

A man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a dark suit jacket over a light-colored shirt, looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is dark with some faint, out-of-focus lights.

DANGEROUS
LOVE

Twisted
Truths

KELLY MYERS

TWISTED TRUTHS

DANGEROUS LOVE

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PROLOGUE

MICHELLE

“I really don’t like you,” I said, even as I was busy unbuttoning his shirt.

Tomasso grinned and kissed my neck, his lips soft and warm. The touch sent shivers up my spine, but I tried to ignore it.

“I’ll grow on you,” he teased.

I tried to frown, but the way his lips moved along my jawline before they claimed my mouth was too distracting. I pushed his shirt off his shoulders then down his back and didn’t waste any time running my hands along the smooth, hard planes of his chest.

His hands were busy, too, and in no time, he’d lifted my dress over my head so that I stood before him in just my bra and panties.

He stood back, his hands planted on my shoulders as if to hold me in place, and looked at me. His eyes traveled from the top of my head down to my toes and back up again.

“Beautiful,” he breathed.

Tomasso pulled me into his arms and then started moving forward, which had me walking backward until my butt ran up against a table.

We were in Italy, at my best friend Tiffany’s wedding of all places, and I’d gone into the wine cellar to grab some more

wine when Tomasso had shown up. He'd had the same idea, apparently.

I didn't really like him though. When Tiffany had been shot, her now husband Paolo had swept her away to Italy to recover while they looked for the guy who'd shot her. I was frantic with worry and went to Tomasso, begged him to get a hold of Paolo so I could talk to Tiffany, but he wouldn't do it.

Why then, was I here now making out with him? He was hot, that was for sure. With his short black hair and piercing blue eyes, I was sure every woman who saw him practically lifted their skirts for him.

I had thought I was better than that. More controlled and sophisticated. But apparently not. I didn't even try to stop him or put up a single protest when his fingers dipped inside my panties and started stroking my intimate folds.

And just like that, I was undone.

We had sex on the table surrounded by vintage wines while Tiffany and Paolo's wedding celebration continued on without us.

I hated to admit it, but it was the best sex I'd ever had. Not that I'd had much, but still, it was not something I'd soon forget. As arrogant and bossy as Tomasso could be, he was sweet and attentive. He prioritized my pleasure and made sure I had two orgasms before he sought his own release.

And when we were through, he held me for several moments. Even after we caught our breath, he continued to hold me so that my face was pressed against his chest and I could smell the deep woody scent of his cologne.

The unmistakable creak of the wine cellar door being opened ended our impromptu sexathon. Tomasso rose quickly and handed me my dress, then grabbed his clothes and hid behind several barrels of wine.

I don't think I'd ever dressed as fast in my life, but I was finished in a hot second and shot a glance in Tomasso's direction. He grinned and blew a kiss my way then pointed

toward the door. I took that to mean I was to leave first and he'd follow later.

I never found out who had come to the cellar, or if they even ventured inside. I joined the party, laughing and making small talk with other guests, then hugged Tiffany goodbye so she could go join Paolo, who was waiting for her by a limo.

I kept an eye out for Tomasso, wanting to see him again. Maybe we could pick up where we'd left off when we returned to the states. But when I did see him, my heart dropped to my toes.

He was walking with his arm around another woman.

TOMASSO

Man, Michelle was one hot mama!

I watched her leave the wine cellar and grinned. I'd had quick rolls in the hay, so to speak, before with women I'd barely known, but nothing like this. This was the best sex I'd ever had. And that was saying something.

I waited several minutes before I left the cellar, making sure to grab a crate of wine bottles on my way out, but I never saw anyone go inside. I wasn't sure if a gust of wind blew the door open or if someone decided not to go in after all, but I was confident Michelle and I hadn't been seen.

The party was starting to wind down. I'd barely made it out to send Paolo off as he and Tiffany left to begin their honeymoon.

I saw Michelle hugging Tiffany and couldn't help the smile that stretched across my lips. Her long, black hair was a little ruffled and there was a wrinkle on the hem of her dress. I doubted anyone else noticed, but to me, it was a reminder of the pleasure we'd just shared.

My phone vibrated in my pocket and I withdrew it, frowning when I saw the caller. It was Ron Windle, one of the cops on my payroll.

I answered it because I knew he wouldn't be calling me without a good reason. He and his brother Don, both cops, worked in different precincts, but were also my informants and fixed things when they needed fixing.

"Hey Tomasso," Ron said by way of greeting. "You're at the Barone's wedding in Italy, right?"

I frowned but nodded. "Yeah."

"My sister, Sonya, is there," Ron rushed out to say. "I don't know how she wrangled an invitation. Maybe she talked one of the guests into taking her, but anyway, she just called me and she's drunk out of her mind.

"Can you do me a favor and check on her? Make sure she doesn't do anything stupid and finds her way home?"

Babysit a drunk girl? Not my idea of fun. Especially when I wanted to get Michelle alone again and see if we couldn't continue where we'd left off.

But Ron and Don were good informants for me, and they'd gotten us out of a couple of sticky situations, so I couldn't turn down the request.

"Sure," I answered. "What does she look like?"

"She's tall, has short red hair, and green eyes," Ron answered. "Oh, and her last name is Sanchez, not Windle. She had a brief marriage a couple years ago and kept her married name after the divorce."

I promised I'd find her and put my phone back in my pocket. For a long minute, though, I watched Michelle with a smile. Not only was she gorgeous, a former model-turned-nurse from what Tiffany told me, but she was funny and full of spirit too.

Speaking of spirit, a woman matching Sonya's description walked by in front of me. I immediately saw why Ron was concerned. She was wobbling and in danger of knocking dishes off the outdoor tables.

I made my way over to her and put my arm around her shoulders as if we were long-lost friends. "Hi Sonya," I said

with a grin.

She looked up and blinked green eyes at me. A second later, she smiled as if she knew me and grabbed the front of my shirt.

“Hi, handsome!” she exclaimed, her voice slurred. “Don’t you just look good enough to eat?” She leaned up and planted a sloppy kiss on my lips.

I jerked away from the kiss and steered her toward the house and got her settled into one of the guest rooms where she passed out almost immediately.

I went back outside and looked for Michelle. When I finally found her, she was getting into a limo. I waved to get her attention, but she scowled at me and flipped her middle finger, then got in the car and they drove away.

MICHELLE

THREE YEARS LATER

“It’s been three years.”

“Three years?” I parroted to Tiffany who was looking at me with a smug expression.

“Since you and Tomasso,” she said, jerking her head in Tomasso’s direction, where I had been looking before her words had pulled my attention away. “Why haven’t you guys buried the hatchet?”

“He’s an ass,” I answered quickly.

I knew how long it’d been since Tomasso and I had sex during Tiffany’s wedding celebration in Italy. I thought about that day often, even though I hated myself for doing so. But I couldn’t help it. There was just something about that damn man.

I had been ready to try a relationship with him. Until I’d seen him with his arm around that red-headed chick. Not even an hour after he’d been in my arms, giving me the best orgasms of my life, he’d had his arm wrapped around another woman!

Even though Tiffany was my best friend, I never told her the real reason why I hated him so much. Not that I didn’t trust her. It was just too embarrassing. I couldn’t tell her how I’d been so stupid, how I’d been dumped in just an hour.

Unfortunately, my luck with men had never been that great. I hadn’t had many relationships, but all of them had ended on a bad note. None of my exes were still my friends,

unlike many women I knew who still remained good friends with some of the guys after they'd broken up.

So what was wrong with me? Why did guys seem to use me and move on to their next conquest? Until Tomasso, I didn't make a habit of sleeping with a guy so soon. In fact, he was the first guy I'd ever done that with.

All my other relationships – all two of them – I'd made the guy wait for at least a couple of months before hopping into bed – or on a table – with them.

But there had been something about Tomasso. Something that drew me to him like no man ever had before.

I turned my head, my eyes searching him out. He sat eating finger sandwiches. A small smile played across his lips as he watched Paolo and Tiffany's little girl Tammy run around laughing and playing. It was her second birthday party, and this was the first time since that fateful day that I'd had to spend time around Tomasso.

And it was damn uncomfortable.

He looked good though. I almost snorted out loud. That was never a problem. The stupid ass always looked good.

Tiffany's sudden indrawn of breath caused me to jerk my head back in her direction. She was smiling, her hand on her stomach. She assured me she was fine; the baby was just being active.

I nodded. "Does Paolo know yet?" I asked. I didn't need to explain what I meant. Tiffany understood I was talking about the fact that they were having twins and Paolo had no clue. Poor bastard.

Tiffany shook her head and we both laughed. I stood from my chair and cast another look in Tomasso's direction before excusing myself to go to the bathroom.

I needed some alone time. Being around Tomasso for so long today was nerve wracking. I'd spent the last three years doing everything I could to avoid him, but there was no way I was going to miss Tammy's birthday party, even though I knew he'd likely attend too.

In the bathroom, I spent a few minutes freshening up. I'd told Tiffany earlier that the problem with Tomasso was because he's mafia. And that was true, for the most part.

I'd known he was mafia when we'd had sex, and though I'd had my reservations, I'd been willing to give it a try.

But not now.

Not after seeing how much of a player he was. It was actually a good thing I'd seen him with his arm around that red head. It had brought things back into perspective for me.

Tiffany had lucked out with Paolo; he'd already been wanting to get out of the business. But Tomasso? No, he seemed to enjoy it too much. The power, the danger. And the women.

I scowled at my reflection in the bathroom mirror. It was obvious he really loved the women part. I'd known he was a player from the first time I set eyes on him, so I shouldn't have been surprised that he took what I'd offered and moved on to the next willing woman.

I put a hand over my stomach, feeling sick at the thought of allowing myself to be used so easily. I took a deep breath and pinched my cheeks to add a bit of natural color to them, smoothed the skirt of my yellow sundress, and left the bathroom.

This was supposed to be a birthday party for Tammy, not a pity party for Michelle. I had to suck it up and pretend like everything was peachy.

I walked through the house and then outside.

"I'm in labor."

My eyebrows shot up on my forehead at Tiffany's words. "You're in labor?" I said, aghast. "Like, right now?"

A flurry of activity happened then. Tiffany called for her Aunt Shirley while Paolo rushed to get their car. I stood there, uncertain what to do. I watched as Tiffany, Paolo, and Aunt Shirley raced to the car, Tiffany moving just a little slower with her hand firmly placed over her belly.

I looked at Tomasso who was watching with open-mouthed surprise, then at Tammy who was watching her parents with confusion.

“Michelle, Tomasso,” Tiffany called out, looking over her shoulder at us. “You two are in charge of Tammy until we get back.”

“Wait, what?” I called back, but I didn’t think they heard me. A few seconds later, they were in the car and driving off toward the hospital.

I walked over to Tammy and picked her up. “It’s okay. Mommy and Daddy will be back soon,” I said and shot a look at Tomasso.

He still stood there with a half-eaten sandwich in his hand, looking dumbstruck. I set Tammy on the ground. “Why don’t you go over to Uncle Tomasso and give him a big kiss. He looks lonely.”

Tammy grinned and ran on her chubby legs over to Tomasso. Seeing the little girl helped to bring him out of his stupor and he leaned down so Tammy could give him a sloppy kiss on the cheek.

I walked over to the table and started cleaning it off, stacking dishes and covering food containers.

“Here,” Tomasso said, as he walked toward me. “Let me help you with that.”

“I’ve got it,” I grouched. “Besides, someone has to keep an eye on Tammy. You can help by doing that while I put everything away.”

“Michelle,” he said, his tone almost pleading, but I hurried away toward the house. I didn’t want to talk to him. I didn’t want to hear what he had to say.

While I rinsed the dishes and put them in the sink, I kept looking out the window where I could see Tomasso and Tammy playing.

Once everything was put away, I had no other choice but to go outside. Tomasso was on the phone when I reached him.

He looked at me and shook his head before disconnecting the call.

“Sorry Michelle. I have to leave.”

I gaped at him. He was leaving me? Again? “Are you serious?” I exclaimed.

He nodded even as he retrieved his car keys from his jean pocket and started walking away. “Yeah, sorry. See you later.”

And just like that, he was gone again.

TOMASSO

I couldn't seem to take my eyes off Michelle as she talked to Tiffany. It had been three years since we got together, and I still didn't know what had happened to make her so mad at me.

I had thought we'd connected and had a shot at something special. Maybe as great as Paolo and Tiffany, but for whatever reason, Michelle had gotten pissed at their wedding and she'd taken off.

I got her phone number and called her several times, but she never answered, and she never returned my calls. After a while, I'd given up and started dating Sonya. That was another in a long list of my mistakes.

But at least I *knew* that was a mistake and could own up to it. I had no idea what I did to piss off Michelle. Unless it was because I'm mafia. While it turns some girls on, it scares others.

Throughout Tammy's birthday party I'd cast glances at Michelle, trying to figure out what had gone wrong. Sometimes I'd catch her watching me and I'd feel a sense of satisfaction. She wasn't as immune to me as she pretended to be.

My eyes dropped to her legs, so damn long they seemed to go on for miles. They were tanned and trim and the black high heels she wore made her calf muscles look even more toned. The yellow sundress she wore was perfect for her skin coloring and long, black hair.

My gaze traveled up and I met her eyes. She'd been looking at me too. But she quickly looked away, even raised her nose a little in the air as if I was a bug she'd like to squash under her heel.

I popped a finger sandwich in my mouth and chewed. I didn't really taste it because I was so concentrated on Michelle. I watched her leave Tiffany's side and go into the house. Should I follow her? Was this her subtle way of letting me know she'd be alone?

I blew out my breath in one irritated huff. Wishful thinking, that's what it was. She'd probably scream or throw something at me if I tried to get her alone.

A commotion drew my attention to Tiffany and Paolo just as Michelle walked out of the house. It took me a moment, but I finally realized that Tiffany had just gone into labor.

Holy shit! I was not prepared for this. I stood there, frozen to the spot, wondering what I should be doing. I'd never been around a woman when she went into labor, so this was new territory for me.

Paolo rushed off, probably to get the car, and I turned my attention to Michelle. She looked just as surprised as I felt.

I saw Tiffany say something over her shoulder, but I didn't catch the words. A second later, they were gone and I was left alone with Michelle. And Tammy, I realized when the little girl wobbled past me, her thumb in her mouth as she watched her parents leave.

Michelle picked Tammy up and said a few words then sent her toward me. I watched Michelle closely, unsure how to act with this new development.

Another new territory for me. I always knew how to act around women. I'd never felt this unsure and insecure in my life. Well, maybe as a young boy on my first date. But that was then. Now, I had plenty of experience and women and never felt this confused.

Tammy came up and kissed me on the cheek then toddled away to play with some of her yard toys. Michelle was

clearing the table of the party favors but refused to let me help her when I asked.

“Michelle.” I tried to get her attention. I wanted us to talk and to find out why she was so mad at me, but she rushed away.

I grabbed up Tammy and we started playing while I waited for Michelle to finish and come back outside. My phone rang and I saw Frank, my security manager’s name, popped up.

“Hey, Frank. What’s up?” I answered.

“There’s been a break-in at your house,” he said. “I’ve called the police, but I think you should get over here.”

“On my way,” I said as Michelle walked out.

“Sorry, Michelle. I have to leave.”

She looked shocked and pissed at the same time, but there was nothing I could do about it now. If it was just a tripped alarm, Frank wouldn’t have called me.

I left, knowing I’d managed to piss Michelle off again.

When I got home, there were two police cars and Frank’s truck in my long driveway. The front door was open, and two cops were talking to each other in the doorway. I was surprised neither of them were the Windle brothers. I would have expected them to be here since they were on my payroll.

“We’ve about wrapped everything up, Mr. Greco,” the tallest cop said to me. “We’ll need you to take an inventory of your home and let us know what was stolen and what was damaged. You can contact your insurance agency with the report as well.”

I nodded and shook the officers’ hands. I watched from the porch for a minute as they got into their squad cars and left.

Frank was waiting for me just inside the foyer. He shook his head with a frown. “Someone really did a number on the place.”

I walked further into the house and instantly saw what he meant. “Fuck,” I said, shaking my head. “Was there a hit in my

house that I wasn't aware of?"

Even though the question was rhetorical, Frank shook his head. "Whoever it was, they didn't come here to steal. They came here to destroy."

As I walked past the kitchen area, I grabbed a toothpick out of its holder on the counter and clamped it between my teeth. "You can go home, Frank. I've got this."

Frank nodded and left while I continued walking from room to room, assessing the damage. It didn't look like any piece of furniture, artwork, or dish was left unscathed. The couches, chairs, and even my bed had been slashed through, so that the stuffing was hanging out and scattered across the floor.

Every dish in the kitchen had been pulled out of the cupboards and shattered on the ground. Even my clothes had not escaped damage, most of them torn or cut to pieces.

I walked into my bedroom and stood in the middle of the room, turning in a slow circle. It was going to cost a pretty penny to replace everything.

A noise from the closet drew my attention. I grabbed my gun from the back of my waistband and silently walked over to it.

I jerked the door open, gun aimed in front of me. "What the fuck!" I exclaimed when I saw two wide green eyes surrounded by a mop of red hair staring back at me.

"Sonya? What the fuck are you doing? Did you do all this?" I waved my gun around to indicate all the damage to my home.

She blinked owlishly at me and crawled out of the closet so that she stood before me. She puffed up her lips in a pout that she thought looked cute but which only made her look like a red-headed pufferfish.

"I was angry," she said, trying to sound like a little girl who threw a harmless temper tantrum instead of destroying my house and everything in it. "You forgive me, right?"

I stared at her incredulously. “Get out,” I said through clenched teeth. The toothpick snapped in half, and I spit it out to the side.

Her eyes narrowed. “You don’t want to do that, Tomasso.”

“The hell I don’t,” I snapped. “We’re done. We’ve been done for months. Why can’t you get that through your head?” I took a deep breath and stepped to the side. I pointed at the door and repeated, “Get the fuck out of my house. Now!

“And don’t ever come back. You’re lucky I don’t tell the cops what you’ve done today. Take that gesture as my final gift to you.”

She straightened her shoulders and stood to her full height, which was tall for a woman. “You’ll be sorry for treating me this way, Tomasso. You’ll regret dumping me.”

MICHELLE

The nerve of that jerk! How dare he leave after Tiffany had put both of us in charge of taking care of Tammy.

I watched as he walked away and continued watching as he drove down the long driveway until he was out of sight.

I looked down at Tammy. “Your uncle is a jerk,” I said out loud.

“Jerk,” the child parroted, and I felt guilty. It figured she’d repeat that.

I picked her up and took her into the house. I sat her in her room while I ran a bath, then helped her out of her clothes and into the bathtub.

After I put the seat down on the toilet, I sat there for a while to let Tammy play in the bubbles with her bath toys.

But I was angry. It seemed the man could never stick around, or when he did, he ended up hooking up with another woman right afterwards.

I shook my head and scowled. Why was I even giving the guy this much of my time? I’ve got things to do tonight. I have a date with Dave, and I shouldn’t be thinking about another man.

I looked down at my watch and frowned again. I still had a couple of hours before he was supposed to pick me up at my house. But I didn’t even have my car here. I’d ridden over with Aunt Shirley, and she was at the hospital with Tiffany and Paolo.

I grabbed the phone where I'd set it in my lap and scrolled through my contacts until Dave's name popped up. I sent him a quick message to let him know I might have to cancel, depending on how long before someone could watch Tammy.

“Cold.”

I looked over at Tammy who was shivering in the tub. “I'm sorry, honey. Do you want more warm water or would you like to get out of the tub?”

“Out,” she said and then thrust her tiny arms up in the air, a symbol for me to pick her up.

I grabbed the towel off the rack and helped her stand, then wrapped the cloth around her and pulled her out of the tub.

Once she was dry and dressed in pajamas, I took her into the living room and we settled down on the couch to watch cartoons.

My phone dinged and I grabbed it off the side table to see Dave had responded. “Let me know,” he replied. “I can pick you up.”

Another hour went by and Tammy was sound asleep on my lap. I started to fall asleep too, but then my phone rang. I hurriedly answered without looking at the caller ID so that Tammy hopefully wouldn't be woken up.

“They're here!” Aunt Shirley's voice was loud and excited. I pulled the phone away from my ear with a grimace. “Both boys and mom are doing well.”

I grinned and looked down at Tammy who was still asleep. “Thank you so much for calling and letting me know!”

“Oh, dear, I'm so sorry,” Aunt Shirley said. “I forgot you rode with me. My car is there, but the keys are in my purse with me. I know you want to be here too, and Paolo and Tiffany are asking after Tammy.”

I bit my bottom lip for a moment, then said, “I can call an Uber to take Tammy and I down to the hospital.”

“Oh, I don't want you to have to go to so much trouble,” she argued.

“It’s not a problem,” I insisted.

Once we hung up, I opened my apps and set up an Uber. Because Tiffany and Paolo lived so far outside of town, it was a thirty-minute wait. But that gave me time to get Tammy appropriately dressed and pack some snacks for her.

We were at the hospital within the hour. I asked for Tiffany’s room at the nurses’ desk, then followed her directions and walked down the hall to the third door on the right.

The door was open, but I still knocked before I went inside. Tiffany looked up and smiled. She looked exhausted, but she had that happy glow about her that only new mothers seemed to have.

