re so horny,” he purred over my lips, probably because he felt me throb against his bare leg.

His perfect, chiseled torso was my favorite place in the world. I loved resting my head on his chest at night and looking up at it from below, when I knelt for him. I loved feeling it on me and under my hands. I loved licking the sea salt off of it after a long swim.

Now, I took charge ever so briefly, jerking back from Luca just enough so I could lower my head and suck his nipple for a moment or two. Then, slowly, I slid to my knees and yanked his shorts down. They were tight and wouldn’t drag over his hard cock, but that didn’t stop me from pulling, just to see him wince in torment.

Luca swatted my hand away and pushed his inside the shorts, stroking himself once before helping me pull his shorts over his cock. They dropped around his ankles and he stepped out of them, but my entire focus was locking onto his hard, long cock.

My heart skipped a beat, as it always did, and I licked my lips. Drawing saliva to my tongue, I opened my mouth wide and pushed Luca’s hand away so I could hold him in mine.

Stroking his lower half, I wrapped my lips tightly around the head of his dick and savored the sea saltiness mixed with his natural scent.

Nearly two years of blazing lust for one another and the flames never waned. They only grew hotter every day. And this summer, weeks upon weeks of us being alone and gorging on each other's bodies, never once made me feel like we'd done it all. With him, it was always new. The only change with time that happened was each of us discovering the other one's deep pleasures and quirks of our bodies. He knew how to twist his hand just right to make me yelp while his fingers filled me. And I knew exactly how to use the tip of my tongue, circling his slit and rim of the head of his cock to make him hold his breath.

Luca sucked a breath of air between his teeth and throbbed in my mouth when I lowered myself down his length. He reached back against my throat, holding himself still and throbbing until the wave of emotions passed and he calmed enough to fuck my mouth with a steady intensity.

We knew one another's core. We knew each other's secrets and kinks. There was nothing that separated us at all.

He knew how little I minded getting down and dirty for him; and I knew how much he loved filling my mouth, then looking at the evidence of his work.

Saliva tickled me when it poured out the corners of my mouth and wet my chin.

He also loved the surprised expression in my eyes whenever he did something sudden. Like now. Luca grabbed a fistful of my hair and jerked me back so that I lifted my chin. He pushed himself to the tips of his toes and fucked my mouth from above, sliding into me straight as a spear.

A choking sound burst through my throat, my eyes wide and fixed on his determined expression. He loved it when I submitted to his whims and I craved to be taken like this.

And when Luca pulled his cock out, I gasped for air and nearly choked on saliva. It dripped from his length when he rested it against my face, bringing my mouth to his thick, heavy balls and grinding his cock against my cheek.

Oh, the filth of it excited me enough that I could feel the tingling of the trickle of precum that dripped down my cock. His use of my body never failed to leave me gasping, shivering with wanting. I was so hard that the sharpness of the sensation left me dizzy.

“If you don’t fuck me right now, I’m going to pass out,” I whimpered, herding my hips while on my knees as if that could even begin to scratch the itch that was far deeper inside of me. It was not just an itch for the explosive orgasm that my time with Luca promised. It was the need for unity of our bodies; I needed his arms tightly wrapped around my torso and I needed him to ram me bare and fill me with his cum. It was the closest we could be and I accepted nothing less than that.

Luca moved behind me and lowered himself to his knees. “Lie there, pretty boy,” he purred and moved me forward so I

lay over the wooden lounge, sun kissing my back and Luca leaning in to lick and suck and wet me for action.

I dug my fingernails into the wood of the lounge and moaned, lifting my head toward the clear blue sky. Not a whip of clouds tainted it and I gazed, my soul leaving my body as Luca worked me into a disintegrating mess of sensations. All I was were splashing, mixing feelings. Gratitude that we were alive and excitement at the prospect of spending the rest of my life like this empowered me, inflated my chest, and enforced my moans.