“Thank you so much for watching Tammy for us, Michelle,” Tiffany said. “And I’m sorry we just sort of bailed on you. Going into labor was totally unexpected.”

I walked over to the side of the bed and gave Tammy to Paolo. He kissed her forehead, and she grinned up at him, then looked at Tiffany with a frown.

“Mommy sick?”

“No, she is just fine,” Paolo answered.

I suddenly started to laugh. Everyone, including Aunt Shirley, looked at me with confusion.

“I just realized,” I said between giggles, “all of your children have the same birthday!”

I guessed it hadn’t occurred to anyone else because their eyes widened and Tiffany started laughing too. “Well, I guess that will make it easier to plan birthday parties,” she said.

“I’m going for some coffee,” Aunt Shirley said as she got up from the chair where she’d been sitting. “Anyone want anything?”

Paolo said he wanted a coffee. “I’m good,” I said, “but I’ll go with you. I want to stop at the nursery and see the babies.”

I followed Aunt Shirley until we reached the nursery.

“There they are, the little darlings,” she said, pointing to two babies wrapped up in blue blankets with “Boy Barone” tags on their cribs.

Aunt Shirley continued to the cafeteria to get coffee while I admired the babies for several moments. They were both sound asleep and looked so adorable. I couldn’t wait to hold them.

I waved at them through the window, even though I knew they couldn’t see me, then made my way back to Tiffany’s room.

Paolo was standing next to the bed, a huge bouquet of balloons in his hand. I walked inside, smiling at Tiffany, who had an odd expression on her face.

It wasn’t until I got in further and saw that behind the balloons was Tomasso that I realized why she was looking at me so oddly.

My smile turned upside down and I sent the man a frown. “Nice of you to show up *now*,” I said.

He smiled at me which made me want to slap that grin right off his face. “Sorry, couldn’t be helped.”

My phone dinged and I dug through my purse to pull it out. “I’m here,” the message read. It was from Dave. I’d messaged him earlier when I got to the hospital and told him he could pick me up there, so apparently he’d wasted no time and had driven right over.

“Third floor, room 304,” I sent back to him, then dropped my phone inside my purse.

“How are you feeling?” I asked Tiffany, ignoring Tomasso. Or at least I tried to. The man was just too good looking to completely ignore. Especially when I felt his eyes on me while I avoided looking at him.

“Tired, but good,” Tiffany answered.

She and Paolo looked between me and Tomasso curiously, but didn’t say anything.

A knock sounded on the door and I turned to see Dave standing there. “Hi Dave. Give me just a minute please.”

“Congratulations,” Dave said with a smile.

I turned around and walked over to the bed to give Tiffany a hug. “Congratulations! I’m so happy for you guys.”

“Hot date, huh?” she said. Although her voice was low, I was sure Tomasso heard because his head whipped around sharply toward the door and he frowned.

“Something like that,” I whispered, hugged her again, then said my goodbyes and walked over to Dave.

“Ready?” I asked and he nodded.

As I left with Dave, I swore I could feel a pair of blue eyes burning through my back.

TOMASSO

Will the woman ever *not* be pissed at me?

Here I was, at the hospital to congratulate Paolo and Tiffany on their new babies, and for some reason Michelle was shooting daggers with her eyes at me.

Was it because I'd left her alone with Tammy? She hadn't given me a chance to explain about the break-in when I'd tried.

Fuck it. I've got to stop obsessing over her. One of these days, I need to sit her down and have a discussion to figure out what really has her all pissed off.

She hugged Tiffany and the two women chatted while I raised my eyebrows at Paolo. "Twins, huh?" I grinned. "And boys at that."

Paolo groaned but he couldn't keep the grin from splitting his face. It was obvious to see he was pleased. And proud.

"I'm sure they'll eat me out of house and home in a few years," Paolo said. "But I promise you this," he said, pointing a finger at me. "They will never, and I mean *never*, be in the business. You got that? Don't even think about trying to recruit them."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "Wouldn't think of it. Besides," I admitted, "I'm kinda thinking about getting out myself."

When Paolo raised his eyebrows in surprise, I nodded and jerked my head in the direction of his wife. "Maybe I'll give

domestic life a try sometime.” I shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s just a thought that pops in my head every now and then.”

“That’s how it starts,” Paolo warned. “Starts off as a tiny grain of sand and before you know it, those thoughts will be a full beach’s worth.”

I opened my mouth to respond but heard a knock on the hospital room door. I frowned at the man standing there, not knowing who he was, but then jerked my head at Michelle when she called the guy by name and said she’d be ready in a minute.

She had a date?

I returned my gaze to the tall man and narrowed my eyes. He wasn’t bad looking, I guess. He looked fit, dressed in a pair of black jeans and red shirt. His short brown hair was styled in the current fashion, but I saw thinning spots around the temples. He’d be bald before he turned forty.

I didn’t like the way he looked at Michelle. I could practically see that lust filled up his brown eyes. I clenched my hands into fists. Fists that wanted to pummel the man’s face in simply because he had a date with Michelle.

Michelle said goodbye to Tiffany and Paolo, then walked by me without even a glance. As she passed, I saw her smile at Dave and I frowned even more.

I’d taken a step after them before I realized it. Not until Paolo reached out and grasped my elbow. I looked back at him over my shoulder and he raised an amused eyebrow at me.

Damn it, what was it about that woman that got me so messed up? Why should I care if she dated someone? It had been three years since we’d had sex. I should be over it by now.

“Been there, done that,” Paolo chuckled and released my arm.

I glared at him, then looked over at Tiffany. Her eyelids drooped low, and she looked like she could barely hold her eyes open anymore.

Paolo noticed, too, and nodded his head toward the door. I followed him out of the room so Tiffany could get some rest.

We didn't talk as we walked to the elevators and got out on the lobby floor. We continued the silent walk until we got outside and around a corner where no ears could hear us.

"Frank sent me a message. Said there was a robbery at your place?" Paolo asked.

I nodded with a grimace. From my front shirt pocket, I withdrew a toothpick and clamped it between my teeth then used my tongue to push it to the side of my mouth.

"It was that crazy bitch, Sonya," I answered with a snarl. "She fucking *destroyed* the place. Every dish, picture, piece of furniture, you name it, she tore it up. I'm lucky I even found a clean shirt that hadn't been ripped to pieces."

"Did you start seeing her again?"

"Hell no," I exclaimed. "I broke it off months ago." I paused to think about it. "Actually, it's been about a year now. But she won't accept that. She keeps calling me and stopping by my house, showing up on dates I'm on, you name it. That chick is one-hundred-percent certified crazy."

"She's an obsessed stalker," Paolo said. "And that makes her dangerous. Did you tell the police?"

"No. I owe that much to her brothers. But I told her if she ever showed her face around me again, I'd let the cops know she was behind it all."

Paolo ran a hand through his hair and looked around the parking lot, a habit from being in the business I guessed.

"What did she say was the reason she ransacked your house?" he asked.

I pushed the toothpick to the other side of my mouth before I responded. "Because she wants me back. She doesn't want to accept that we're broken up."

I shook my head and barked a sarcastic laugh. "As if destroying my house and everything in it would make me want

to get back together with her. It was a mistake in the first place,” I said with self-disgust.

“Because you were crying over Michelle,” Paolo chuckled. “Thought you could work her out of your system with another woman.”

I gave him a dirty look for calling out the obvious that I didn’t even want to admit to myself. “Whatever the reason, it was stupid and now I’m paying the price.”

Paolo sobered and nodded. “Ron and Don Windle may be cops, but we both know they’re dirty,” he said slowly. “They love their little sister and will do anything for her.”

He paused and gave me a meaningful look. “I mean *anything*. I think you’re going to have to watch your back for a while.”

MICHELLE

I was so caught up in my irritation with Tomasso that I hadn't been paying attention to where Dave was taking me. Not until we'd actually pulled up and parked did I realize he'd brought us to none other than *Il Piacere*, Paolo's restaurant where Tomasso also worked as manager.

I'd been avoiding that place as much as possible for the past three years because I didn't want to run into the jerk. And here I was, on a date, going to the restaurant.

My only relief was that I doubted I'd see Tomasso tonight because he was at the hospital with Paolo and Tiffany. I could only hope that he would stay there for a while, or at least not make an appearance tonight.

"I've been looking forward to trying this place," Dave said as he turned the car off and looked over at me with a smile. "I've heard it has the best Italian food."

I only nodded with a smile, not sure what to say. He got out of the car and went around to my side, where he opened it for me then shoved a hand inside to help me get out.

I placed my hand in his and noticed that his palm was clammy. Was he nervous? I wasn't sure whether to feel grossed out or flattered.

As we walked up the walkway to the restaurant, I couldn't help scanning the area to see if Tomasso was around. I felt like an idiot for doing so since we'd only just left him at the hospital, but I couldn't seem to help it.

It was even worse when we got inside. I was stiff as a board as Dave put his hand at my lower back while we followed the hostess to a table. I was starting to get a headache from my eyes moving back and forth looking out for Tomasso.

Dave was being a perfect gentleman. He pulled my chair out for me then took his own across the table. He ordered us a bottle of wine, and although it was a good brand, I was a little peeved he didn't even ask if I liked red or white wine.

I was probably being too picky because my nerves were still frayed from running into Tomasso and then coming to this restaurant.

I took a deep breath and gave Dave my brightest smile.

"Thank you for bringing me here," I said. "I haven't been here in a long time, since not long after it opened."

He raised both eyebrows. "You don't like this restaurant?"

Oh boy. I just realized how I painted myself into a corner. I couldn't tell him the reason I avoided the place without making it more awkward. I tried for something lighter.

"Oh, no, that's not it. The food is great. I've just been busy and haven't really made the time." I paused to take a sip of water that the waitress had just filled. "My best friend, the one who just had the babies, used to sing here. Her husband owns the place."

Dave's eyes widened. Apparently he hadn't known that.

"So, when Tiffany quit working here to spend time on building her blogging business and start a family, I just never found the time to come back."

Good God, I was rambling now. But at least the reason I gave was a plausible one and he seemed to believe it. So, that was one bullet dodged.

As the night wore on, I started to relax. Dave was a nice enough man. Maybe too nice though. He was also pretty dull. Most of our conversation centered around his work. He was an accountant so that wasn't a very interesting topic.

“I’ve been talking most of the night,” Dave said. “Let’s talk about you for a change. How do you like being a nurse?”

I was a bit startled to have the spotlight, so to speak, centered on me. I’d already grown accustomed to letting Dave drone on while I was lost in my own thoughts, planning my outfit for work tomorrow, making a mental checklist for groceries I needed, and so on.

I blinked at him and then smiled. “I love it most of the time,” I answered. “For as long as I can remember I’d always wanted to be a nurse.”

He smiled. “With your looks, you could be a model.”

That was probably the worst thing he – or any other guy – could have said because I worked hard to get where I was. I didn’t just get things because of my looks. “That’s just not for me,” I answered a bit stiffly.

He frowned slightly and cocked his head to the side. “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to insult you.”

Dave looked genuinely sincere so I felt like a jerk for my response. I smiled to take the sting out. “I *was* a model,” I relented. “It paid my way through nursing school.”

“Oh,” he answered as if he wasn’t sure what to say that I wouldn’t take offense at.

This night was going from good to awkward and I had no one to blame but myself. I’d met Dave in the grocery store, and we talked for a while before I agreed to go out with him.

I knew at the time that he was a mellow and somewhat boring guy, but he seemed really nice and I thought he was the kind of guy I needed. No more Tomassos or bad boys for me. They just break your heart and hang you out to dry.

But, while Dave was good looking, he was as exciting as a box of rocks. I didn’t even feel an attraction to him other than to think he was decent looking.

This date was a mistake. The problem was, how did I end it without hurting his feelings? Besides the fact that I was not attracted to him, I was too distracted being in this restaurant.

It turned out I didn't have to do a thing.

“Where's Tomasso?”

The voice was so loud and shrill it drew everyone's attention. It was like nails on a chalkboard and the sound sent shivers crawling up my spine.

Like everyone else, I looked in the direction of that voice. A red-headed woman in a slinky backless red dress had marched into the restaurant and right up to the hostess podium. I frowned slightly. She seemed familiar somehow, but I couldn't place her.

She stood there, hands on hips, one high-heeled shoe tapping impatiently against the carpet.

“I said,” she bellowed now, dragging out the last word, “where is Tomasso? I demand to see him!”

I couldn't hear what the hostess said in return, but this was a good excuse to get out of the restaurant. Apparently, Dave thought so too. He called the waitress over and paid for our dinner and then we left.

Dave gave me a ride home and I very politely refused a goodnight kiss and suggested we remained friends. Once inside my home, I thought back to the woman and wondered who the hell she was and why she looked familiar.

TOMASSO

The engine thrusters were redlining. If she didn't do something fast, they wouldn't have enough power to get out of the meteoroid's path.

She looked out through the main viewer and felt her blood turn to ice. The meteoroid was approaching faster than she'd anticipated.

"Commander? What are your orders?"

I paused with my fingers hovering over the keyboard. Leaning back in my leather chair in my home office, I reread what I'd written, but I wasn't pleased. It wasn't original enough. Meteoroids were common in science fiction works. I needed something different, something that would capture attention.

I sat forward again and deleted what I'd just written, then started typing again.

This was no normal meteor shower.

The rocks, or whatever they were, were vibrant reds, blues, and oranges. And they seemed to have some kind of intelligence. Whichever direction she maneuvered the ship to get it out of the path, the rocks switched course and moved to block them.

I moved the computer mouse and highlighted what I'd just written, but paused with my finger over the delete button. I was always my own worst critic.

Writing sci-fi was my deepest, darkest secret. No one knew about my passion, not even Paolo. I liked to blend a little fantasy into my stories as well. So far, I'd written three books. This was my fourth based on a new series I'd started with a female commander.

It didn't escape my notice that I'd made the female lead to almost exactly resemble Michelle, either. She had the same long, black hair and brown eyes, and she was tall for a female. She was feisty and spunky, but was standoffish with men.

Just like Michelle.

Although this was my fourth book, I hadn't published a single one. I hadn't even tried. I didn't want to put myself out there like that, be so vulnerable. Imagine me, a mafia boss, as a science fiction writer!

I'd probably be laughed out of town. I doubted it would do my boss reputation much good either. Would people even take me seriously if they read my books and knew I was the author?

Someday, maybe I'd grow enough balls to publish and say fuck you to anyone who dared criticize me or think I was weak.

My cell phone rang, jarring me out of my thoughts. I grabbed it off my desk and looked at the caller ID then frowned when I saw Frank's name.

"What's up?" I answered.

"Just got a call from the docks," he said. Frank didn't waste time and always got right to the point. I liked that about him. "Apparently, there's a problem at Lil Jimmy's. The details are a bit hazy, but from what I gather, the owner is refusing to pay his dues and is threatening to call the cops."

"Fuckin' great," I growled into the phone. "Jimmy has never been a problem before, what the hell is going on?"

I could almost see Frank shrug in response. "I don't think it's Jimmy, even though the caller, Don Windle, said so," he said, referring to one of the cop brothers.

“He said he’s trying to convince the man not to call in other cops, but it isn’t going well,” Frank continued. “Windle said the man called him a dirty cop and wants to talk to someone else.”

“Alright, I’ll be down there in a few minutes,” I answered and disconnected the call.

After I saved my draft, I pocketed my cell phone, then opened my desk drawer and retrieved my gun. I tucked it into the back of my pants then walked toward the door and grabbed my jacket off the coat rack.

I shrugged into the jacket as I strode through the house. At the front door, I paused long enough to look through to the living room and the emptiness of it since I hadn’t had a chance to replace everything Sonya had destroyed.

With a frown, I opened the front door, set the alarm, and walked out to the driveway where my Jaguar was parked.

I’d opted for a manual transmission because I like the feeling of being in control. I loved the power this car had, and there was no pause switching between gears. It wanted to go fast just as badly as I did.

I put it into reverse and drove out of the driveway, then changed gears and headed toward the waterfront. It was dark out and a look at the clock showed it was after ten at night, much later than Lil Jimmy ever stayed at his store.

I frowned at that thought. Maybe Frank had been right, and it wasn’t Jimmy who was causing the problem but some other guy.

I could have sent an enforcer to see to the problem, but Jimmy had always been good about paying his dues and never caused any problems, so I wanted to smooth things over myself if necessary.

There wasn’t much traffic as I drove toward the docks. The streetlights were eerie without traffic, their lights casting shadows on the dark street.

Lil Jimmy’s was on the south end of the waterfront, away from the main loading docks. This part of the area was dark

and quiet, and as I pulled up around the back of the store, I only saw one vehicle, which I knew belonged to Don Windle.

Why he wasn't in his police car, I had no idea. Maybe he was trying not to make whoever was upset even more nervous. But then, if the guy already didn't like him because he suspected he was dirty, it probably would have been better had he driven an official car.

I shook my head and parked my jaguar. I didn't see Windle as I got out of my car. In fact, I didn't see anyone. Had the problem already been handled, and if so, why didn't anyone call me?

I walked toward the parked car and squinted, trying to see inside. I was still too far away, and the windows were too dark to see inside.

Then the passenger side door opened and a light went on inside the car as Ron Windle stepped out. A second later, the driver got out; Don Windle. I caught a brief glimpse of Sonya in the backseat, a wide smile stretched across her face, and then both car doors closed and extinguished the inside light.

The hackles on the back of my neck rose in warning. I stopped walking and slowly reached behind my back for my gun while keeping my eyes on the brothers as they rounded the car and walked toward me. They were in street clothes I noticed as well.

"I take it there wasn't a problem at Lil Jimmy's?" I said casually.

"Oh, there's a problem alright," one of the brothers said.

Although they were two years apart, they resembled each other enough that they could be twins. Don, the oldest at 35, was about six foot tall with short red hair. The younger brother at 33, Ron, was about an inch taller with short red hair too, but with blonde streaks. It was the older brother, Don, who I thought had spoken.

"We're tired of answering to you," Ron said. Now that they were a little closer I could tell them apart.

“And you shouldn’t have dumped Sonya like that,” Don added.

Ron nodded. “You ruined her reputation and broke her heart.”

Don’s mouth bowed so low the corners almost touched his chin. “She had to have an abortion because of you, and you wouldn’t even pay for it, you cheap shit.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I demanded, although I kept my voice low. “I haven’t touched Sonya in over a year. If she was pregnant before that, I never knew.”

But the brothers weren’t listening. I saw them pull their guns out in unison, as if their movements had been choreographed. Even as I pulled my own gun from behind my back, I knew I was too late. I heard simultaneous gunshots and felt a searing pain as a bullet found its mark in my flesh.

MICHELLE

“**A**lrighr now. You’re just going to feel a little prick.”

I looked down at the fifteen-year-old boy who was trying to be so brave in front of his mom and older brother. His mouth turned down into a frown even while his blue eyes widened.

“I don’t need a shot,” he argued.

I leaned back and pulled the needle away from his arm. “Shots suck, I know,” I replied. “But you don’t want that to get infected, do you?” I pointed to his foot where he’d been playing in a field and had stepped onto a nail that damn near went through his entire foot.

“I can take antibiotics or put hydrogen peroxide on it,” he insisted.

“What about lockjaw?” I said, using the common term for tetanus. He tightened his jaw stubbornly. “How are you going to kiss your girlfriend if your jaw locks up like this?”

I opened my mouth wide and crossed my eyes. The teenager laughed despite his nervousness, which had been my intention.

“This shot is the only thing to prevent that,” I explained.

The boy thought about it for a minute, then squeezed his eyes shut. “Okay. Do it and get it over with.”

I didn’t hesitate and administered the shot. He winced slightly, but he didn’t make a sound. “You’re all done,” I said. “That wasn’t too bad, was it?”

“It wasn’t too great either,” he scowled, but then smiled at me.

I left that room and walked down the hallway in the emergency room to grab the chart for my next patient. Thankfully, the rush we’d had earlier had slowed down some, so it wasn’t quite as hectic as it was earlier.

I grabbed the chart, looked at the name, and quietly groaned. Mrs. Jenkins again. Even though this was the emergency room, she was a regular patient.

I walked inside the room and right up to the side of the bed to stand over her. “Okay, Mrs. Jenkins, hand it over,” I said, holding my hand out.

She rounded her eyes innocently at me. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

I stood there with raised eyebrows and wiggled my fingers. “Yes, you do. Now hand it over.”

With a long-suffering sigh, Mrs. Jenkins reached under the sheet she’d been given and pulled out a candy bar. But not just any chocolate bar, it was the king-sized version.

I took it from her and then held my hand out again. “The other one too,” I ordered.

She scowled at me but grabbed a bag of M&Ms from the other side of the sheet and threw them at me. I caught them unfazed, walked the candy over to the far counter and set them down, then turned back to her.

“You know that stuff is not good for you,” I admonished. “It only makes your diabetes worse, and if you’re not careful, you’re going to end up really sick.”

“I’ve been taking my insulin and watching my numbers,” she argued.

“But you’re still overdoing it on the sugars,” I said. “That’s why you have to keep coming here.”

I prepped her arm to take a blood sample while we talked. Once that was done, I checked her glucose levels and then shook my head.

“When did you last eat?” I asked, grabbing her chart to make notes. “And what did you eat?”

She bit her bottom lip. “Let’s see. I was at Brenda’s house for a birthday party and we had meat and cheese snacks about three hours ago,” she began. “Then I had some cake before I left about an hour ago.”

I pulled up a chair and sat next to her, placing the chart on my lap. I had a feeling Mrs. Jenkins was a lonely older woman and might be eating extra sugar just to get some attention, but of course I couldn’t ask her that.

“Do you realize how dangerous diabetes can be?” I asked her seriously.

She nodded. “I know, but sometimes I crave sugar so much. Especially chocolate.”

“I know it’s difficult, but that candy bar,” I said, turning to point at the counter where I’d placed her candy bar, “is poison for you. Once in a while won’t hurt, but you really need to watch your sugars.”

Mrs. Jenkins nodded, but I knew giving up the candy wasn’t going to be an easy thing for her, especially if she didn’t want to kick the habit.

“The doctor will be in soon. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

She shook her head and I left to finish my rounds. The rest of my shift went by quickly, but I was practically dead on my feet when I got home.

What I needed now was a long, hot bath. The plan was immediately put into motion when I turned on the faucet and got the water temperature just right, then pulled the stopper to the tub and poured in some bubbles.

I quickly got out of my scrubs, pinned my hair atop my head, and then sank into the water with a grateful sigh.

The water and jasmine aroma helped to relax me and ease my aching muscles, so naturally my brain started concentrating on other things.

Like Dave's text earlier today. He wanted to go out again, give it another try, he'd said. Even though I'd already told him I thought it'd be better if we stayed friends.

And then there was Tomasso, who was never far from my mind. Why couldn't I get that jerk out of my thoughts? Yes, we'd had great sex, but that was three years ago. And only the one time. I should be over that by now.

But I wasn't, and it not just because I'd run into him lately. Even not seeing him, the stupid man was always popping up in my mind, pissing me off.

A loud pounding on my front door startled me so much, I sloshed a good amount of water over the side of the tub when I jumped.

With my heart racing, I stood and grabbed the towel off the rack and quickly dried off. I was putting on my white fluffy robe when another round of pounding sounded, urging me to hurry.

Who the hell was knocking on my door this late at night? Tiffany would be my only thought, but she'd call first. Plus, she was at home with the new babies, and I doubted she'd be out this time of night anyway.

I rushed through the house to the front door and looked through the peephole, my eyes widening in surprise when I saw Tomasso's face on the other side.

I took a step back, my hand on the doorknob, but paused in indecision. He'd never been to my house before. I didn't even know he knew where I lived.

"Michelle, please open the door," he said, his voice muffled through the door. He also sounded out of breath, as if he'd been running.

After another moment of trying to decide whether I should answer, I twisted the doorknob and opened the door.

I stumbled backward and nearly fell to the ground when Tomasso's big body tumbled on top of me. I caught sight of blood pouring from him an instant before his body slammed into mine.

TOMASSO

“Oh my, god! Tomasso, what happened?”

My head spun and my breathing felt labored. It was hard to concentrate on Michelle’s words, but I was conscious enough to realize I’d fallen against her and had almost knocked her over.

I tried to pull back to take some strain of my weight from her, but nearly fell in the process. Michelle reacted quickly. She spun to the side and hefted her slight shoulder under my armpit and then threw my arm around her shoulders while she wrapped another arm around my waist.

She started walking me toward the couch, telling me to take slow and easy steps. “Sorry,” I managed to say. “I wasn’t sure where else to go.”

“The hospital?” she quipped. “That would have been the best choice.”

I groaned slightly as she eased me onto the couch. I shook my head. “Can’t,” I breathed out. “Too dangerous.”

She knelt beside me and raised my shirt to get a look at the gunshot wound. I looked down as she revealed my side. Blood seemed to pour out of a hole just below my ribs.

She didn’t say anything, but her lips were compressed into a tight line. She pulled my shirt over my head, helping me raise my left arm just high enough to be able to fit through the sleeve.

“Gunshot?” she asked.

I nodded and it seemed like her lips drew together even tighter. She probed the wound area gently, then went into the kitchen and came back with several towels.

“I need to call an ambulance,” she said, and I vehemently shook my head.

“No,” I gasped out because of the pain caused by her pressing a towel tightly against the wound. “Can’t trust anyone. It’s too dangerous.”

She grabbed my hand and pressed it against the towel. “Hold it there tightly,” she instructed, then stood, hands on hips, to glare down at me.

“What do you expect *me* to do?” she asked.

I looked up at her and had to blink a couple of times as my vision went fuzzy. “You’re a nurse,” I said. “I hoped you’d help me.”

One perfectly arched eyebrow rose. The expression reminded me of a disapproving nun, although no nun I’d ever met looked as hot as Michelle.

“You’ve been shot,” she said as if I was too stupid to understand what had happened to me. “That’s a police matter.”

Not when they were the ones doing the shooting, I thought, but didn’t say out loud. I couldn’t tell her much, not without risking her life too.

“I can’t trust anyone right now,” I said. “You will just have to trust me on that.”

I realized how stupid that sounded, saying I couldn’t trust anyone and in the same breath telling her to trust me, but the wound hurt like a bitch and I was feeling weak.

She scowled, then knelt to gently ease the towel away to look at the wound again. She shook her head as she replaced the towel and looked up at me.

“You need stitches. And antibiotics.”

“You’re a nurse,” I repeated. “Don’t you have that stuff?”

Her hand flew to her waist and she jutted her hip out angrily. “Yeah, sure. I’ll just go to the pharmacy in the back of my house. No, you Italian idiot, that stuff is at the hospital.”

“Where you work,” I pointed out.

Her eyebrows shot up her forehead and her mouth opened into a small O shape. “What? You expect me to *steal* from my hospital?”

“Please?” I said and tried to offer her a smile that I think came out more like a grimace. “Pretty please?”

My charm wasn’t working on her. She continued to stare at me like I’d grown two heads. “Listen,” I said with a sigh. “I don’t have anyone else to go to. I’m not going to drag Paolo into this when he’s just had the twins.

“You’re the only one I could think of, and I wouldn’t have come here if I weren’t desperate. I just need you to fix me up and then I’ll be on my way.”

For some reason, that last bit seemed to make her angrier. Her eyes narrowed and her cheeks even pinked slightly.

She stared hard at me for a minute and then asked, “Did you get this by robbing some little old lady or something?”

I choked and coughed and looked at her as if she were the crazy one. “Are you fucking serious? Of course not.”

“Did someone not pay you and you tried to make them?”

“What? Where do you come up with this stuff? No, it was nothing like that. In fact, I wasn’t doing anything against the law when this happened.”

Michelle didn’t seem convinced. “Cross my heart,” I said and followed through with the motion, tracing an X over my chest with my index finger.

“As if you had one,” she muttered so low I wasn’t sure that I’d heard correctly.

I looked down at my side and grimaced. The white cloth was soaked with blood and was even seeping through enough to start dripping between my fingers.

“Are you just going to let me bleed out on your couch?” I asked.

Her eyes jerked down to my side and then filled with concern. She grabbed another towel from the stack she’d brought from the kitchen and replaced the soiled one.

She frowned down at me for a minute then disappeared toward the back of the house. When she returned, she had a pillow and blanket in her arms, and was dressed in hospital scrubs.

Michelle placed the pillow against the arm of the couch and pointed at it. “Lay down,” she instructed a bit harshly.

I didn’t argue and leaned back as quickly as I could while still holding my side. Once I was settled, she covered me with a blanket.

“Keep pressure on that wound until I get back.”

She didn’t say another word as she grabbed her purse and keys and left the house. I stared at the door for a minute after she left, grateful she’d agreed to help me.

I must have fallen asleep because when I opened my eyes again, I was still looking at the door, but now Michelle was walking in with a bag full of supplies.

“You said you didn’t do anything illegal,” she accused, setting the bag down on the coffee table by the couch.

“I didn’t,” I agreed.

“A pair of cop twins showed up at the hospital to question me. They asked if I’d seen you. If you didn’t do anything wrong, why would they be looking for you?”

“Fuck,” I said and struggled to sit up, but she put her hand on my shoulder and pressed me back down. I didn’t think the Windle brothers would have even known about Michelle, but they must have done their homework.

Or maybe, it was guilt by association because Michelle was friends with Tiffany, who was Paolo’s wife, and then I had been Paolo’s underboss before taking over the family.

“Listen, Michelle. We have to get out of here,” I told her urgently. “We have to hide.”

MICHELLE

“**W**hat? You can’t be serious,” I exclaimed. “I’m not going anywhere. Especially into hiding – with *you!*”

Tomasso was starting to sweat, I noticed suddenly, my nurse training kicking in. Beads of perspiration dotted his forehead. A strand of black hair fell over his face, sticking to his head. His usually bright blue eyes were now glassy.

I knelt down at the side of the couch, pulled back the blanket and the blood-soaked cloth and examined the wound.

“You’ve lost a lot of blood,” I remarked unnecessarily.

“I’m sorry, Michelle. I’m sorry for dragging you into this.”

I dug through the bag until I found the disinfectant, then poured a generous amount over the wound, ignoring his sharp hiss of pain.

“You should be,” I retorted, but there wasn’t any heat to my words. I was more concerned now with the bullet wound. “The bullet has to be removed.”

He grimaced but nodded in understanding.

I pulled out a needle and bottle of numbing agent, filled the syringe, then paused with it over the wound, and raised my eyes to his.

He nodded. “Go ahead.”

I held my breath when I gave him the shot and winced when he sucked his breath in between his teeth. “Give it a few

minutes and the medicine will make it numb enough for me to dig out the bullet.”

I was surprised when he shook his head. “We don’t have time. Just get it out. We have to get going.”

I wasn’t going to have this argument with him right now, but when he glared at me and then looked down at his side, I shrugged. If he didn’t want to wait for the medicine to work before I dug around inside, that was on him.

I retrieved the tools I needed from the bag and set to work. It was slow going, even though I was trying to hurry to cause him the least amount of pain possible.

“Found it,” I muttered, concentrating on grabbing the bullet. It was deep, but thankfully it didn’t seem to have hit any major organs or arteries.

By the time I retrieved the bullet and set it on one of the discarded bloody cloths, Tomasso’s face was ghost white. His lips were a thin line of pain and he’d broken out into a sweat that dripped down from his temples along the side of his face.

But he hadn’t uttered a protest. He hadn’t screamed or yelled or even cursed. He’d simply laid there and let me dig in his side.

I was amazed at his strength and determination, but quickly turned my thoughts in another direction. Finding any admiring qualities about the man was not the road I wanted to take.

Besides, I wasn’t done yet. I poured antiseptic over the wound again, then started stitching up his side. Besides a couple of low grunts, Tomasso was quiet while I worked. But the pain and exhaustion showed on his face and the way his body tensed.

After the stitches were complete, I cleaned the area, put a salve over it, then applied a bandage and carefully pulled the blanket back up to just under his chin.

“At least that will keep you from bleeding out,” I said. “But you lost a lot of blood and need time to rest and heal.”

He shook his head and tried to sit up. I pushed him back gently and shook my head right back at him. “If you tear your stitches out, then all my hard work will have been for nothing.”

He blinked slowly. He was getting tired. I stood and went into the kitchen, poured a glass of water, and returned. “Here,” I said, shoving the water at him. “Drink this.”

While he took the glass and started drinking, I shook out two big pills into my palm and handed them to him. “Take these too.”

He eyed the white pills. “What are they? I don’t want anything to knock me out. We need to leave.”

“Antibiotics,” I lied with a straight face. They were pain killers. I’d already given him an antibiotic, but he needed to sleep and let his blood have a chance to rebuild.

He stared at me as if trying to decide if I was telling the truth, then grabbed the pills and swallowed them in one gulp with a mouthful of water.

“The police,” Tomasso said, handing me the empty glass. “The ones you talked to at the hospital.”

When he didn’t say anything for a minute, I prompted, “What about them?”

He opened his eyes and blinked at me. His dark pupils were almost pinpoints, meaning the drugs were working. He seemed to be having a hard time focusing and I knew he’d be out like a light soon.

“They’re the ones who shot me,” he said, then closed his eyes again.

“What?”

“They’re dirty cops,” he whispered without opening his eyes.

I tried to get him to talk more but the painkillers had done their job and he was sound asleep.

I stood and walked over to the chair across from the couch, then sat down. I looked down at my hands, realized I still wore the gloves from working on his stitches, then stood and went into the kitchen to throw them away.

The cops shot him? If he knew they were dirty, then I could only assume they'd been on his payroll, or maybe worked for one of the other mafia families. Maybe one of the families put a hit on him?

I shook my head. I really didn't know much about mafia life and how things worked. I knew I'd just be jumping to conclusions until he could explain, which wouldn't be for a while since I'd knocked him out with drugs.

A sudden rush of dizziness swamped over me and I put a hand to my forehead. The brother cops were dirty and they'd sought me out at the hospital. They knew who I was and that I had some kind of connection to Tomasso.

About the time that realization hit, I heard a car pull up outside. My heart pounded in my chest, and I brought my hand down from my head to press against my throat.

I walked over to the window and peeked outside, barely moving the curtain aside. My eyes widened and I gasped. The cops were there, getting out of their car.

I watched a second longer, just long enough to see them pull a gun and walk toward the house. Instinct kicked in and I ran over to Tomasso.

"Wake up," I said, shaking his shoulder slightly. When he only snorted and didn't open his eyes, I shook him harder. "Tomasso! Wake up! They're here, we have to do something."

He blinked his eyes open, but they looked unfocused. "The cops!" I whispered loudly. "They're outside, walking up to the house!"

That seemed to register in his mind because he frowned, then tried to sit up. I leaned down and helped him stand. I grabbed the bag of medical supplies, my purse and keys, and together we stumbled toward the kitchen and the back door that led out of the house.

We had just closed the door when I heard a gunshot and the unmistakable sound of wood shattering as one of them kicked the door in.

TOMASSO

I felt like I was walking in a fog. I was aware I was moving, that Michelle was helping me, and I knew that we were in a hurry.

The cold night air helped clear the fuzziness a little, but I was still out of sorts. I heard the gunshot as if it echoed through a tunnel and knew the brothers had found their way inside the house.

Fuck. Michelle had lied and had given me pain meds. If the fogginess wasn't enough of a clue, the fact that there was only a dull ache in my side was proof enough.

“Oh my god,” Michelle exclaimed in a loud whisper. “Did they just shoot my door?”

“Doorknob probably,” I said between gritted teeth.

While the Windle brothers were busy breaking into the house, we snuck around from the back to the side where the driveway was.

I winced when she pressed her key fob and the car beeped twice. The sound seemed to echo in the night air and my head.

“Shit,” she said, then quickly opened the passenger side of the car and helped me inside.

When she reached for my seatbelt, I pushed her hand away. “I can do it. Just get us out of here.”

Michelle nodded and hurried around to the other side of the car. She jumped in, pulled her seatbelt across her chest and buckled it into place at her hip, then started the car.

I wanted to berate her for taking the time to put the seatbelt on, but I didn't have the strength. I felt hot and clammy and knew I had a fever. Never a good sign with a gunshot wound.

But right now, we had to concentrate on getting the fuck out of there before the Windle brothers caught up to us.

She jammed the car into reverse and sped out of the driveway, then slammed on the brakes when she reached the street to make sure no cars were coming.

Again I wanted to say something. Who the hell would be driving on this residential road in the middle of the night besides us?

She backed into the street, put the car in drive, and drove away. But not before I saw the brothers rushing out of the front door of her house.

"Step on it," I rasped.

She glanced at me with a frown. "I am!"

"A little harder then," I offered.

"Stop being a backseat driver!" she admonished.

"I'm in the front seat."

Apparently she didn't appreciate my attempt at humor, but at least she did press the gas pedal a little harder.

But it was too little, too late. From the sideview mirror, I saw the brothers' vehicle gaining on us. Michelle must have too, because she looked into the rearview mirror, cursed, and then took the next right.

We took the turn so fast I was surprised we didn't end up on two wheels.

"Jesus," I said under my breath.

Or I thought I'd whispered it, but Michelle must have heard me. "Don't blame me. I've never done this shit before. You don't like the way I drive, you can jump out and walk."

I wisely kept my mouth shut. She didn't need any more distractions than she already had. I glanced at the steering

wheel and could just see from the dashboard lights reflecting on her hands how tightly she gripped it.

My eyes rose to her face and the shadows that raced across it as we passed under streetlights. She was a nervous wreck, but she was holding up for now.

I heard the shot a second before the sound of glass shattering reached my ears. Michelle screamed and I automatically ducked.

The assholes had shot out her back window. “Stay low,” I demanded as I tried to turn around in the seat to get a better view of the brothers.

“I’m driving!” she yelled back. “How am I supposed to stay low and still see the road?”

“Stay as low as you can,” I qualified in a calm voice. I was trying to be careful not to spook her more.

Another shot rang out, but I didn’t think it hit the car anywhere. I knew I had to do something. There were two trained cops on us. They knew how to follow a car in a high-speed chase, and they knew how to shoot.

I was surprised they hadn’t tried to take out the tires. Blown tires would have caused us to wreck or at the very least, have to pull over where they could easily get to us and finish the job.

My only guess was that they wanted to get us so badly they weren’t thinking straight. Unless they had been trying for the tires and missed.

I frowned at that thought. That was a possibility considering the way we were driving. Michelle was having a hard time staying in the right lane. I didn’t think it was intentional, but it was a good idea if it was.

I figured it was more that she was shaking so badly and was so freaked out she was having difficulty holding the car straight.

I leaned forward in the car seat and retrieved my gun from the back of my pants. The movement made me a little dizzy

and I paused long enough to take a deep breath and get my vision refocused.

“Is that a gun?” Michelle shrieked. She’d jerked her eyes over at me when I leaned forward, and now I could see the whites of them in her wide-eyed gaze.

“Yeah. And before you ask, with real bullets, too,” I answered.

“What are you going to do with it?” she demanded.

I didn’t answer. Another shot rang out and I heard it slam into the back of the car, probably the trunk. If I didn’t do something soon, we’d be sitting ducks. Or dead.

I pressed the window lever and rolled it down, then unbuckled my seatbelt and leaned out of the window.

Unlike the Windle brothers, I took my time and aimed for the front driver’s tire. It took about three shots because of Michelle’s erratic driving, but I managed to hit it.

But the activity had cost me dearly. My vision blurred and I barely made it back into my seat before everything went dark.

MICHELLE

“H o-ly shit!”

Tomasso was hanging out the window and shooting at the car following us like something out of a movie. I couldn't believe my eyes.

The sound was loud, not like in the movies. Each time he fired, which I think was about three times, I winced and grabbed the steering wheel harder. I wished I could take my hands off and cover my ears, but I had to drive.

My heart pounded so fast and hard I felt it in my throat, and it even throbbed in my ears. I was afraid I was going to have a panic attack and pass out.

Tomasso fell back into the car and I glanced at him. His breathing was labored and a sheen of sweat covered his face. An instant later, he passed out.

And then I heard it. The sound of screeching tires. I looked in the rearview mirror in time to see the brothers' car spin out of control. Tomasso must have shot out one of their tires.

They tried to gain control of it, but they had been going too fast and the car spun in a circle in the middle of the street, tipped onto two wheels, then slammed back down again.

I looked back at the road in front of me to make sure we weren't going to crash into anything, then back into the rearview mirror.

The car was sideways, stopped dead in the middle of the street. Turning around, I glanced over my shoulder to make

sure I was seeing correctly and breathed a sigh of relief.

This was our chance to get away.

A loud pop, pop sounded, and I realized they were shooting at us again. I slunk as low as I could in the seat while still being able to see over the dashboard then chanced a glance at Tomasso.

He was still passed out but was also an easy target. I grabbed his shoulder and pulled him closer to me. He was dead weight and he slumped to the side, his head nearly in my lap. Because I was sitting so low in the seat, the top of his head brushed up underneath my breasts.

But I only vaguely realized that. My attention was on getting the hell out of there before one of their bullets hit us. Or blew out a tire. Or ... I paused to shudder ... hit the gas tank and caused us to explode in a fiery ball so severe no one would be able to identify our bodies.

Shaking my head to get rid of the morbid thoughts, I glanced in the rearview mirror and breathed a sigh of relief. We'd put enough distance between us that I figured their bullets wouldn't be able to reach us. At least I hoped they wouldn't.

To be on the safe side, I took the next road I came to and turned right. I had no idea where I was going. I just knew I had to get as far away as possible as quickly as possible.

A few minutes later it started to rain. Winter had come early. Just a few days ago I was wearing a sundress for Tammy's birthday party, and now it was raining. Just great. Just fucking great. Big, fat rain drops fell onto the windshield and with every second that passed, they seemed to come down faster.

I turned on the windshield wipers about the same time I realized that I didn't have a back window. The cold air swirled inside the car and made me shiver. I hadn't had time to grab a jacket or anything other than my purse and medical supplies on our mad dash out of the house.

Tomasso, I finally noticed, wasn't even wearing a shirt. That just showed how distracted and terrified I'd been not to notice something as fantastic as a bare-chested Tomasso.