I pushed my body back against him and Luca sank his fingers into my waist, pulling me against his mouth and nose as he probed my hole with his sinful tongue.

And in sins, too, we were perfectly matched. A former escort and a former cleaner, we carried burdens of the past that weren't easily erased. But we each lifted the other one's weight a little and living with them was lighter every day.

Luca's open palms met my thick butt with a loud slap, followed by my whimper and moans over the soothing massage he provided. Again, he spanked me hard, making me tense all my muscles and cry out, only to caress the warmed skin and grind my cheeks together, then pull them apart. And when he let his index finger circle my rim, I purred against my will.

I thrust my butt back, needy for his touch, and buried my head in the fold of my arm.

Luca set his left hand on the back of my neck and applied pressure on the index finger of his right hand. Gently, he broke into me, sliding his finger deeper until my reflexes made me tense and tighten around him. It stopped him instantly and I let myself relax. It was effortless; I took him every chance we had. We made love every day, as if the summer breeze carried us far from the real world and lulled us into the security of the sun's warmth and nature's sweet scents. We lived in the land of dreams this summer.

Luca pulled his finger back, making me moan with satisfaction, before spearing me harder. He spat on my rim and applied pressure on his middle finger, joining forces in stretching me for his cock. And even so, he never failed to make me lose myself in the sensations of foreplay. He found the spot of my pleasure and touched it repeatedly, then lowered the intensity and purposefully stopped edging me for a few heartbeats before surging with all his might and making me want to scream with joy.

Sliding his hand into the beach bag, he pulled out a small bottle of lube from a side pocket, still fingering me persistently. He let drops of lube fall down his length as I watched over my shoulder, moaning and panting, then stroked himself briefly before skillfully replacing his fingers with his dick.

My torso lifted with swiftness when he buried himself inside of me and grunted.

“Fuck,” I hissed. “Yes.” My words were clipped, voice strained. I didn’t want to be bothered with trivial things such as speech. I wanted to feel him inside of me, to feel his thickness fill me.

Three slow, careful swings of his body was all it took for Luca to settle inside of me, nearly all the way in. And I thought, faintly, how practice made perfect. We’d shaped ourselves to fit the other one in every way imaginable. My body accepted him like it accepted no other. My soul merged with his as he pulled me up and wrapped his arms around me. His breath licked my neck as he leaned in and bit my ear.

Everything in me tingled madly as I thrust my hips at him and curved my lower back. A throbbing heartbeat later, Luca charged. He impaled me with his length until I felt myself slide down him all the way, my butt grinding against his groin.

I wiggled my arms and grabbed my cheeks, spreading them for him in hopes of just another fraction of an inch, and getting a little more than that. He buried himself ferociously inside of me, whispering how he liked me filthy and telling me how much he loved me.

I panted, professing love in murmurs as he took me to the heavens and back.

Our passion was such that it seared away every impurity. Every past sin and the darkness of our souls melted like rocks into lava. They faded and slipped away before the intensity of the love I had for Luca.

I panted, reaching in front with my right hand as Luca's pace increased. I held myself in my fist firmly, sliding through it with the jerks of my body as Luca rammed me. Slowly, steadily, I climbed the peak of our passion and felt that sweet temptation to let go.

"You beautiful, filthy boy," Luca purred into my ear. "Will you come for me?"

"Yes," I choked, sliding my fist over my cock in a tight grip.

"Come for me, sweet boy," he commanded. "And I'll fill your ass. I'll make you drip."

The words buzzed and echoed in my ears as I threw myself over the edge willingly, flying as my body flickered like a speck of light in a blizzard. It tensed all over and I somehow experienced it both from within, as nothing more than a cacophony of physical sensations, and from without, as something that transcended my human form.

Somehow, Luca tightened his grip on my torso, ramming me harder and persistently massaging my prostate as I fucked my fist and spilled over the back of my fingers. Spent and exhausted, I held my breath, tightening myself around him and feeling him speed up toward his climax.