Even though he should be cold, he was still sweating. Which meant he had a fever. Hopefully, the antibiotics would start fighting off any infection and as soon as I figured out where we would go, I'd give him some more.

Where should I go? Tiffany and Paolo's was my first thought, but Tomasso had been right when he said he didn't want to bring danger to them, especially with the new twins.

I had no other friends I trusted enough to go to, or any that I felt could handle the situation I was in. And I didn't have any close relatives.

Wait a minute. I pounded my palm on the steering wheel. The cabin. I hadn't been there for a few years, but it belonged to my cousin Curtis, and he'd said I could go there whenever I wanted. He didn't use it often, and neither did anyone else in the family.

It would be the perfect hideout. It wasn't in my name, so I couldn't be traced to it. And Curtis and I had different last names, so someone would have to do some serious research to figure out that link.

Maybe eventually they'd make the connection, but it would at least give us some time for Tomasso to heal and figure out our next move.

And, finally a bit of good luck, I decided as I caught the next road sign that showed I was close to the onramp to take us out to the cabin.

I got in the far lane and took the onramp, making sure to use my blinker even though no one else seemed to be on the road. But it was habit, and right now I needed something normal and familiar in my life.

As we went into higher elevations, it started to snow, making the drive slower than usual. It was sticking, too, covering the highway in a thin white sheet of slickness.

Good Lord, I was still scrunched down in my seat. I wiggled my butt and pressed with my feet until I was sitting up fully again then looked down at Tomasso's head in my lap.

I started to move it, then decided to let it stay. He was out cold and if I tried to sit him up, he'd probably slide to the other side and give himself a concussion against the window.

It took about an hour, but I finally saw the turn off for the cabin and breathed a sigh of relief as I turned onto the dark road, lit only by my headlights and the shimmering snowflakes.

I started to park in the front, as we always did, but drove around back instead. Even though I doubted anyone had followed us, it was better to keep my car with the shot out back window out of sight.

Tomasso didn't want to wake up when I shook his shoulder. It took several tries before he groaned and blinked open his eyes.

"Here, let me help you," I said and reached under him to help push him into a sitting position.

He sat up slowly, then looked out the window with a frown. "Where are we?"

"At my cousin's cabin," I answered as I unhooked my seatbelt and got out of the car.

I nearly slipped on the icy snow and broke my neck as I rushed around to the passenger's side and opened the door.

It was when I was reaching down to help Tomasso out of the car that I noticed the blood trailing down his arm.

"Oh my god! You've been shot again!"

TOMASSO

A piercing beam of sunlight filtering in from a window woke me. I squeezed my eyes closed tighter, but it didn't do any good. It felt like I had the mother of all hangovers and my tongue felt thick and swollen.

Carefully, I opened one eye and then the other and found myself once again laying on a couch, my chest bare except for a colorful quilt covering me.

Where the hell was I? I pushed up to a sitting position and then winced as my arm and side protested with sharp stabs of pain.

A bandage covered my side, which I remembered, but not the one on my right arm. But then the memories started flooding in.

The Windle brothers had shot me out at the waterfront and I'd gone to Michelle's for help. She'd been the only one I could think of, plus she was a nurse.

She patched me up and then I'd passed out when she went to get more supplies. Things got a little hazy from there because the damn woman had given me pain pills that had knocked me senseless.

But I remembered leaving her house in a hurry and then the brothers chasing us as we drove away. It was all coming back to me in fragmented pieces. I had to concentrate to grab a memory and focus on it.

They'd shot at us. I remembered the sound of the glass shattering from Michelle's back window. I looked down at my

arm and winced. I must have taken a bullet to the arm when I'd leaned out and returned fire.

Had I managed to shoot out a tire on their car? I couldn't remember. I frowned and ran a hand through my hair.

Shit, I didn't remember anything after that except a vague memory of Michelle helping me out of her car. It had been dark and cold, but I'd felt hot and clammy. And out of my mind from the meds.

I frowned. Had Michelle tended to my arm and side again, or had that been a dream? I shook my head in frustration then carefully swung my legs off the couch and sat up.

A moment of dizziness had me pause while I blinked to bring my sight into focus. My eyes widened as I took in my surroundings.

The room I was in was made out of wood, or at least it looked that way. There was a large fireplace taking up the middle of one wall and several chairs plus the couch I was sitting on scattered about the spacious room.

On the walls were various outdoor-themed paintings, a metal saw blade, an old rifle mounted over the fireplace, and several old-fashioned fishing poles.

My head swiveled to the other side of the room and I raised my eyebrow at three mounted deer heads, their glassy black eyes staring at me.

God, but my throat was dry. I tried to swallow, but it was like trying to swallow sandpaper. A glass of water sat on a wooden stand next to the couch and I grabbed it and gulped down the contents like a man who'd been lost in the desert for days.

Feeling much better, I rose from the couch and explored my surroundings. I was in a cabin and remembered Michelle mentioning something about it last night. Her cousin's place, I thought.

Where was Michelle anyway? My heart skipped a beat. Had the brothers found us? Had they taken her hostage?

I shook my head. They would have killed us both. She must be in the cabin somewhere. I walked down a paneled hallway to the first bedroom on the right.

I opened the door, but Michelle wasn't in there. I was just about to close the door when I spotted a police scanner sitting on a dresser. I walked over and grabbed it and fiddled with it until I got it working.

I planned to explore some more, but the sound of car tires crunching on snow drew my attention and I quickly walked over to the window by the door.

I stood to the side and eased the curtain away just enough to see outside. I winced though, when I spotted Michelle's car with a shattered back window as she drove around to the back of the property.

I let the curtain drop and walked over to the couch to set the scanner on the coffee table. A few minutes later, Michelle walked in, a grocery bag in each arm.

"You went shopping?" I demanded before she could even kick the door closed with her foot. "We're on the run and you went shopping?"

She jumped at my voice, then scowled at me. "Would you prefer we starve to death?" she retorted.

I followed her as she walked into the kitchen and set the bags of groceries on the counter. "How did you pay for it?" I asked. "Please tell me you didn't use a credit card."

"I used cash," she said and raised her chin a notch. I got the distinct impression she was proud of herself. "But I don't have much left, so we have to be careful." She paused and looked at me. "Unless you have some?"

I patted my back pocket and was relieved my wallet was still there. I pulled it out and flipped open the leather flap and checked the insides. "I have some," I answered.

"Well, that's something," she grumbled as she started unpacking the bags.

I walked over with the intention of helping her put the groceries away when I stumbled back a step. She'd thrown a small box at me and when I looked down, I realized it was toothpicks.

I looked askance at her.

"You kept demanding you wanted toothpicks," she said with a shrug.

I didn't remember that, but was glad she got them. Until I looked closer. I opened the box and pulled one out. "You got me party toothpicks?" I asked incredulously, holding up the toothpick with the bright red ribbon on the end.

"That's all they had. Take them or leave them. No skin off my back." She turned to glare at me. "You could be more grateful, you know."

I didn't get a chance to answer because the police scanner went off and I heard an all-points bulletin announcement. The brothers had put an APB out on me and Michelle.

MICHELLE

The carton of milk I was putting into the refrigerator nearly slipped from my fingers. I turned to Tomasso in shock.

“Did I just hear that right?”

Tomasso’s expression was answer enough. His brows pinched in the middle and a frown creased his lips. “Yes. Seems the Windle brothers have sicked their fellow officers on us.”

My nerveless fingers trembled as I set the milk into the refrigerator and closed the door. I looked at the remaining bag of groceries on the counter but decided to put them away later. The rest of the stuff was not perishable and right now I needed to know what the hell was going on.

The message was repeated on the scanner, telling others to be on the lookout for Tomasso Greco, with known mafia association, and Michelle Travers who may be a kidnap victim. They even described my car.

I stared at Tomasso with an open mouth and wide eyes. This wasn’t happening! I’ve never even had a speeding ticket and now I was wanted by the police? Granted, they suggested I might be kidnapped, but still, hearing my name on the scanner like that freaked me out.

And what about my job? Tomasso wouldn’t let me use the phone, so I couldn’t call in to explain. Would I still have it when this mess was over?

After taking several deep breaths, I pinned Tomasso with a glare. “I think you need to explain what the hell is going on.” I paused and looked at his naked chest. “And put some damn clothes on! There’s some men’s clothes in the upstairs bedroom.”

He stuck a toothpick in his mouth and grinned before giving me a one-handed salute. “As you wish.”

God, the man was so frustrating I wanted to scream. Even after being chased by dirty cops, shot at, and now wanted by the police, I still found myself admiring his bare chest. The bandage across his side and covering the top of his arm didn’t deter my hungry eyes either.

And the bastard knew it. I could tell by the way his eyes sparkled when he grinned at me before going upstairs to put on a stupid shirt. It should be illegal for him to walk around with any skin showing.

It was cold inside the cabin. Last night, I’d been too worried about tending to Tomasso’s wounds and too freaked out over everything that had happened, that I hadn’t thought about starting a fire. I walked into the living room and breathed a sigh of relief as I saw a nice pile of dry wood stacked neatly by it.

As I knelt and started putting wood onto the grate, I heard the upstairs shower turn on. Looking up toward the stairs, I scowled. Tomasso better not get his bandages wet.

By the time I had the fire going and had made us each a cup of hot chocolate, Tomasso had finished his shower and came down the stairs.

There were two comfy overstuffed chairs that sat across from each other in front of the fireplace. A nice hand-carved small wooden table sat between them, the feet of the table resembling bear claws.

I put our cups on two coasters that had a mountain scene painted on them, then watched as Tomasso descended the stairs.

His black hair was wet and slicked back, drawing attention to his sharp cheekbones and blue, blue eyes. Even clothed, looking at him was just too much. It set my nerves on alert and had my body tingling in anticipation, even though I told it Tomasso was off-limits.

He walked into the living room, his eyes dropping to the steaming cups of hot chocolate, and smiled. “Thanks,” he said, pointing to the cups. “And I see you made a fire too. Aren’t you industrious.”

Although his tone was friendly, I was still trying to fight my attraction to him, so when I spoke, it sounded more like I was snapping at him.

“I hope you didn’t get your bandages wet.”

He raised an eyebrow, then lifted his shirt so I could see the one on his side was dry. Before I had time to drool over his six pack, he lowered the shirt then showed me the dry bandage on his arm.

I harrumphed and turned my head to look at the fire while he took the seat across from me. “I can’t believe you were shot twice in one day,” I grouched. “Luckily, the one on your arm just grazed you. It wasn’t even bad enough to need stitches.”

“Technically, I didn’t get shot twice in one day. The one on the arm was early this morning, the other was last night.”

I threw a glare at him, then got caught up watching the way his throat worked as he sipped on the hot chocolate.

He stretched a leg forward and leaned back in the chair. It took me a moment to realize he was digging in his front pocket because my eyes were drawn to the thick muscles stretching beneath his jean-clad leg.

He pulled a toothpick out of his pocket and put it in his mouth then bent his leg back to its normal position. The frilly bright pink ribbon at the end looked ridiculous and bounced around as he switched the toothpick from side to side until he found where he wanted it.

I swallowed thickly and made myself focus on what was important. “So, if you weren’t doing anything illegal, why did

those cops shoot you? And come after *us*?”

He took a sip of his hot chocolate, his eyes regarding me over the rim. A waft of steam rose from the cup and spiraled upward until it disappeared just above his head.

“The brothers were on my payroll,” he said after he set the cup on the small table. “But I made the mistake of dating their sister, Sonya.

“I honestly don’t know why I did. She wasn’t my type—”

“You have a type?” I asked with a sneer. I knew I was being petty but couldn’t seem to help myself.

He ignored my snarky question. “And we didn’t date long. But she was obsessed with me.” He stopped to shake his head. “Too bad I didn’t see that earlier.

“Anyway, we broke up about a year ago, but she wouldn’t accept it. In fact...” He paused to give me a meaningful look. “She destroyed my house and pretty much everything in it. That was why I had to leave you alone with Tammy when Tiffany went into labor. I got a call about the break-in.”

I felt my face flame with embarrassment. So he’d had a good reason and I never gave him the chance to explain.

“Last night, I got a call that there was trouble with one of my... customers,” he said, and I narrowed my eyes. I didn’t know much about the mafia but I doubted his definition of *customers* was the same as mine.

“When I went down there, it was the brothers and I caught a glimpse of Sonya in the backseat. It’s hard to miss that bright red hair,” he added with another shake of his head.

Tomasso switched the frilly toothpick to the other side of his mouth. “They accused me of knocking up their sister and then dumping her, and claimed she had to get an abortion. But I hadn’t been with her in over a year. And you know the rest. They shot me and now they’re after both of us.”

When he’d mentioned Sonya the first time, it didn’t phase me. But when he described the red hair, a memory clicked into my mind. The woman making a scene demanding to speak to

Tomasso at the restaurant where I'd been on a date with Dave was a red-head. And so was the girl from Tiffany and Paolo's wedding that he'd had his arm around.

TOMASSO

It had been several days since we arrived at the cabin and still the atmosphere between me and Michelle was strained. I caught her sometimes looking at me as if she was trying to figure me out, like I was some puzzle she was trying to solve.

Other times, I'd see the look of lust shining in her dark eyes. No matter how much she wanted to pretend otherwise, the woman was still attracted to me.

I grinned as I swung the axe. The blade cut into the wood with a loud and satisfying thwack. It felt good to be doing something productive such as making sure we had enough firewood to keep us warm.

I paused and wiped my forehead with the back of my wrist then looked up at the sky. Although it was a pure, clear blue, there was a bite in the air, and I wondered if we weren't in for another snowstorm.

There had been no news about the cop brothers, but then I'd taken the batteries out of mine and Michelle's phones so they couldn't be traced.

And shit, had that been a fiasco. Michelle hadn't wanted to give up her phone, even after I told her that the brothers would be able to trace our whereabouts. She'd thought I was making it up, and accused me of watching too many spy movies.

Finally, though, she'd relented. She was a stubborn one. And feisty. Just how I liked my women. She was also

beautiful. The sight of her always seemed to cause a catch in my throat, which shocked me.

I've had my fair share of beautiful women, so it wasn't like me to lose my shit over a rockin' body and pretty face. But there was just something about Michelle that made me act differently.

For one thing, I felt protective of her. Of course, I felt that way about most women; it was just the way my mama raised me. But this was different. The urge was stronger and somehow more intimate.

Being around her made me think of a different life, one that didn't involve the dangers of the mafia business. I'd never given it much thought before. The family has always been in me, a part of me, and until meeting Michelle, I'd never questioned it.

Michelle was just one of those people that made a person want to be better, do better, and I felt like I could tell her anything.

I shook my head as I swung the axe again.

“What the hell do you think you're doing?”

Michelle's loud screech startled me and I almost missed the log I'd been about to chop. I glanced up at her incredulously.

“Are you crazy?” I demanded. “I could have cut my leg off.”

She pointed at me like an angry mama who just caught their kid playing in the mud after they'd bathed and dressed for Church. “You're going to rip out your stitches!”

I set the axe on the ground, leaning the handle against the wood then turned on her and copied her pose, hands on hips and a scowl on my face.

“I'm not an infant, Michelle. I was being careful. But we need more wood and I needed to do something.”

She glared at my hands on my hips, understanding that I was mocking her. “You already put plastic on my car where

the back window was,” she charged. “And you’ve been doing things around the cabin, going on walks, and who knows what else.”

“Would you rather me lay around on the couch all day and have you wait on me hand and foot?”

Was that a growl I heard come out of her throat? I almost chuckled out loud. It was fun to get her riled up. She looked so cute with her eyes narrowed at me and those twin spots of color that rode high on her cheeks.

She waved her hand toward the wood pile. “I think there’s enough. Let’s just get this inside.”

It took several trips and a wheelbarrow, but we were able to get enough wood into the cabin to last us for at least the next few days. If we didn’t overdo it.

Earlier, Michelle had found a tarp and had brought it inside, so this was where we stacked all the wood.

I went into the bathroom and washed up, then wondered what the hell to do with the rest of my time. I heard Michelle pattering around upstairs and then the sound of the shower being turned on and my mind instantly found something to occupy itself with.

Such as how Michelle would look naked while in the shower, her skin smooth with water running in gentle rivers down her luscious body.

I imagined her leaning her head back as the water sluiced over her, those long strands of dark hair gliding down her back.

The images were so real I had to adjust my jeans. My cock was certainly interested in my lusty thoughts and was straining against the zipper, demanding to be released so it could get to down to business.

By the time Michelle came downstairs, I had thankfully gotten myself under control. But then I caught sight of her wet hair hanging over her shoulders and the way it left damp marks on her sweatshirt, and another stirring in my crotch started all over again.

Fuck, I needed to pull myself together! I looked down at the small table by the fireplace and the deck of cards I'd put there earlier and snatched them up.

“Want to play some cards?” I asked, holding them out toward her.

She raised an eyebrow, and just when I thought for sure she'd say no, she shrugged her shoulders and said, “Why not.”

I waited until she was seated across from me then began expertly shuffling the cards. She watched me carefully, as if she expected me to do a trick.

“What are we playing?” she asked.

“Strip poker?” I offered.

The glare she sent my way nearly singed my eyebrows. I laughed and started dealing out the cards. “How about straight poker, no wilds?”

She nodded and picked up her cards.

We spent the next couple of hours enjoying the game. When Michelle won, she squealed and slapped my uninjured arm. A couple of times I let her win just so I could watch her boobs bounce in her excitement. But she wasn't a bad player either, so I didn't let her win often.

Outside, the wind howled, and it had started snowing. I got up and stoked the fire, adding a couple more logs to it, then sat back down.

When the lights flickered and then went out, I knew the storm had gotten worse. It was so dark in the cabin we only had the glow from the fire to see by.

“Maybe we should sit on the floor, closer to the fire so we can see our cards,” Michelle offered, and I was grateful she wasn't freaked out about the loss of power.

We moved to the floor and sat on the rug and continued to play. After a time, it was obvious the power wasn't likely to come back on anytime soon, especially since the wind had picked up and the snow was falling much faster and thicker.

I looked at Michelle, watching the firelight dance across her face, and did my best not to grin when I said, “We’re going to have to stay in front of the fire and cuddle to stay warm tonight.”

MICHELLE

“I don’t think I’m desperate enough for that yet,” I said with a frown.

“You said *yet*, which means there’s still hope,” Tomasso grinned. The firelight played off his handsome features and made his teeth gleam behind his lips.

The man was just too adorable for his own good. He was so charming, when he wanted to be. Like now. But I had to remind myself that he was also a player, and I couldn’t afford to lose my heart to him.

I leaned back on my hands and regarded him with consideration. “What are you trying to do, Tomasso?”

He cocked his head to the side, his brows drawn down in confusion. Before he answered, he popped a toothpick in his mouth and shoved it to the side.

“Have a conversation?” he said, and it was a question, as if he wasn’t sure of how to answer.

“I mean with me,” I clarified with a hint of exasperation coloring my voice.

He grinned again. “What do you want me to do with you?”

I sat forward in irritation and stared into the fire. Did I dare bring up the subject of how he dumped me at Tiffany and Paolo’s wedding?

I wanted to, but I was also afraid. Maybe I didn’t want to hear the truth, that he was just a player and I’d played right into his hands.

“What’s wrong, Michelle?” he asked, and I thought I could actually hear concern in his voice.

I looked back at him, met those blue eyes that truly seemed to be full of sincerity, and decided what the hell.

“I don’t want to be your plaything, Tomasso.” His eyes widened in surprise, but I continued. “Despite what we did at the wedding, I don’t sleep around.”

“I never thought—” he started.

“I’m not sure why I did it with you. But then you took off and left me right afterward, and now you’re acting like that never happened.”

“Me?” he asked and placed a hand over his heart. “You’re the one who gave me the one-finger fuck off goodbye.”

Yeah, okay, I had flipped him off, but he’d deserved it. “Because you went from having sex with me to having your arm around that woman, Sonya, right? And I even saw you kiss her. Was I supposed to smile and jump into your bed again after that?”

“Hold up. That wasn’t what you think,” he said.

“Then what was it?” I demanded.

Tomasso sighed and removed the toothpick from his mouth. As he spoke, he twirled the little wooden stick between his thumb and forefinger.

“You know Sonya’s brothers are the cops after me. Well, at the wedding, they called me concerned about her because she was drunk, which they figured out after she’d called them slurring all over the place.

“They were on my payroll, and we did each other favors. They asked me to look out for her.”

Tomasso paused to stare at me knowingly. “I had my arm around her because she couldn’t walk straight. That’s it.”

“And the kiss?” I asked, still not satisfied with his answer.

“*She* kissed me. I pulled back right away. I didn’t want anything to do with her.” He reached forward and grabbed my

hands, which were fisted in my lap, and held them between his. “I wanted *you*. I wanted to hurry up and get back to the states so we could start dating.”

I felt like I’d just been punched in the gut. Could any of what he said be true? My heart wanted to believe it, but my head warned me that he wasn’t the trust-worthy guy I wanted him to be.

“But Sonya is your ex-girlfriend, so there was something there,” I insisted stubbornly.

He let go of my hands, sat back, and popped the toothpick back in his mouth. “Yeah, but not until much later. And it was a mistake. We only dated for a few months, and I promise you, my heart was never in it.”

I wanted to ask him if his heart had ever been with any woman, but decided he was revealing enough about his personal life for now. Besides, I hadn’t had time to process what he’d told me. If it was true, that meant I’d wasted three years being pissed at him for no reason, and I wasn’t ready to let go of that anger yet.

“Besides your obvious attributes,” Tomasso said. As he spoke, his eyes roamed over my... attributes. I felt my face heat up and only hoped he would think the redness was from the heat of the fire. “You are not like most girls I’ve gone out with.”

“Cheap hoes?” I asked, only half teasing.

He chuckled and shook his head. “You’ve got to understand that I’ve been raised in the business. I’ve always had girls after me because of my family associations.

“Women want to date me for one of a couple of reasons. They are either attracted to the dangerous side of me or the power and money I have. Or both.

“You, though,” he said and paused to laugh. “You pretty much hated me from the beginning.”

“And that’s what you liked about me?” I asked incredulously.

“I liked your honest reaction,” he qualified. “You weren’t putting on a show to get my attention or pretending to be something you’re not. It was refreshing and intriguing.

“And then there was the wedding...” He drifted off with a devilish grin that I found contagious.

“Yeah, there was that,” I agreed.

We sat there for a long time, talking about mundane things, and it was nice. I was finally able to relax a little after the harrowing last few days we’d had. I still wasn’t ready to process what he had told me, so for now I was content to sit in front of the fireplace and just be civil for a change.

I don’t know when I ended up laying my head on his lap, or when I fell asleep, but when I woke up the next morning, the sun was shining brightly through the window and I was alone. The storm had passed.

Tomasso had replaced his lap with a pillow, which he’d put beneath my head at some point. With a smile, I stretched and got to my feet. Where was he now?

I heard what sounded like a car door closing and I stiffened. With shallow breaths and my hand over my chest where my heart had started galloping, I walked over to the window and chanced a peak outside. A strange man was walking toward Tomasso.

Was this a bad guy sent to kill us?

TOMASSO

Michelle looked so peaceful this morning, I didn't want to wake her up, so I put on a jacket I'd found in the upstairs bedroom, and went outside for a walk.

There was a lot of snow on the ground from last night's storm and my boots crunched against the crystals as I walked. Each step, my feet sank and snow covered above my ankles.

It was cold, but beautiful and peaceful. I took a deep breath of the crisp, clean air and smiled. I felt like Michelle and I had crossed a road block last night with our talk.

Apparently, she'd thought I'd left her for Sonya at the wedding and has been pissed about it ever since. I wouldn't blame her, if that had happened.

Hopefully she'll warm up to me now that she knows that isn't the case.

I was almost back to the cabin when the sound of a car driving down the long driveway drew my attention. I stepped behind a tree and slowly withdrew my gun from the back of my jeans, then leaned my shoulder against the trunk and waited for the car to get closer.

Tires munched through the snow and gravel until I could see a dark blue four-door car heading up the lane. I held the gun with both hands down by my waist and peeked around the tree as much as I dared without being seen.

The car came to a stop right in front of the cabin. The door opened slowly, and my body went on full alert, my legs braced apart and my arms loosening at my sides.

A blonde head poked out as the door opened. The man stood, half in the car, and slowly looked around. It wasn't until his head swiveled my way that I recognized him.

“Marco?” I said, stepping out from behind the tree.

His green eyes swung in my direction and a grin split his face when he saw me.

I returned the gun to the back of my jeans and walked over to my cousin. We did a one-arm man hug complete with a couple of slaps on each other's backs, then stood back and shook hands.

“What the hell are you doing out here?” I asked him. From the corner of my eye, I saw Michelle peek through the living room curtain. I gave her a smile to let her know everything was okay, then returned my attention to Marco.

“I heard about your trouble,” he said. “Came to help.”

“I can certainly use it,” I acknowledged. “Why don't you park your car around back and come on into the cabin?”

Marco nodded and walked to his car while I went inside to explain to Michelle. She was still standing by the window when I got inside the cabin.

“He's not here to kill us, I take it?” she said wryly.

I laughed. “No, that's my cousin, Marco. He said he came to help.”

“How can he possibly help us?” she asked, then her eyebrows drew down in a frown. “And how did he find us?”

Fear replaced confusion in her dark eyes. “If he found us, then—”

“Relax, Michelle,” I said calmly. “That's what Marco does. He's very good at finding people... and anything else we might want. We're safe for now.”

She let out her breath so quickly it almost looked like she deflated in front of me. Damn it. I didn't like that she was having to go through this, that she had to be so scared.

Three loud knocks rapped against the cabin door and then it opened. Marco stepped in, stomping his feet first to get rid of snow trapped on his boots, then shut the door behind him.

“You must be Michelle,” he said with a smile.

I shouldn’t have been surprised he already knew her name, but it still startled me a little. I hid my reaction though and watched Michelle closely.

Marco was the type of man women couldn’t take their eyes off of. He was tall with blonde hair and green eyes and had the face of a male model. His body was trim and toned and he looked more like he belonged on the front of a GQ magazine than part of the mafia.

Michelle just nodded, though, and looked at him with curiosity. I studied her expression and realized that she wasn’t in awe of Marco’s good looks, like most women were.

I relaxed, which surprised me since I hadn’t even realized I had tensed up in anticipation of her reaction to my cousin. And then, when her brown eyes met mine, I saw a spark of heat in them and couldn’t resist grinning. She wasn’t as oblivious to me as she wanted to pretend. It was there in the way her eyes practically ate me up when she looked at me.

“I’m Marco, Tomasso’s cousin. I came as soon as I could to see what I could do to help you guys.”

“What if you were followed?” Michelle asked.

Marco and I exchanged a glance and laughed while Michelle frowned at us. “Sweetheart, Marco is known as ‘The Cleaner.’ He cleans up everyone else’s messes.

“He doesn’t get tailed and he doesn’t get found if he doesn’t want to. He’s the one we send to find other people.”

“But what if he was sent to find you?” she persisted.

“Did you miss the part where he’s my cousin?” I gently teased.

“But still mafia, right?” she argued. Then her face paled and she took a step backward. “I-I didn’t mean any offense, it’s just that, well...”

“No offense taken,” Marco said with a grin.

Marco walked toward Michelle, reaching in his pocket. Her eyes went as round as saucers and a hand fluttered to her chest.

I bet she was thinking he was going to pull a gun out and shoot her right there. Instead, he handed her a cell phone.

Michelle stared at it for a second as if it was a cobra getting ready to strike and then calmed down, the fear leaving her eyes as she realized it was just a phone.

“Here,” Marco said with a teasing smile. “This is for you and Tomasso. Don’t worry, it’s completely untraceable. And,” he said, waggling his dark eyebrows, “you don’t have to throw it away after using it.”

“But that doesn’t mean you should start going around calling everyone,” I warned her. “Just use it for emergencies.”

Michelle looked at the phone, took it from him, then raised an eyebrow at me. “Are you two trying to get rid of me?”

I nodded, surprising her. “We still have some cash, right?” When she nodded, I continued. “Could you go to the store and grab us some supplies? I need to talk with my cousin.”

Although she didn’t seem too happy about it, Michelle agreed and was out the door, purse and phone in hand, about ten minutes later.

“She’s hot,” Marco told me and for some reason I got irritated. He must have seen that in my expression because he held up a hand and chuckled. “Relax. Just an observation, not a declaration of intent.”

“So what brings you all the way out here anyway?” I asked to change the conversation.

“Just some chatter I picked up and also thought you might want a safe way to communicate with people. Turns out you’re not the first sucker Sonya has played the pregnancy hoax on.”

When my mouth dropped open in shock, Marco nodded. “I’ve found at least two other guys she’s sicked her brothers

on. Both of them ended up with some broken bones. But the Windle brothers really have a hard on for you.”

Great, well that makes me feel better. Not.

“You’d think they’d get the hint about their sister and her games if I’m not the first, or even second, guy she’s tried that on.”

Marco grunted. “I get the feeling they don’t really care. Sonya is just an excuse for them to flex their muscles.”

When I heard tires as they crunched on the snow pathway to the house, at first I thought Michelle had returned. I looked out the window, but didn’t recognize the car.

“Are you sure you haven’t lost your touch and weren’t followed?” I asked Marco while pointing at the wall, instructing him to take up a hiding spot.

“They didn’t follow me,” he said with certainty.

I pulled my gun out of my jeans and waited behind the door, glad that Michelle wasn’t still in the cabin.

Marco and I waited silently, both with our weapons drawn, as we heard footsteps climbing the steps to the front door.

The doorknob rattled and then opened slowly. I waited until the intruder was just inside the door and I could see enough to know that he wasn’t someone I recognized, then bashed him over the head.

MICHELLE

Was Tomasso being straight with me? How was it possible that Marco dude was a computer geek? He was way too good looking to sit behind a computer all day.

Not as good looking at Tomasso though, at least in my opinion. Every time I looked at him, my heart rate kicked up and I felt a zing of awareness shoot along my nerves.

Apparently, Marco was more than a computer geek, but what else could he be? Maybe “cleaner” had a completely different meaning in the mafia. What was I thinking? Of course it did.

I pulled into the parking lot, the makeshift back window Tomasso made out of clear plastic after it had been shot out by the brothers, flapping in the wind. Although there weren't a lot of cars in the lot, there were enough to make me nervous.

I was still surprised Tomasso let me leave the cabin. Told me to leave, actually. After all the hush-hush, don't talk to anyone, don't go anywhere stuff, he decided to send me out in public to the grocery store?

Sure, I had already gone to the store once since we got to the cabin, but Tomasso hadn't been happy about it. But it's okay today, as long as I took the phone Marco gave me?

After I turned off the engine, I grabbed the phone out of my purse and studied it, turning it this way and that to see what was so special about it. I couldn't see anything, so I shrugged and dropped it back into my purse.

Thankfully, it wasn't snowing, but it was cold as I walked through the lot to the store entrance. A blast of heat hit me full in the face when the automatic door opened. At least the heater worked well.

A couple of people that stood in line waiting to be checked out turned to look at me when I entered. For a brief second I froze and stopped in my tracks. Did they know who I was?

I gave myself a mental head shake and continued into the store. What was I supposed to buy, I wondered as I grabbed a shopping cart and started walking down the aisles. It wasn't like Tomasso gave me a shopping list or anything. He just wanted me gone so he could speak to his cousin privately.

I strolled up and down the aisles, adding things here and there. Crackers were always a good choice. They could be eaten with anything, and if the power went out again, we'd still have something to munch on.

Granola, another good idea. I threw several bars in assorted flavors into the cart, then paused. Would that be enough? How long was Marco going to be staying with us? On second thought, I grabbed ten more bars and tossed them into the cart as well.

Along the canned food aisle, I grabbed green beans, chili, and peaches, then went to the picnic area and found toothpicks for Tomasso that didn't have the frilly little ends on them.

The hairs on the back of my neck tingled. I looked around and saw a couple of shoppers. Were they watching me? I stared hard for a minute, but neither of them looked up.

God, I was so paranoid! But who could blame me? It's not like I was a pro-fugitive or anything. I led a quiet life now that I was out of modeling. I went to work and came home. Sometimes I hung out with Tiffany, but that was about it. I was usually too tired after a long shift at the hospital to do much else.

Would I even have a job after all this was over? That thought stopped me in my tracks as I tried to figure out what to do. Marco had given me a cell phone that supposedly couldn't

be traced. Should I try and contact them, let them know I was fine but out of town for an emergency?

But what kind of emergency would allow me to be missing for so many days? Plus, there was an APB out on me according to the police scanner. The cop brothers had been to the hospital to talk to me once, they were probably staking out the place even as I shopped.

I started walking down the aisles again, tossing in odds and ends and even some cleaning supplies into my ever-growing basket. Had I been gone long enough? Could I return to the cabin yet? Tomasso hadn't given me a timeframe, so I wasn't sure how long I was supposed to aimlessly walk around shopping.

This was long enough, I decided. Besides, I kept getting the feeling that someone was watching me. How would I know if the brothers were in this store? I only met them the one time and I'd been preoccupied with trying to get medicine and supplies for Tomasso at the time.

I took my groceries to the check-out and waited in line. The longer I stayed there, the more paranoid I became, convinced I was being watched. I was tempted to just leave the store without the groceries. But thankfully, the line moved fast and I had my purchases and rushed out of the door.

All the way home I kept looking in the rearview mirror to see if I was being followed, an impossible task considering the wavy and distorted view through the plastic covering.

When I pulled around the back of the cabin, I saw Marco's car, then parked alongside it. So, he was still here. But wait. There had been another car out front, too. I'd just assumed that was Marco's car until I saw his behind the cabin.

I got out of the car slowly and quietly, listening for any sounds that might tell me if there was friend or foe inside. It was a short walk to go around to the front of the cabin and when I reached it, I stood there a minute, listening again.

Still nothing. What the hell. Either it's a friend in there or everyone is dead, I thought morbidly. What I wasn't expecting

was to see my cousin Curtis tied up to a chair in the middle of the living room, Tomasso and Marco standing off to either side of him.

“What are you doing?” I demanded. “Why do you have my cousin tied up?”

“Cousin?” Tomasso asked.

“Yeah, Curtis. This is *his* cabin,” I admonished. “You need to let him go.”

Tomasso was shaking his head, his dark hair swirling across his forehead. “Sorry, sweetheart, but he isn’t going anywhere until we know why he’s here.”

“I came to check on the cabin after the storm,” Curtis said quickly. “Like I always do. I didn’t know Michelle was here... or you guys.”

Damn. I was still holding the grocery bags. I set them aside on the floor then stalked over to Tomasso with my hands planted firmly on my hips.

“There, you see? A perfectly good explanation. Now let him go.” I glared at him, refusing to let the way his blue eyes regarded me, with an odd mixture of attraction and stubbornness, get to me. He stood assuredly, his hands also on his hips and his broad shoulders blocking my view of Curtis.

This time it was Marco who answered, dragging my attention away from Tomasso. “Not yet. He might have been followed.”

TOMASSO

“**M**arco is right, Michelle. We can’t take any chances.”
If looks could kill, I’d be dead meat right now. Obviously, that was not the answer Michelle wanted to hear. She glared first at Marco, then at me.

Little did Michelle know that she only looked hotter to me with her eyes full of fire and her cheeks slightly flushed.

“Well, even if he was, what good does it do to keep him tied up? In his *own* home, I might add,” Michelle demanded.

I hated disappointing her, especially since we had been getting along lately. But safety was my number one priority and until I knew more about her cousin, I had to take every precaution possible.

“Sorry, man,” I said to Curtis. “Nothing personal, but we can’t be too careful.”

Michelle’s cousin didn’t look much like her except for the dark black hair. He wasn’t as tall as Michelle and his features were not nearly as striking. He was scrawny, too, and his light brown eyes looked back at me with concern and confusion. He kept darting looks between me, Marco, and Michelle, but he didn’t say much. Probably because he was too scared.

“Tomasso, can I speak to you a moment?” Michelle asked. “In private,” she added, jerking her head to the side, supposedly to indicate a room to go have a chat in.

“Marco, that computer I told you about is in the upstairs bedroom,” I said, then turned to Michelle. “Lead the way.”

Damn, but she had a fine ass I thought as I watched her walk away. My hands itched to grab onto those firm, round globes.

“Why does he need a computer?” she asked as she led me into the kitchen, jerking my attention away from her ass. She leaned against the counter and glared at me. That seemed to be her favorite expression.

“He’s going to take a look at it and make sure we can’t be traced here. Knowing him,” I added with a grin, “he’ll probably do some upgrades too. That’s an old machine you’ve got there.”

“It’s not mine.” She shook her head in agitation, her long hair swishing around her shoulders. “That’s not why I called you in here. I want to know how long you’re going to keep Curtis tied up.”

“As long as it takes.”

She waited a full minute for me to continue and when I didn’t, she blew out her breath in a huff. “This is ridiculous. Curtis is harmless. And he’s my *family*.”

“How well do you know your cousin?” I asked. “How do you know he’s not a secret agent or serial killer who uses this cabin to hide the bodies?”

The look Michelle gave me said it all. She thought I was being ridiculous.

Serial killer jokes aside, I felt bad and wished I didn’t have to do this, but we needed to be careful. People had been betrayed by family members before and I doubt that would ever change.

“I’m sorry, Michelle. Really,” I added when she raised a disbelieving eyebrow. “It’s better to be safe. I know he’s your family,” I hurried on to explain when she opened her mouth to object. “Just give me a little time to make sure he wasn’t sent here by the Windle brothers or something.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she scoffed, flinging her long hair over one shoulder.

“This is me trying not to be,” I said with a slight lift of the corner of my mouth. “I can’t just take someone at their word, especially when I don’t know them, and even more so when we are in such danger. You know the saying; it’s better to be safe than sorry.”

“Where I come from, we don’t mistrust every person we meet,” she said with a scowl.

“Maybe you should.”

I left the kitchen and Michelle stewing in frustrated anger and went in search of Marco. He was in the bedroom, his head bent toward the computer as his fingers flew over the keys.

He looked so engrossed, it surprised me a little when he spoke without looking away from the screen or even pausing a single stroke in typing. I hadn’t realized he’d even heard me enter the room.

“Not a lot to work with here,” Marco said. “But I’ve secured it so you can use it without being traced. Err on the side of caution though and don’t go visiting chat sites or anything so public.”

“Me? Chat?” I laughed. “Not a chance. Who has the time for that anyway?”

“So what are you going to do with the Curtis guy? Your woman looked pretty pissed at you.”

Running a hand through my hair, I frowned and walked up to the computer. “She’ll have to get over it. It’s for all our own good.”

“Do you really think he could be on the brothers’ payroll? He looks too... mousey. I don’t sense that vibe from him.”

“I don’t either to tell you the truth,” I responded. “But it’s Michelle I’m more concerned about. He would be the perfect person to send looking for her because no one would suspect him, including her.”

Marco nodded, still without pausing in his work. “This is true.”

He glanced up briefly at me, then pulled up several windows on the monitor. “I hacked into the police station and took a look at the police report,” he explained, pointing at one of the windows. “There’s multiple charges, but the main ones are assault on a police officer and attempted murder.”

“According to their report, they stopped you and Michelle on a routine stop and you took off so they pursued you. You shot out their tire which caused them to have an accident that resulted in a broken arm for Officer Don Windle.”

“That’s not what happened,” I argued, grinding my teeth in frustration. Where was a damn toothpick when I needed one? I patted my pockets until I finally found one lone pick, the one with a pink frill on the end. Scowling at the stupid looking thing, I popped it into my mouth.

“Figured as much,” Marco said. “Right now, they are still considering Michelle a hostage, so there’s that.”

“Yeah, that’s something at least. Hey, is there any way you can do something to help Michelle with her job? It’s my fault she’s in this mess and I don’t want to see her lose it. She’s worked so hard to get where she is.”

“Give me a minute.”

I wasn’t surprised that Marco didn’t need any information from me. He knew where Michelle worked, and probably pretty much everything else about her. Once she got caught up with me, Marco had made it his job to know everything about her.

“Okay, I hacked into her email and backdated a request for time off for vacation, then hacked into the hospital’s HR email and sent an approval email. Don’t know how much good it will do if her picture ends up plastered across the news, but it’s something.”

“Thanks man, I owe you.”

“You always do,” Marco said. “Now, you have the info on Curtis?”

I nodded and reached into my back pocket where I’d stashed his wallet earlier. Michelle would probably chew me a

new asshole if she found out I'd stolen her cousin's wallet. After setting it on the desk next to Marco, I stepped back and let him work his magic. It didn't take long.

"He's clean as far as I can tell on this piece of shit," Marco announced. "And I mean squeaky clean. There hasn't even been a parking ticket in the last decade that I could find. I don't see any ties to the brothers either, or weaknesses they could leverage as blackmail."

"Thanks again, Marco. I'll go give Michelle the good news."

After I clapped Marco on the shoulder, I went downstairs. Michelle was sitting in a chair across from Curtis and the two of them were quietly talking. Without a word, I went to the back of Curtis' chair, pulled my knife from my front pocket, and cut the rope that had bound his hands behind his back.

"You checked out," I told him, coming around to stand in front of him. "Sorry for the inconvenience, but you're free to go."

Curtis brought his hands to his lap and started rubbing feeling back into the limbs. Michelle glared at me and pointed to the window.

"Way to go, Sherlock," she snapped. "While you two were upstairs playing detective or whatever, another storm hit. No one is going anywhere anytime soon."

MICHELLE

I was still irritated with Tomasso for tying up Curtis and let him see it in my glare every time I looked at him. But it wasn't just about Curtis. I was angry with myself too. Even in this situation - hiding out from the police - which was one hundred percent his fault, Tomasso still had the ability to draw me in.

Yes, he was gorgeous, but there was more to him than that. There was just something about him that drew me to him like the proverbial moth to the flame. And that scared the shit out of me.

I didn't want to like Tomasso, or be attracted to him. He was mafia, which meant danger. But more than that, he seemed like a player and I didn't just want to be another one of his conquests. Sure, I believed him about Sonya and how he'd not left my arms to be with her at the wedding, but that didn't change the fact that he had a reputation as a ladies' man.

I'd heard stories from Tiffany about his different girlfriends and dates. I'd also seen some of it with my own eyes. I did *not* want to be a trophy girlfriend.