As he promised, exclaiming the sort of love that was never going to waver, Luca came inside of me. His cock throbbed and filled me until the sound of our sex grew slick, the slaps of bodies that smashed against one another had the wet quality of a mess freshly made. It ignited such love in me for the unity of our minds that I wished he would never stop. Each thrust of

his dick inside of me sent explosions of tingles right into my toes and to the tips of my fingers. My eyes rolled back in my head and a cry erupted from my throat as Luca pushed himself in all the way, then held fast.

We were stuck in this position of pure ecstasy where sighs said more than millions of words ever could. Cut short, strained, our breaths were echoes of the joy we could only ever discover when we were united.

And while our bodies found the release and we parted minutes later to lie on the lounge with arms around one another, our souls didn't. They remained tangled, unknowing where one ended and the other began. The flames of lust may have waned after sex, but the embers never stopped glowing. All it took was a gust of wind to make them roar back to life.

Luca moved his fingers over my face, feeling as much as looking at me. "I never thought I'd be so lucky," he mused lazily. He was always like that afterwards. Tranquil, not minding that he was positioned on the lounge under my weight and that his body was starting to hurt. I could tell it better than he himself could.

"You think you're the lucky one," I said with humor in my voice. "When I met you, I'd already accepted I would never have this."

"And here we are," he whispered, then kissed me blissfully.

Later, still caressing me with one hand, he looked into my eyes. "I was thinking, when we go back to New York, maybe you could, ah, I dunno...spend more time at my place?"

My ears perked up. “Are you asking me to move in with you?”

“Ah, maybe. Move in. Stay longer when you do. Whatever you’d like.” He was suddenly as awkward as a teenage boy asking his secret crush to a school dance.

I squinted. “I’m already there six and a half days out of the week.”

He laughed at that. “Yeah, but you still only have a drawer and less than half a closet. I was imagining something a little more permanent.” He examined my expression, then screwed his lips to one side. “Or maybe that’s too much?”

I laughed out loud. “God, Luca, I would love to make it more permanent.”

“You would?” he asked, eyebrows rising quickly before he cleared his throat. “I mean, yes, you would. Of course.”

“Of course,” I agreed. “I’m all yours, you know that? And if you’re ready to make me officially live up in the clouds with you, I’ll gladly make it official.”

He grinned. It was, in essence, a symbolic gesture on his part. I spent most of my time with him, anyway. And now that my nights were promised to my boyfriend, rather than random clients of the upper echelons, my social life was also abuzz. Maddy, who was completing her transition like a gorgeous butterfly, was fast becoming the animator of the group. She truly became herself with the cheerfulness I hadn’t seen in her since the early childhood we had shared.

Maddy, Parrish, Levi, and the two of us saw each other often. At times, Jack joined the outings, although he was as busy as ever, even if he was striving to find the balance. It was odd to think that Luca's best friend was a former client. It took true mental effort to remember it as real; he was a dear friend to such a point that I forgot the bored millionaire I had known before.

“What is it?” Luca asked.

“Huh?”

“You're grinning,” he said.

Just then, I felt my muscles burn from the duration of this smile. I hadn't even realized. “Oh, it's just...” I looked into his blue eyes. How had I ever thought of them as cold? “You make me incredibly happy.”

He grinned at that, cocking his head a little. “And you know what? I'll try even harder tomorrow.”

I leaned in and kissed him as the sun slowly moved toward the horizon. Its golden glow aged and turned orange. But the kiss we shared was brighter than that.

I knew he meant what he said.

And I vowed silently that I would do the same.

I loved him.

There was no end in sight to that love.

The End

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GAY. SWEET. STEAMY.

Hayden Hall writes MM romance novels. He is a boyfriend, a globetrotter, and an avid romance reader.

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His stories are sweet with just the right amount of naughty. You can learn more about Hayden by visiting haydenhallwrites.com.