It had happened to me before. Guys dated me just to brag that they had such a beautiful girlfriend. I didn't mean anything to them other than how I could increase their status among their friends.

I did not want to be Tomasso's arm candy.

The snowstorm had hit pretty hard, so we were sitting around the fireplace enjoying hot chocolate and granola bars. I

had made sure I wasn't sitting next to Tomasso and had chosen to sit next to Marco the Computer Genius. Tomasso sat across from me and Curtis sat across from Marco.

The firelight danced across our faces, casting shadows and highlights that were at once cozy and a bit eerie. Even though the power hadn't gone out – yet – we still had most of the lights off and ate by the light of the fire.

Even though I was angry at him, I couldn't stop sneaking appreciative glances at him. The firelight highlighted his hair and sparkled in his blue eyes.

As if he felt my eyes on him, Tomasso suddenly turned and looked at me. Our eyes met, and for a moment I was caught like a deer in headlights. I couldn't look away from the heat in his eyes.

The spell was broken though, when a loud pop sounded from one of the logs, and I was able to tear my gaze away.

I wasn't really paying attention to the conversations flying around since they were mostly just chit chat until Curtis started talking about the history of the cabin. Then my ears perked up and I turned to face my cousin.

"It's been in the family for generations," Curtis was saying. "Well, the property has. This cabin is only about fifty years old and is the third structure to be built here.

"My great-great-great grandfather built the first house with his bare hands, but a fire destroyed it."

We all looked at the fireplace and the flames crackling there as if imagining the house on fire back in the day.

"There was nothing left of the place, so grandpa moved into town and the land sat idle for a while," Curtis continued. He paused long enough to take a sip of hot chocolate before continuing.

"It was after his death that his son built the next house here and brought his wife and two kids to live in it. According to the family gossips, he ran a moonshine ring and made his own stuff here. He used a cave that's toward the back of the property to hide his stuff.

“Unfortunately, he double-crossed too many people and they came to the house and shot the place up. The story goes, he escaped to the cave, but they found him there and killed him.

“The place stayed abandoned until my grandfather renovated it. So the cabin we’re in today is a mix of the old moonshine place and what my grandfather added.”

“I never knew that,” I said, surprised at the family history I’d never been aware of. “This land has seen some action!”

Tomasso pulled the toothpick he’d been swirling around out of his mouth and tossed it in the fire. “So, no one ever stays here?”

Curtis shook his head and laughed. “Most of the family are afraid. They think the place is haunted.”

A log in the fireplace chose that opportune moment and popped, the sound so loud I jumped high enough that my butt cleared the floor. Sparks flew, several of the embers escaping the fireplace to land on the floor. Marco was closest, so he reached over and swatted them out with his bare hand.

Tomasso was laughing at me. I turned to him with a glare and shot a middle finger in his direction. That didn’t stop him from laughing though. If anything, it made him laugh harder. What an ass.

“I’ve been thinking about listing it as a weekend rental or something. The extra money would come in handy to help with the upkeep of the place.”

“Why don’t you just sell it?” Tomasso asked.

Curtis raised his eyebrows. “It’s my family’s. I could never get rid of this place. Plus, it’s in my grandfather’s will that it can’t be sold and has to be passed down to the oldest child. My parents gave it to me early because they just didn’t want to mess with the upkeep and they knew how much I loved the place.”

“Well, at least he didn’t say the oldest *male* child,” I said with a smirk.

“He was considered progressive for his time,” Curtis said with a smile.

We continued to sit around the fire drinking hot chocolate in silence for a bit. It was actually quite peaceful with only the sounds of the logs crackling in the flames. The snow still fell outside, and even though it was dark out, I could still see some flakes float by the window from the glow of the fire.

I chanced a look at Tomasso only to meet his gaze straight on. Had he been staring at me this whole time? He smiled, but I put my nose in the air and looked back at the fire. When I chanced another look in his direction, the jerk caught me and grinned again.

This time I looked at Marco, just because I knew it would probably irritate Tomasso. At least I hoped it would. I’m not above creating some petty jealousy here and there if the occasion called for it. Plus, it didn’t hurt that Marco wasn’t hard on the eyes.

Firelight flickered across his face, making him look even younger. I figured he was in his early twenties. So young to be caught up in the mafia. Aside from fixing computers and being able to track Santa Claus if he wanted to, what else did a “cleaner” do for the families?

Maybe I didn’t want to know. It was probably something gruesome like the guy who went in after they off’d someone and cleaned up all the blood then disposed of the body. I tried to picture Marco, with his manicured nails, doing something like that.

Not that I knew the man had his nails manicured, it’s just that they looked so clean and well-trimmed. They were the type of hands that belonged to a keyboard, not mopping up blood and guts.

God, what the hell was I thinking? How did I even let my thoughts jump track like that and go into that deep, dark tunnel of violence and crime?

Because I was with Tomasso, that’s why. I shot him another glare for making my imagination run wild, but this

time he was glaring at Marco for some reason.

“Michelle,” Curtis said, drawing my attention. “I think it’s about time you tell me what you’re really doing here at the cabin.”

Startled, I just stared at him, not knowing what to say.

“Don’t get me wrong. As I’ve told you before, you’re always welcome to stay here whenever you want. But something is up. I don’t imagine your friends normally tie up people they don’t know to a chair.”

“I – uh, that is, we – uh...” I stammered like an idiot. I hadn’t been prepared for his question, although I should have, and I had no idea how to answer.

“If we tell you, we’ll have to kill you,” Marco answered for me.

Curtis laughed and then suddenly stopped on a choked cough. His eyes widened and he looked from Marco, to Tomasso, and then to me with eyebrows raised in suspicion.

Marco’s voice had been calm and quiet, his expression neutral. That expression had not changed.

I looked at Curtis and shrugged helplessly. “I’m afraid he’s serious, Curtis.”

TOMASSO

Last night was shit. All I wanted to do was spend some time with Michelle. Alone. But no, not with two other guys in the house.

She thought I didn't realize she had been cozying up to Marco to irritate me. Ha! Women and their tricks. I'd been around it all my life. Although, I don't think Michelle was used to playing games. She seemed too honest for that.

It just proved to me how pissed she was that I tied up her cousin. It was her way of getting back at me. Unlike other women I've known, she didn't outrageously flirt to make me jealous.

Yep, that's happened to me a few times. Honestly, though, it didn't bother me with any of those other women because they didn't mean anything to me. But the thought of Michelle in another man's arms... or bed... made me murderous.

Although it was still snowing, it wasn't bad enough to keep me from wandering outside. Or maybe it was just because I needed to get away. Have some alone time without Marco and Michelle's cousin around.

It really was a beautiful area. The snow capping tree limbs obscuring any paths only made it more so. The air was crisp and cold, so cold that it burned the lungs if breathed too deeply too quickly. But the walk outside was worth it.

It helped clear my mind and get my thoughts and emotions under better control. I had never been so torn up over a woman before, and Michelle and I weren't even an official couple.

We'd only had sex once and then it had been three years since we really started to talk again.

But during that entire three years, I couldn't stop thinking about her. It didn't matter who I dated or slept with, it was always Michelle I secretly wished was there instead.

The snow was so fresh, my footsteps barely made a sound as I explored around the cabin. A tree branch snapped somewhere in the distance, the sound loud and echoing through the woods.

I'd walked maybe five minutes away from the cabin when I spotted the entrance to the cave. I almost didn't see it, it was so well hidden.

Curious, I walked over to it and peeked inside. It was too dark to see much of anything, so I grabbed a lighter out of my pocket and lit it. Although I didn't smoke, I liked to carry a lighter because you never knew when you might need it to burn a body. Or in this instance, use it for light.

The flicker from the lighter didn't provide much light but I could see that the entrance was pretty wide. Several people could fit inside if they needed shelter, although it would be tight. I walked further in, the flame from the lighter flickering and casting long shadows on the walls and in front of me.

After only about ten feet, the cave ended with a solid wall. I felt around and walked along the wall, but didn't find any cracks or hints of a tunnel. Disappointed that this was all there was to the cave, I backtracked toward the mouth of the cave.

The floor seemed to tilt a bit and I briefly lost my balance, stumbling a couple of steps to the right. The lighter dropped out of my hand and blinked out. As I knelt and felt around for the lighter, a cool draft teased my hand.

What was this? My hand brushed against the lighter and I snagged it from the ground, relighting it and holding it toward the wall. The small breeze made the lighter flicker, almost blowing it out.

With my other hand, I felt around the breezy area, pressing against the stone. Suddenly there was a cracking noise and my

hand went through the wall.

So, this was made out of wood but had been cleverly painted to resemble the cave wall. Curiosity got my blood pumping and I ducked my head inside. This part of the cave smelled musty and old, probably because it didn't get any fresh air.

I had to crawl on my hands and knees while holding the lighter out in front of me to see where I was going. Once I got through the short hole in the wall, I was able to stand with several feet of head clearance above me.

The flickering lighter threw shadows on the wall, but it gave off enough light to see a lantern hanging from a hook on the wall. Rocks and gravel crunched beneath my boots as I walked over to light it.

I breathed a sigh of relief when it lit and pocketed the lighter. Holding the lantern high, I started to explore.

This was where Curtis' family member had his moonshine business. The evidence was there in front of me with an old still and several barrels. Would there still be booze in the barrels after all this time?

Anxious to find out, I walked over to the closest one. The lid was not attached and it was empty, but there was still a strong alcohol smell. The other barrels proved to be in the same condition.

With a sigh, I turned to leave, but stopped short. I had seen a strange shape as I passed the lantern in a swoop toward the tunnel. Swinging it back to get a better look, my mouth dropped open. A skeleton leaned against the wall in the corner.

Was this Curtis's relative? Was this where the man had held his last fight?

Closer inspection didn't reveal any more clues. Whoever he or she was, they appeared to have died alone in the cave. And for what? For riches? For power? I decided I did not want to meet the same lonely end.

I moved on to let them continue their final rest here. It was getting a bit too cold for my liking anyway. After blowing out

the lantern and returning it to the hook on the wall, I lit my lighter and crawled out of the fake opening.

Putting the lighter back in my pocket, I headed back to the house. The cold wind and snow was starting to seep into my bones. A hot shower was in order, and I picked up the pace to the cabin.

Inside, Marco was fiddling with some kind of electronics he'd probably brought with him while Curtis was playing a game of solitaire in front of the fireplace. I took the stairs two at a time and walked into the bathroom...

...And walked in on Michelle who had just gotten out of the shower. I had a brief glimpse of her naked body as she wrapped the towel around herself. She squealed, her eyes round and surprised.

"What the hell, Tomasso?" she cried out, trying to tighten the towel even more. "Ever hear of knocking?"

"Sorry," I said and started to back out, but stopped and turned to face her fully. With my heel, I closed the door, then took a couple of steps toward her. Her eyes went wide as she took a stumbling step backward.

"Listen, I'm sorry about your cousin. I was just trying to make sure we were safe."

A look of satisfaction flickered over Michelle's face. "You should have listened to me," she said. "I told you he is my family."

The next step I took put me right in front of her. I looked down into her deep brown eyes watching me wearily and smiled. "Trust doesn't come easily for me, Michelle. It is my nature to be suspicious. It's not about not believing you."

"But—"

I leaned in close and felt her breathing hitch. Our eyes locked and I saw something in hers, maybe desire? But then she pulled back, leaving me with nothing but air.

Michelle took in a deep breath. "Not so fast, buddy. You think you can come in here and try to sweet talk me and I'll

fall right into your arms?”

I shrugged. “A guy could hope.”

Although she tried to hide it, I saw her lips twitch as she tried to hold back a smile.

I leaned in again, taking my time, giving her a chance to pull away. But she didn't. When our lips met, I felt the touch all the way to my balls. No woman had ever affected me so easily as her.

“Jeez, Tomasso, your lips are freezing!” she exclaimed as she pulled back from me with a little shudder.

“Well, then, it's a good thing you're here to warm them up.”

When I kissed her again, Michelle raised her arms to wrap around my neck and her towel slipped down, hanging for a breathless second on her breasts, then dropping to the floor.

I grinned against her mouth and pulled her close as I started walking toward the shower. She surprised me when she wrapped her leg around my waist, pulling our bodies even closer together.

“Is this you falling into my arms?” I asked.

She looked down at me and scowled. “Are you *trying* to kill the mood?”

“Never! I just want to make sure we're on the same page.”

She jiggled her hips a little so our lower bodies rubbed together, then leaned forward and bit my ear. “I think you're at the beginning of the chapter and I'm wanting to get to the end.”

I blinked, then laughed, shaking my head. Michelle never ceased to amaze me.

I claimed her mouth with a kiss, opened the shower door and turned on the water. There was no need to wait for it to warm up since she'd just gotten out of the shower.

Michelle's hands were busy lifting my sweater from the hem up and over my head. We stopped kissing long enough to

get me out of my clothes and both of us into the shower, then our lips eagerly sought each other again.

“Now this is more like it,” she moaned. She dipped her head and started kissing my throat, her soft lips leaving a fiery trail everywhere they touched.

The warm water felt good spraying on me, but Michelle’s soft heat felt better. Pressing her against the shower wall, I cupped her breasts with my hands and tweaked the nipples.

Her head fell back and she gasped. Bending, I sucked first one nipple, then the other, my tongue and teeth bringing the tips to swollen nubs. We kissed again, our bodies urgently rubbing up against each other while our hands explored each other.

Running my hands down her sides, I gripped each ass cheek and lifted her. Michelle didn’t need any encouragement to wrap her legs around my waist, which put her core right where I wanted it.

She was hot, wet, and ready when I slipped inside her, both of us groaning at the exquisite pleasure. Maybe it felt too good because I already felt my orgasm speeding from my balls to the tip of my dick.

Holy shit, I didn’t know if I could hold it back. And then Michelle’s inner muscles started spasming around my erection and she broke our kiss to lean her head against the shower wall.

With a cry that echoed in the bathroom, Michelle’s orgasm was so strong it pulled me right along with her.

MICHELLE

What the hell had I been thinking? Having sex with Tomasso? Was I just looking for a way to make my life more miserable?

Yeah, sure, it had been awesome. The man knew his way around a woman's body.

But he was also mafia and with the past baggage between us, I didn't understand how I could fall so easily. Tiffany got lucky with Paolo who wanted out of the business, but with me, I didn't see Tomasso ever wanting to give up that life of danger. And that was just something I didn't want to be a part of. I mean, look, I was already hiding out and on the run for my life when we weren't even together.

I should have known, though, that being cooped up in a cabin in the middle of nowhere would eventually lead us to sex. And when you throw danger into the mix, well, it was a sure thing as far as I was concerned.

The man was just too sexy, and he had this undeniable pull on me. No matter how hard I wanted to fight the attraction, that just wasn't going to happen.

Oh well, there was nothing I could do about it now. What was done was done. How would I look him in the eyes though? If he showed that smug smile of his, I might just have to slap it off his face.

It was definitely going to make things a little more complicated. And if he thought that because I slipped once, I'd

let him into my bed whenever he wanted, he had another thought coming.

Tomasso walked across the cabin and my eyes followed him with a mixture of lust and frustration. His dark hair was a bit messy, which only added to his appeal. It reminded me of how it had looked after I'd run my hands through it.

Ugh! Why did my mind keep going there? The answer was simple, I thought with a low growl watching him walk. There wasn't a thing about him that wasn't sexy – at least physically. I could go on for days about how unattractive his personality was, such as his arrogance and know-it-all attitude.

“Okay, spill it cuz.”

I looked up, startled, at the male voice that sounded above me. “Curtis? Jeez, give a girl a heart attack.”

He walked around the back of the couch and sat down next to me. “Maybe if you weren't sitting there lusting after that man, I wouldn't have been able to startle you.”

Although he was smiling, I still tried to defend myself. “I wasn't lusting. I was just lost in thought.”

“Uh huh, sure,” he said with a grin. “But back to my question. What gives?”

When I looked at him in confusion, Curtis looked around the cabin, presumably to make sure we were alone, then continued.

“I know there's more to the story than what you told me the other night. I find it hard to believe Tomasso is running from the brothers of a sister he used to date. I mean, come on. He doesn't strike me as the type of guy who'd run away from anyone. Even a crazy ex.”

What the hell was I supposed to say? It was my turn to look around the room, only I wasn't making sure no one was around, I was hoping someone, namely Tomasso, *was* so they could explain the situation.

“You don't think that's enough of a reason?” I challenged instead. “You've seen those obsessed movies where a woman

will do anything to keep a man who doesn't want her."

"Yeah, but we're not talking about the movies," Curtis argued. He looked around again and then leaned in to whisper. "You and I both know Tomasso and Marco are more than they seem. They've got this air of danger around them."

"That's just because they tied you up," I laughed nervously, trying to play it off.

"Exactly. *Who* does that?"

"Paranoid people?" I offered with a raise of my eyebrows. By his frown, I could tell he wasn't falling for anything I said.

"Why does it matter?" I asked instead, trying to get him off topic. It wasn't my place to reveal Tomasso and Marco's mafia connections, and for all I knew, Curtis and I would both be shot and dumped in the river if I dared break that confidence.

"Why does it matter?" Curtis parroted incredulously. "Because they are in *my* cabin. Because we don't know what they're into. Because we are probably in danger. Because--"

"Okay, okay, I get it," I interrupted. I didn't want to hear a whole slew of reasons for why I should care more about what type of men they were.

The problem was, I did know, but didn't want to tell Curtis. Would he freak out even more? Probably. It might just send him screaming into the hills.

Curtis looked around again, obviously nervous, and started talking quickly, as if he needed to say whatever it was before Tomasso or Marco came back.

"What have you gotten yourself into, Michelle? This isn't like you. How do you know you can trust these guys?"

Marco? Well, I didn't trust him. But for some reason, I had no problem placing my trust in Tomasso and I knew he would do whatever it took to keep us safe. Including tying up my cousin, I admitted irritably to myself.

"I know you don't trust them, Curtis, but can you trust me?"

Curtis stared at me for a long moment before responding to my question. “I trust you, but when it comes to them, I can’t. Not until I know more about what’s going on. Maybe we should call in the police to—”

“Michelle is trying to protect you,” Tomasso said, coming into the room. He’d been so quiet, neither of us had heard him and his voice had us both spinning around to look over the back of the couch like two guilty teenagers caught sneaking beer.

“Protect me from what?” Curtis asked, and I was surprised he’d not only had the courage to do so, but also that his voice was so steady.

“Because I’m a mafia boss,” Tomasso said simply. “And Marco is part of that family. The brothers after me are dirty cops.”

TOMASSO

Curtis' brown eyes rounded so much they looked like huge saucers. His face paled and his mouth dropped open. He looked from me to Michelle, back to me, then at his cousin again, this time with raised, questioning eyebrows.

Michelle sighed and nodded. "I'm afraid it's true Curtis."

Afraid? Why was she afraid it's true? While I appreciated the fact that she tried to steer her cousin away from my identity, I didn't like her being afraid of me in any way. I would never let anything happen to her, but apparently, she didn't trust me enough. Yet, I qualified to myself.

"Listen, Curtis," I said, looking at the horrified man sitting on the couch next to Michelle. "That's dangerous information you have. You'd better keep it to yourself for your protection as well as your loved ones. Capisci?"

"Capisci?" Curtis asked.

"Capeesh," Michelle translated. "Understand."

Curtis nodded quickly and then swallowed so hard I could see his Adam's apple bounce with the movement.

I wasn't one to get off on someone's fear. To me, it was a necessary evil. I enjoyed my power, but I didn't like to see someone like Curtis, who had done nothing wrong, so afraid of me.

With a disgusted grunt, I left the cousins to talk and went outside. I'd thought about going to bug Marco, but he was up

in the computer room, busy tapping away on the keyboard. He was looking into ways to track the brothers and see what chatter he could find in the police files.

Meanwhile, I'd checked in with Paolo who I'd been in contact with since Marco had given me the burner phone. Paolo was running some leads and putting out the word to some of his contacts to see what he could find that we could use against them.

I didn't want to make a move until I had the edge on the brothers. Backed and protected by the police department as they were, I had to be careful how I dealt with the problem.

My hope was that Paolo or some of our contacts would be able to provide proof against the brothers. Not just how they went after me, which was my main goal of course, but any past transgressions as well.

I couldn't deal with them in the mafia way, just take them out and give them cement shoes. I had to be careful because they were the law.

I walked around the cabin's property for a bit. Although it was beautiful here, I was also getting bored. There was nothing to do. At least not with Marco and Curtis here. Now, if I had the place just for me and Michelle... I grinned... I could find plenty to keep me entertained.

Having sex with Michelle again had been a bonus and a worry. I had wondered if the reason I was so attracted to her and couldn't get her off my mind for those three years was simply because she wanted nothing to do with me after Paolo and Tiffany's wedding.

I wasn't used to being turned down by women, so it was possible it was a self-conscious male ego thing. But that wasn't it, because the sex had been even better than I remembered, and I still felt this powerful pull toward her. If anything, it was even stronger now.

But how did she feel? Judging by her body language, Michelle seemed to regret us having sex. Or maybe she was just embarrassed and shy about it. Whatever it was, it bothered

me. I had hoped we could fix the wrongs from the past and start seeing each other.

Another first for me. I couldn't remember a time that I actively sought out a serious relationship with any woman. Women practically threw themselves at my feet.

But I also knew it wasn't all because of my looks. Women liked the danger and power that surrounded me. And, of course, there was the money. Some women would do anything to land a rich guy. In that regard, it wouldn't matter if I was old and in a wheelchair, the money would still attract them.

Not Michelle, though. None of those things seemed to matter to her, and that was one of the things I liked about her. Plus, she wasn't afraid to stand up to me, even knowing the kind of man I was.

It was obvious she didn't approve of my lifestyle, but that hadn't kept her from going toe-to-toe with me when she felt like it. That was another big turn on for me.

The sound of wheels crunching on snow yanked me out of my thoughts. I was around the back of the cabin, so I carefully and quietly walked to the side. Since the driveway was long, I couldn't yet see the vehicle, so I made a mad dash behind some trees toward the front of the cabin.

I wanted to be in a position to prevent whoever it was from getting inside the cabin. From getting to Michelle. Reaching inside my jacket pocket, I withdrew my cell phone and tapped out a quick message to Marco: "Company," then put it away and zipped the pocket shut.

The vehicle finally started rolling into sight. It was a blue compact car going very slowly along the driveway. I stood behind the trees and shrubs, waiting patiently but also anxiously for the driver to park so I'd know who I was dealing with.

Nothing could have prepared me, though, for who came out of the car. After it stopped in front of the house, the driver's side door opened, and a feminine hand reached up to clasp the top of the window for support.

A blonde head appeared next and swiveled on a pair of fur coat-covered shoulders as she surveyed the area. She walked around the door slowly, then closed it and continued toward the front of the car. Since I was off to the side of her, I didn't get a good look at the intruder until she was in front of the car and had started walking toward the cabin.

For a moment I was locked in place, staring in awe at the woman. Not because she was beautiful, although from what I could tell she was, with long blonde hair and a slender figure. It was the lavish coat and five-inch-high heels the woman was wearing while she tried to navigate her way through the snow that got me.

She looked more like she was attending some fancy charity event than going to a cabin in the mountains. I shook my head at the idiotic sight and quickly snuck up behind her.

One arm wrapped around her waist while my hand clapped over her mouth. She hadn't heard me coming, so she wasn't able to respond except for the breathless squeak behind my hand.

"Fucking Grand Central Station," I muttered as I tried to figure out what to do with her. Marco came to the front door and opened it, his eyebrow quirked up in amusement.

I dragged the woman up the porch stairs and through the door, looking for Michelle. I had no idea who this woman was, but I wasn't going to make the same mistake twice and tie up someone who might be another cousin or family member.

The woman thrashed her legs and squirmed in my hold, her heels connecting painfully with my shins. I looked around her until I saw Michelle, then said, "A relative of yours?"

"I have no clue who she is," Michelle responded.

MICHELLE

“I have no clue who she is,” I answered Tomasso, and stared at the woman. She didn’t look familiar in any way. She had long blonde hair and wild blue eyes. I couldn’t see the lower part of her mouth because Tomasso’s hand was covering it.

She wore a large, thick fur coat. Was it real fur? I hoped not. Underneath she wore a small, tight dress that barely went down past the hem of the coat. Sheer pantyhose covered her trim legs, and... Good God, was she wearing stilettos out here?

They were a bright pink and sparkly pair of shoes that looked like they belonged on a Barbie doll instead of a full-grown woman out in the middle of nowhere. I winced as those sharp heels smacked against Tomasso’s shins. Whoever she was, she wasn’t happy.

I happened to look over at Curtis who was shaking his head. He looked at the woman and dropped his forehead into his hands.

“Do you know who she is, Curtis?” I asked.

Without raising his head, he nodded. “Barbara. My ex.”

Hearing that at least someone knew the woman, Tomasso took his hand off her mouth and then released his hold on her. She immediately toppled on those heels and would have fallen had Tomasso not reached out to steady her.

Barbara wasn’t happy with his help and jerked her arm away. Unfortunately, for her, the momentum sent her off

balance and she fell on the floor with a loud “oomph.” No one moved to help her up, but everyone looked at Curtis expectantly.

“What?” he said, his face screwed up in a perplexed expression.

The outrage on the woman’s face almost made me laugh. She sat sprawled on the floor, her purse off to the side where it had fallen and skidded across the wood planks.

When she finally looked up to see who had assaulted her, she got her first good look at Tomasso, and I watched with narrowed eyes as her expression went from outrage to interest in the blink of an eye. Then she looked to his right and caught sight of Marco and her eyes widened again.

I figured I knew what was going through Barbara’s head. If you were going to be kidnapped, then a woman couldn’t ask for better looking kidnappers.

She looked over her shoulder and scowled. “Don’t just sit there like an idiot, Curtis. Help me up!”

Curtis’ groan was loud enough that I figured we all heard it. He rose from the couch and walked over to her, holding a hand down.

She grabbed it and struggled to stand, then took a minute to jerk her dress into place and fluff up her hair.

“And it’s *Barbie*,” she said with a glare at Curtis before turning her attention to Tomasso and Marco. “Barbara just sounds too old and boring.”

Barbie, that suited her. She looked like the classic Barbie with her blue eyes, fair skin, and long blonde hair. She also sounded like she had the brains of a doll too.

“What are you doing here, Barbie?” Tomasso asked.

He didn’t look like he was falling for her charms, which shouldn’t have made me so happy. I had no claim to Tomasso. Just because we’d had sex didn’t mean we were suddenly exclusive. We hadn’t even had a chance to talk since then, either.

Her smile slipped slightly. “I came here to get my things back from Curtis,” she said. As I watched, dumbstruck, her pink lips pouted then started to tremble as if she was going to cry. “He broke up with me without warning and kept all my things that had been at his house.”

“It’s a T-shirt and a lipstick,” Curtis said with irritation. “And I didn’t keep them. You threw them at me when you left.”

“Well, I want them back,” Barbie complained. She folded her arms under her breasts and stood glaring at him with a pout.

I looked over at Tomasso. He watched Barbie with narrowed eyes. He was probably trying to decide what to do with her.

“Do you think she was followed?” I asked, walking over to stand between him and Marco while Curtis and Barbie continued to argue.

“I doubt it, but there’s no way to know for sure,” Tomasso answered.

“I don’t have them here,” Curtis argued. “Why would you come out to the cabin knowing I wouldn’t have your things with me?”

“How would I know you wouldn’t bring them out here just to hide them from me?” she demanded.

I shook my head in irritation and caught the amused expression on Marco’s handsome face. He seemed to be the only one enjoying the drama unfolding around us.

Turning my back on the arguing couple, I looked up at Tomasso. “What are you going to do with her?”

“Do?” he asked with a raised eyebrow.

“You tied Curtis up until you could make sure he was clear, so what are you going to do with her?”

“I can tie her up,” Marco interjected with a grin. When Barbie screeched, the sound was so shrill we all winced. “With a gag,” he added with a grimace.

Despite myself, I smiled. Marco was not only gorgeous, he was charming and funny too. Tomasso hadn't smiled yet, though. He still wore that inscrutable expression that gave me no hint of what he had planned.

"Obviously, she'll have to stay here for a bit," Tomasso finally said. "I don't think it's necessary to restrain her though. At least not yet."

"Stay here?" Barbie gasped. She walked away from Curtis to stand next to me, facing Tomasso. She was a few inches shorter than me, making me feel like I towered over her. But her shrill attitude made up for her small stature.

"I can't stay here," she argued, looking up at Tomasso imploringly. She blinked her baby blue eyes pleadingly and managed another pout. "I have to go home."

Thankfully, Tomasso didn't seem moved by her actions. "Sorry, that's not going to happen. At least not right now."

"But I don't have any clothes," she argued, then seemed to pause as if an idea struck her. Smiling, she ran a hand down Tomasso's arm while I clenched my teeth in frustration. "Unless maybe you have a shirt or something I can borrow?"

TOMASSO

Barbie was exactly the girl I tried to avoid. She was beautiful, vain, and collected men like some people collected stamps.

As she stared up at me with her baby blue eyes, I felt nothing but disgust. She wanted to borrow clothes? From me? Ha, wasn't going to happen.

"I'm sure Curtis has something here at the cabin you can wear," I told her. Her face fell and she tried to sway me by pouting her full lips.

It didn't work. I turned on my heel and went into the kitchen. Anywhere to get away from her.

"How about you?" I heard her ask and assumed she was talking to Marco.

That was confirmed when I heard his voice. "Sorry. I don't have any spares."

"Don't look at me." Michelle's voice. With a grin, I looked into the living room in time to see Michelle as she raised her arms out away from her side. "I don't have much, but what I do have I'm sure won't fit you."

That was true. Michelle was a good four or more inches taller than Barbie and more slender and toned. While Barbie had a good body, from what I could see that the fur coat wasn't hiding, she wasn't as trim and lithe as Michelle.

Finally, Barbie swung around to Curtis, a scowl marring her features. "Well? Do you have clothes for me or not?"

“Yeah. In the back bedroom there’s some clothes. Help yourself.”

Barbie followed Curtis toward the back of the cabin while Marco and Michelle joined me in the kitchen.

“She’s something else,” Michelle said with a shake of her head.

“All looks and nothing upstairs,” Marco agreed.

“Speaking of looking,” I said, changing the subject. “Have you heard anything about the brothers?”

Marco pulled a chair out from the kitchen table and sat down. Michelle and I followed suit. She gave me a challenging look as if she expected me to tell her this was man talk and she had to leave. But to me, she had every right to listen in and offer any suggestions she might have. This involved her, too. No matter how much I wished it didn’t.

“There hasn’t been much chatter that I’ve been able to pick up. Looks like they’re laying low, at least as far as law enforcement goes. Which makes sense,” he shrugged. “If they make this out to be a huge deal, then the other cops might wonder about their motives.”

“I talked to Paolo, too,” I informed them. Michelle raised her eyebrows in surprise, but didn’t say anything. “He said the brothers have been hitting up our informants, trying to figure out where we are. But since no one knows, they aren’t getting any information.”

“They won’t go after Tiffany and Paolo, will they?” Michelle asked, worrying her bottom lip. “I mean, they know he used to be the Barone boss and that you worked under him, so will the brothers try and hurt them to get answers?”

Although it was a possibility, I didn’t tell Michelle that. Besides, it wasn’t too likely since Paolo was out of the business now, but they could be desperate enough to try.

I shook my head. “No, I don’t think so. And even if they did, Paolo would spot them a mile away. He can take care of himself and his family.”

“I’ve spent the past couple of days decoding and setting up some programs on the computer upstairs,” Marco cut in. He must have caught on to Michelle’s nervousness as well.

“I put a tracer on the brothers’ vehicles, so you should get an alert on that phone I gave you if they get within three miles of you. It’s not a lot of time, but it’s better than being ambushed.

“Also,” he added, “it will only work for their personal vehicles. I can’t do anything about a rental car or if they use someone else’s.”

I grabbed a toothpick out of my pocket and stuck it in my mouth, contemplating our next move. “We’re safe here for now, but if we keep getting unexpected visitors, we’re just going to pull up and leave.”

“It’s a good hideout,” Marco agreed. “You should be safe here for the time being.”

He turned to look at Michelle with a smile. “And don’t worry about your job, Michelle. I think I’ve got that taken care of. Besides,” he added, “it’s only until we get enough goods on the brothers to put them away for life. We’ve got people working on it, so we just need to hang tight for now.”

Michelle looked at him incredulously and I couldn’t help the smile that sprang to my face. “My job? What? How?”

“It was just a matter of a few backdated emails and forging an approval slip. According to the hospital, you requested time off a while ago and it was approved.”

“Really?” Michelle shook her head. “I mean, that’s crazy. What if they find out?”

Marco put a hand over his chest in mock affront. “Me? Get caught? Never!”

“I think you’ve just insulted him,” I said. “You might want to be careful about that. The guy can reinvent your entire life in a matter of minutes and there’s nothing you could do about it.”

“Seconds,” Marco interjected. “It would only take me a few seconds.”

“Uh, well... thank you?” Michelle said hesitantly.

Marco nodded, and as if on cue, we all stood up. Just in time for Barbie and Curtis to come back into the room.

Barbie held up a plaid shirt and pair of brown sweats and looked at me with what could only be described as anguish. “I can’t possibly wear this. Can we go to the mall or something so I can get some proper clothes?”

I was about to tell her there’s no fucking way, but then I caught Michelle’s sour look and noticed the way her body had stiffened. Hmm. Could it be that she was jealous of the attention Barbie was giving me? I decided to test out my theory.

“Maybe later,” I said, then gave her a big smile, making sure to clamp down on the toothpick so it didn’t tumble out of my mouth.

Barbie’s smile got so bright it almost hurt to look at her. She stepped closer, close enough to lay her hand on the front of my chest while she looked up at me and batted her lashes.

I could have sworn I heard Michell growl behind me.

MICHELLE

After our conversation at the table, Marco excused himself and said he was heading back home where he could work on computers that weren't as old as dinosaurs. So that left me, Tomasso, Curtis, and Barbie stuck together in the cabin.

And it was the most awkward situation. Everything about Barbie seemed to grate on my nerves. I wasn't sure if it was because of her attitude, or the way she outrageously flirted with Tomasso. Probably both, I admitted to myself.

Even though I used to be in the modeling business, I was never one to try and get what I wanted by using my looks. I wanted people to see me for what I had upstairs, not what size my boobs were. Modeling had just been a means to an end, so that I could finish my nursing degree and get a job in the field I'd always wanted.

Women like Barbie made me sick. They thought the world revolved around them because they had a hot body. Well, they'd figure out in a few years that looks only lasted so long, and if all a man was interested in was a woman's body, then they would likely stray when something younger and hotter came along.

That night, we all sat around the table sharing grilled cheese sandwiches and macaroni and cheese. Not the most nutritious dinner, but then when I'd gone shopping, I had only expected to buy things for two people.

Tomasso sat to my right while Curtis sat to my left and Barbie sat across from me. It didn't escape my attention that we had somehow arranged ourselves in a boy-girl-boy-girl seating style.

Barbie still refused to change into the extra clothes Curtis had supplied, so she looked absolutely ridiculous sitting at the table with that fur coat on. It was bulky, making it difficult to eat, but it was too cold to take it off.

"So, Tomasso, what do you do for a living?" Barbie asked, shooting Tomasso a wink and smile.

"He kills people," I answered matter-of-factly.

Tomasso's only reaction was a raised eyebrow in my direction. Curtis, though, he choked on his macaroni and coughed for a good full minute.

Barbie giggled. It wasn't a real laugh, and it was annoying as hell. "Oh come on," she said. "What do you really do?"

Tomasso shrugged. "I'm a businessman. I do a little bit of this and that. Let's just say I have my hands in a lot of different pots."

"Oh, how interesting. So... are you good with your hands?" Barbie asked. She looked down at his hands and then back at his face.

It didn't take a genius to understand the sexual innuendo. I snorted, drawing Tomasso's amused grin.

"Depends," he answered. "I'm pretty handy around the house, if that's what you mean."

We all knew she meant the bedroom, and Tomasso played into her hands. Probably on purpose. The man was a dog. He had no sense of loyalty.

But, I reminded myself, we weren't in a relationship, so I had no right to be jealous or expect anything from him.

I shot a glance at Curtis and inwardly winced. The poor guy looked miserable. This was his ex-girlfriend and at one time they had been together. It must be difficult watching her come on to Tomasso like that.

“Excuse me. I’m going to bed.”

Tomasso looked startled. “Already? It’s early.”

I sent a pointed look at Barbie. “My stomach is upset. Good night, everyone.”

I wasn’t lying. Not really. It had made me feel sick watching Barbie gush all over Tomasso. All I wanted to do was get away from the table and seek some privacy.

I wasn’t in the room more than five minutes before I heard a knock on the door. I stood up from the bed, but before I could get to the door, it opened and Tomasso stepped inside.

“You really need to work on your manners,” I chided.

“What? I knocked first.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t wait for an answer. I could have been naked.”

He wagged his eyebrows. “Fine by me.”

I glared at him and put my hands on my hips. “What are you doing here? Aren’t you afraid your *Barbie* is going to get jealous?”

A grin spread across his face and his eyes twinkled with mirth. And something else. Maybe pride? Pleasure? I couldn’t tell.

“The only one I care about getting jealous is you.”

He’d said the words so softly, so sincerely, I wasn’t sure how to take them. Raising an eyebrow, I cocked my head to the side and studied him.

“Could have fooled me,” I said after a minute. “You look like you were enjoying the hell out of her attention.”

He took a step further into the room. And then another. This time I didn’t back down and stood my ground. “Only because it seemed to bother you.”

“So you like to irritate me?” I demanded.

He reached me and put a thumb under my chin, raising my head a little higher. “You are so cute when you’re all flustered,

did you know that? Your cheeks turn pink and your eyes get darker.”

He shook his head when I opened my mouth to argue. “But the real reason was because I liked knowing you cared enough to be bothered by another woman’s attention.”

I smacked his hand away from my face and walked over to the nightstand to put some distance between us. “Anyone would be irritated by that woman.”

He chuckled and closed the distance. “I don’t care about *anyone*,” he said, placing his lips on mine. It wasn’t a long kiss, just a brief meeting of our mouths, then he pulled back to look into my eyes. “I care about *you*.”

What a nice thing to say, I thought dreamily, then shook my head with a scowl. He probably said that to all the women he dated. I couldn’t let him get under my skin or in my heart.

“You don’t believe me?” he asked. He seemed to read my mind, which honestly kind of freaked me out.

As an answer, I shook my head, keeping my mouth stubbornly shut.

He pulled me down onto the bed with him so that we were sitting side by side. I got lost in his eyes, so lost in fact that I didn’t realize he was unbuttoning my flannel shirt.

“It’s true,” he said softly. “I do care for you. A lot,” he stressed. Leaning over, he placed another kiss on my mouth, deepening it briefly, before pulling away. “And trust me, that’s not something I tell a lot of women.”

I didn’t know whether to believe him or not, but at the moment, I was lost in his touch as his hands gently pushed my flannel off my shoulders and down to my waist. I barely noticed as he pushed the arms down and took my hands out of the shirt before he tossed it aside.

“And I’m supposed to take your word for it?” I managed to gasp out a second before he lifted the T-shirt I was wearing underneath and threw it on top of the flannel.

“I never stopped thinking about you after the wedding in Italy.” He continued talking, as if he wasn’t stripping me bare at the same time.

“I looked for you. I hoped you would come into the restaurant. But you ignored me. You wanted nothing to do with me.”

“I told you why. I thought you had left me and immediately gone on to your next conquest.”

He smiled and kissed my nose. “And now that you know that wasn’t the case?”

I looked into his deep blue eyes and chewed on my lip. He waited patiently for my answer, but I wasn’t sure how much I should tell him. How honest I should be. Honesty wasn’t always the best policy when your heart was on the line.

“I don’t want to get hurt,” I blurted out before I realized I was going to say anything.

“I would never hurt you. Not intentionally,” he qualified. Reaching up, he brushed strands of hair away from my face with a gentle caress. “You know, you have the power to hurt me too.”

Okay, that did it. My heart melted with those words and my barriers seemed to disappear in a flash. I smiled and returned the favor, brushing his hair away from his forehead.

When I leaned forward to kiss him, Tomasso hesitated only a moment before he met me with a tender kiss. But now that we’d gotten some feelings out in the open, I wanted more. I deepened the kiss, melding our mouths together while our tongues sought and explored.

While we kissed, I quickly took off his shirt and then ran my hands down his chest and flat belly. His stomach muscles twitched with the contact and I smiled against his lips, loving the sexual power I seemed to have over him.

Pressing me onto my back on the mattress, Tomasso unzipped my jeans and pulled them down my hips. I sat up and finished the job, throwing them off the bed while I pointed to his jeans.

Tomasso got the hint, and with a grin, removed his as well. But when he tried to crawl on top of me, I shook my head and wagged my finger in his face.

“You’re used to being in control, aren’t you, Tomasso?”

When he looked at me with a question in his blue eyes, I shook my head again. “Not this time. On your back, buddy.”

With a wide grin, Tomasso eagerly flipped over and laid there spread eagle, his eyes playful and eager at the same time.

I laughed and straddled his hips, then leaned down and kissed him. My breasts pressed against his chest and I started moving, rubbing myself along the length of his erection.

My wetness combined with Tomasso’s pre cum made us so slick the pleasure was almost excruciating. Pressure built low in my belly and my inner muscles started clenching. Breaking our kiss long enough for me to raise my hips, I reached between our bodies and guided him inside me.

We both groaned as I sank all the way to the hilt.

“Oh God, baby, you are so wet and tight,” Tomasso growled. One of his muscular arms snaked around my waist to help me with the rhythm while the other raised between us, his fingers plucking my nipples.

We were both too caught up in sensation to hold any kind of conversation besides grunts and groans, until I practically screamed as my orgasm burst from me.

Tomasso plunged harder and faster inside me, pulling every ounce of pleasure from my body. When my body finally stopped convulsing, I collapsed onto his chest, my breath sawing in and out of my lungs.

“My turn,” Tomasso said, and before I knew what was happening, he’d pulled out of me, slipped from beneath me, then flipped me onto my hands and knees. Then he was inside me, going deeper than ever. His hands gripped my hips while he set the motion.

I could feel his erection growing even larger as he got closer to his climax. Just when I thought he was going to

orgasm, he reached around and started rubbing my clit. The feeling was so intense, I found my release again instantly, as did Tomasso.

Tomasso leaned to his side, taking me with him without leaving my body. We laid there for a while until our breathing was more even. I fell asleep, naked, with him still inside me and his arm wrapped around my middle, holding me close.

TOMASSO

“How long are we going to stay here?” Michelle asked me.

I pushed the toothpick to the other side of my mouth. “I’m not sure yet. Usually, I wouldn’t want to stay in one place too long, but this is a good place to hide out.

“It’s in the middle of nowhere with only one road in. Plus, it’s not in your name, so it’s not easily traced.”

I grabbed the jacket off the rack by the door and put it on, zipping it up to my chin. The hem ended up between my back and gun, so I pulled it out and over the gun.

“We can’t stay here forever,” she argued.

“No, we can’t. I have Paolo talking to some sources to see what information we might be able to use against the brothers while Marco monitors the police channels.

“We need some kind of leverage,” I continued when she looked at me doubtfully. “It shouldn’t take long. They’re dirty and someone will cave and agree to testify against them.”

Michelle sighed. “It concerns me that we’re just sitting here like the proverbial ducks waiting for others to save our butts.”

I laughed because her face was screwed up in such disappointment. Small wrinkles were drawn between her nose and her mouth was turned down at the corners.

Of course she still looked hot. I didn’t think there was much the woman could do that wouldn’t still make her look

good.

Beautiful, she knew it, but didn't use it. I loved that about her.

"Trust me, if I knew of something else we could be doing without putting you in more danger, I would be doing it."

She raised her eyebrows and looked at me with surprise. "Are you trying to say you're staying in this cabin because of me?"

She sounded half flattered and half offended. It was the latter half that had me worried. I wasn't quite sure how to answer.

Finally, I decided the truth was the better, and safer, approach. "Yes."

She narrowed her eyes in irritation. Pulling the toothpick out of my mouth, I sighed. "You don't belong to this world," I explained. "You don't deserve to be in this mess."

"You're the one who dragged me into it when you showed up bleeding out at my door," she reminded me. Not that I needed that reminder.

I winced and shook my head. "I wasn't thinking clearly. Still, the brothers would have, at the very least, visited you at the hospital because you have ties to me, no matter how thin they might be."

She didn't look mollified exactly, but at least the frown drawing her eyes down had lessened somewhat.

"I'm sorry I got you into this, but I'm doing everything in my power to keep you safe."

"I just hope it's enough," she said softly, then walked away.

With those words ringing in my ears, I went outside. Curtis was sitting on the porch with a cup of coffee between his hands.

He looked up, saw it was me, and nervously looked away. My hand itched with the urge to slap some sense into him, but

that would only make him more frightened of me.

“Let’s go chop some wood,” I told him.

“With you?” he squeaked, then cleared his throat. “I-I mean right now?”

I had been walking away and was halfway down the porch steps when he uttered that question. I stopped and turned to look at him.

“Yeah, with me. And yeah, right now. Why not?”

I knew I put him on the spot, but he needed to learn to relax at least a little around me. Going around acting all skittish wasn’t doing anyone any good.

Besides, the more afraid of me he was, the more likely he might decide to call the police as soon as he got the chance. Curtis needed to learn that he had nothing to fear from me as long as he didn’t rat me out or put Michelle in danger.

“No reason,” he answered, then got to his feet.

We walked silently to the shed where there were several stacks of dried logs that needed to be cut down to size to fit in the fireplace, and others to be split into kindling.

Without a word, we each grabbed an axe and started working. Other than the thwack thwack of cutting wood, there was complete silence. “I’m not a danger to you,” I finally said into the silence.

He glanced sideways at me. “You’re mafia. You’re a danger to everyone.”

Well, he had me there. Sort of. “Only if someone gives me a reason. You know, it’s not like I go around just breaking legs or killing innocent people.”

He didn’t answer and we were quiet for a long time. Even though it was cold outside and clouds were starting to roll in, I was sweating like a pig.

Several times I had to pause to wipe sweat from my forehead. But then, so did Curtis I noticed with satisfaction.

“What about Michelle?” Curtis asked suddenly.

I paused to look at him. “What about her?”

“What are your plans for her? She knows you are mafia and is messed up in this... whatever it is,” he shrugged. “So what happens when she’s no longer useful?”

Ah, so that was what had been bothering him. He thought I’d hurt Michelle, break her heart, or worse. “I’ll tell you straight, Curtis,” I began and waited for him to lean his axe against the cutting board and turn toward me.

“I like Michelle. A lot. All I want to do is make sure she is safe. I would never do anything to hurt her.”

“Did you tell that other woman that too?” he asked, then continued when I frowned in confusion. “The one whose brothers are after you. Did you tell that woman you’d never hurt her too?”

I shook my head. “That was different, and no,” I hurried to explain when he looked like he was about to interrupt, “I didn’t tell her that.”

“I don’t like the idea of my cousin being with someone like you,” Curtis said. I had to give him credit for having balls.

Not that I planned to do anything because the man was sticking up for his cousin and speaking his mind, but because he seemed so scared of me already.

“I know you don’t,” I said. “I don’t think she likes it much either.” I had to laugh at that because Michelle wanted me but hated that she wanted me.

Last night was proof of that. Sex had been great, as expected, but she wasn’t pleased with herself that she enjoyed it so much.

She wanted to pretend like she didn’t have any feelings for me, but she did. It was in her eyes when she didn’t think to guard her feelings. It was in the way she expressed herself during sex.

I shook my head, put the axe away and picked up a stack of chopped wood. “I’ll take these in,” I told Curtis.

I could feel his eyes watching me as I walked away. I admired his loyalty and protectiveness.

I was still trying to think of a way to make Curtis more comfortable around me when I went inside the cabin. Then stopped in my tracks, my arms full of wood.

“You need to leave, Barbie.” It was Michelle’s voice. And by the sound of it, she was pissed.

“You don’t own this cabin.” Barbie’s retort, bitchy and snotty.

“Doesn’t matter. My cousin does and you are just in the way.”

One of the logs shifted in my arms and made enough noise to draw the women’s attention to where I was standing just outside the kitchen doorway. Barbie smiled like a cat with cream, probably thinking I’d stand up for her. Which I wouldn’t. I’d be glad if she left, too.

Then Michelle noticed me and her face instantly flooded with a blush that started below her neck and climbed to the top of her head. Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open into an “O” shape.

A second later, she marched out of the kitchen and toward the back of the cabin.

MICHELLE

What an idiot! I couldn't believe how stupid that was. And I knew, without a doubt, that Tomasso had heard me tell Barbie to leave.

It was there, clear in his asinine grin. The jerk had heard me and had enjoyed it! He probably thought I wanted Barbie to leave because I was jealous.

As if!

The woman was a pain in the ass. She wanted everyone to wait on her hand and foot. When she wasn't trying to get someone to do something for her, she was hitting on the men in the cabin.

Covering my face with my hands, I shook my head back and forth. I was standing in the bathroom, the only private place I could think of.

But then, it hadn't been that private when Tomasso had barged in. And we'd had sex. And it had been great. Then I let my guard down and had sex with him again!

I didn't really regret it if I was being honest with myself. The problem was, sex with Tomasso was more than just sex for me. I was beginning to care for him too much and that scared the shit out of me.

Forcing those thoughts out of my head, I went to the door and checked the lock. Nope, it was still broken so anyone really could come in any time they wanted to.

The wind suddenly whipped branches across the window, making me jump. For the first time, I noticed the sounds I hadn't been paying attention to.

The wind outside was howling and throwing branches, snow, and whatever else it could against the cabin. This was not good. It sounded like we were in for a windstorm.

Just fucking fantastic.

I took a deep breath and checked my reflection in the mirror and scowled. My cheeks were still a bit pink from embarrassment and my hair was a wild mess around my head.

Searching through the drawers and cupboards, I found a hair tie and finger-combed my hair into a ponytail. That was about the best I was going to be able to do for the time being.

Steeling myself for seeing Barbie and Tomasso again, I firmly grabbed the doorknob and practically yanked the door open.

The sound of the approaching storm was even louder when I reached the living room. Tomasso knelt in front of the fireplace, stoking the fire. It looked like he'd been busy because there was a huge stack of various sizes of firewood stacked next to it.

Barbie was sitting on the couch, wrapped tightly in her ridiculous fur coat. "It's cold in here," she complained to no one in particular.

I ignored her. "Where's Curtis?" I asked, walking up to Tomasso.

Tomasso looked over his shoulder at me. "He said something about grabbing boards for the windows."

"Oh, good idea. The wind sounds bad. Don't want it to break out the windows," I mumbled, walking toward the kitchen.

Tomasso had looked so good squatting in front of the fireplace. The jeans had pulled tight against his legs, showcasing those strong thigh muscles. The firelight had

danced off his face, highlighting his handsome features, strong jaw, and high cheekbones.

I wanted to take him into the bedroom and have my way with him again. With a delicious shiver at the thought, I walked faster toward the kitchen. I didn't have time for such fantasies.

Just as I passed the front door, it opened and Curtis stumbled inside. The wind was so strong it slammed the door against the wall and pushed Curtis inside.

"It's getting bad," Curtis announced, carrying plywood in his arms.

I grabbed the door and fought the wind to get it closed while Curtis set the boards down on the ground. Once his hands were free, he helped me push the door the rest of the way closed.

"There's a hammer and nails in the back bedroom closet," Curtis said.

I nodded and went in search of them while Tomasso walked over to Curtis.

Wind storms this bad didn't happen too often, but enough that Curtis kept pre-cut plywood to fit all the windows just in case.

I found the hammer and nails in a carpenter's tool belt hanging inside the closet. Tossing it over my shoulder, I headed back downstairs.

Tomasso and Curtis were setting out the boards at the windows where they belonged. I handed Curtis the tool belt.

"I'll go set out some candles," I told him and he nodded.

I looked into the living room and there was Barbie, standing in front of the fire with her hands stretched out to get some warmth.

"Barbie? Want to help me find some candles and set them out?"

She didn't even look at me when she shook her head. "It's too cold. I'm just going to stay by the fire and try to get warm."

What a waste of space, I thought irritably as I set out to scour the cabin for candles and, hopefully, some hurricane lamps and whatever else I could find.

Last time, we didn't have any warning about the power going out and I hadn't wanted to traipse around the cabin in the dark looking for any. Now we had the time and I wanted to be as prepared as possible. I didn't relish the thought of being stuck in a dark cabin with so many people bumping into each other.

After a thorough search of the cabin, I was able to find several candles and two oil lamps. Should I leave a candle or oil lamp in the bathroom?

Chewing on my bottom lip, I decided to leave a candle in there. Since there were two lamps, whoever needed to go to the bathroom could use one to navigate the cabin.

I placed one of the larger candles on the bathroom sink and then lit it with matches I'd also found on my hunt. Next I carried everything into the living room and set them down on the coffee table.

The sound of hammering echoed through the cabin as Tomasso and Curtis went around boarding up the windows. It was already making a difference on the noise level. The wind didn't sound quite as bad now.

However, looking out of one of the uncovered windows proved the windstorm was not lessening but had actually gained in speed and strength. A lot of the snow that had been built up had been blown off tree limbs. It was difficult to see very far because of a white blanket of snow that was blowing around the cabin.

I walked back to the coffee table where I'd set the candles and lamps and worked on getting the lamps lit. I managed to get one going when the power flickered and then went out.

Barbie screeched as everything went dark except for the soft glow of the fireplace and oil lamp. Actually, it wasn't that bad. There was enough light to make out the furniture in the living room, so no one should bump into anything.

And, of course, there was the white coat Barbie wore that was like a beacon in front of the fireplace. Which, hell, she hadn't been stoking, so the fire was losing heat.

"Shit," I heard a second after a thumping sound in the back of the cabin. It sounded like Tomasso. He'd probably just stubbed his foot on something or tripped over some furniture.

"Barbie, add some wood to the fire, please," I said as I grabbed the lamp that was lit and went in search of Tomasso and Curtis.

I didn't wait to see if she was listening and walked out of the living room. The men were just coming down the hall when I found them. I turned and led the way back to the living room with the lamp.

Barbie was still standing in the same spot, maybe even a little closer to the fireplace. She hadn't added a single log or piece of kindling.

"Barbie," I said, my voice tight with anger. "If you want to stay warm, add some wood to the fire or else it will go out."

I started lighting candles and placing them around the room and in the kitchen. When I returned, Tomasso was at the fireplace adding the wood.

"Thank you, Tomasso," Barbie cooed. "That wood is just so rough. I didn't want to get any splinters."

Okay, that was it. My patience had just snapped. I turned around, lit candle in hand, and faced Barbie. Who, by the way, was smiling up all sweet, like a damsel in distress, at Tomasso.

"First thing in the morning, Barbie, you're out of here," I said through gritted teeth, but my voice was loud enough to practically echo off the walls.

TOMASSO

“**Y**ou know that means we need to leave too.”

Michelle looked up at me when I came into the kitchen. She was sitting at the table drinking a cup of hot chocolate. The storm had passed, and it was the next morning. Curtis was busy checking the water and oil levels in Barbie’s car, something she’d insisted had to be done before she could leave.

“What are you talking about?” Michelle asked.

I pulled out a chair and sat next to her, my eyes scanning the area looking for anyone close enough to hear what I said before answering. “You told Barbie to leave, so we need to as well.

“We can’t take the chance that she might call the police. Here, we could monitor her, make sure she didn’t make any phone calls. But she can easily drive to the end of the driveway and call.”

“But she doesn’t know what’s going on. Why would she even think about calling the police?”

I shrugged and popped a toothpick into my mouth. “She’s unpredictable and we can’t take the risk.”

Michelle’s eyes traveled up to the ceiling and she frowned. “That’s if she ever gets out of the shower,” she grumbled. “She’s been in there a good forty-five minutes. There won’t be any hot water left for anyone.”

“Listen, Michelle. While we have a few minutes alone, I want to say something.”

It didn't escape my notice the way she suddenly looked wary. Her eyes narrowed slightly and her grip on the hot chocolate cup grew tighter.

Reaching across the table, I pulled one of her hands away from the cup and held it in my own. Her skin was warm from the steaming cup, but stiff and uncertain.

“I like you. A lot,” I began. “I want to continue seeing you, exclusively,” I clarified, just in case she wasn't understanding my meaning, “when all of this is over.”

I waited for her to say something but she just stared at me. For once, her beautiful face wasn't showing any hint of her thoughts.

My stomach started to churn. Had I read her wrong? Was she now going to turn me down? I didn't even realize I had been holding my breath until I started to see spots before my eyes.

Okay, this was bullshit. I was the head of a very powerful mafia family yet here I sat on pins and needles waiting for a woman to respond to my declaration.

“I would like that, Tomasso,” she said softly and I felt my breath come out in a whoosh. Only for it to hitch in my throat again when she said those three little letters that meant whatever followed I wasn't going to like. “But...”

Absently, I stroked my thumb across the back of her hand. “But what?” I asked.

She looked down at the table and shook her head, the black tresses floating around her shoulders. “But you're in the mafia,” she said, her voice so low I almost didn't hear her.

She raised her head and met my eyes steadily. “I like you too, but what kind of relationship could we have? Your life is just too dangerous for me.”

She paused, cocked her head to the side, and drew her eyebrows down. “You're in the business of killing. I'm in the

business of healing.”

Okay, that was a blow to the gut. I admired her honesty, though. She wasn't afraid to speak her mind around me, which was a nice change. And she didn't play games.

That was so different from the women in my circle and another reason why I wanted to pursue things with Michelle and see where'd they take us.

But she had a valid point. Our lives were vastly different. Lately, though, I'd been tossing around the idea of a life outside of the mafia. Those thoughts had been inspired by Paolo and how he'd found happiness with Tiffany.

Watching them had made me think that perhaps there was something else out there waiting for me. A special woman who wasn't after me for power or money.

Yet, I'd worked so hard to get where I was today. Would I even be able to get out of the life if I'd wanted to? Would it just keep calling me back?

I knew some guys who'd tried to quit but kept getting sucked back in. Sometimes it was just because they'd been too deep, but for others, it's the only life they'd ever known.

Like me.

“Paolo and Tiffany made it work,” I told Michelle.

She shook her head. “But he got out of it. He'd been working on getting out of the business since before he'd met her. They had a future without the mafia.”

“What if I told you I was planning on getting out?” I blurted out without thinking.

Her eyes went round, and her brows rose high on her forehead. “Are you?”

I didn't miss the slight hopeful quaver in her voice. I shrugged. “It's crossed my mind.”

Some of the hope I'd seen glimmering in her eyes dimmed and she looked away. I felt like a jackass for getting her hopes up and then dashing them.

But I wasn't even sure what I wanted yet. Quitting the business had been something I'd been thinking about, but not planning. And I wanted to be honest with Michelle. She deserved that much at least.

I opened my mouth to say I still wanted to give whatever this was between us a chance, but Barbie chose that moment to walk in.

"The hot water doesn't last very long," she complained, walking into the kitchen. I caught Michelle rolling her eyes and almost laughed out loud.

I didn't blame her. Barbie was a high maintenance brat who thought her body gave her a pass to do and get away with whatever she wanted.

While she was pretty, Michelle was exquisite. Barbie was superficial while Michelle had so many layers I imagined it could take a decade or even a lifetime to figure them out. Barbie played games; I didn't think she knew any other way. Michelle gave it to you straight without holding punches.

"Isn't there any coffee?" Barbie whined.

Michelle shook her head and held up her cup. "Hot chocolate. There's cups in the cupboard and instant mix packages on the counter."

Barbie just stared at Michelle as if she was speaking a foreign language. She stood there at the counter, wearing that ugly white fur coat, and waited for someone to get up and make it for her.

No one moved.

One of Barbie's stiletto encased feet started tapping impatiently on the floor. I looked at Michelle and covered my mouth to hide my grin. She sat there staring into her cup, obviously ignoring Barbie.

The door opened, allowing a cold shaft of air inside as Curtis walked in. "Oil and water are fine," he said, walking into the kitchen. "I started your car and turned on the heater so it will be warm when you get in."

Curtis was obviously as anxious, if not more than we were, to see Barbie on her way.

“Now I just need some coffee,” she said. She looked around the room at each of us individually, but none of us paid any attention.

After a few seconds, she huffed out her breath, shoved her purse up higher on her shoulder, and tried to stomp out of the kitchen. It didn't really work in those high heels, but I'd give her an A for effort.

Everyone was quiet as she made her way to the door. The only sound was her shoes clicking on the floor. When she reached the door, she paused to look out the window.

“You kick me out and invite someone else?” she asked in astonishment.

“No one was invited,” I said with a frown, already standing from my chair.

“Well, someone is driving up the driveway,” she grouched.

I crossed to the door in a few long strides and looked out the window. Turning grimly to Michelle and Curtis, I said, “The brothers are here.”

MICHELLE

Tomasso's gun was out from behind his waist so fast, I didn't even see him move. Honestly, I hadn't even known he was carrying. Which was stupid since he's had the thing on him the whole time we'd been here.

He pointed down the hall, which I assumed meant the back door. Curtis and I headed off immediately, but I paused and looked back to see Barbie still standing at the widow.

Backtracking, I grabbed her arm and pulled her along with me, much to her outraged protests. Tomasso was right behind us.

I could hear the tires crunching on the snow and gravel now and my heart literally skipped a beat before it sped up and started thundering in my chest.

"Hurry," Tomasso urged in a loud whisper.

"What's going on?" Barbie wanted to know, still trying to resist me, her high heels clacking across the floor.

"We'll tell you later. Just hurry," I snapped at Barbie.

Curtis was unlocking the back door for us to escape through when the first gunshot rang out. The sound of splintering wood followed as we hurried out the back door.

They must have crashed through the front door, I thought, panicked, just as Barbie let out a blood curdling scream.

Surprisingly, it was Curtis who spun around and clapped a hand over her mouth. I would have expected Tomasso to take

charge like that, but my cousin grabbed Barbie with one hand on her arm and the other across her mouth.

She struggled, of course, but when another gunshot rang out, followed by two more, Barbie's self-preservation finally kicked in and she put on a burst of speed and started running through the snow, her high heels not seeming to bother her too much at the moment.

Tomasso caught up to Curtis who was in the lead and pointed ahead. I had no idea what he was talking about, but Curtis seemed to, because he nodded and led the way.

Tomasso dropped back so that he was next to me. When our eyes met, he gave me an encouraging smile, but it really didn't do anything to relieve my angst.

As we ran, Tomasso pushed branches away so they wouldn't smack me in the face or other parts of my body. Even though we were literally running for our lives, the protective gesture caused my heart to melt just a little bit more.

If this kept up, soon I wouldn't be able to resist him no matter how much my logical side tried to warn me away.

Curtis stopped ahead and I barely had time to slow my momentum before I crashed into his back. Tomasso helped with a gentle hand on my arm steadying me.

I watched in amazement as Curtis and Barbie disappeared into what had to be the cave he'd talked about. Although I'd been here several times in my youth, I'd never actually seen the cave before.

I followed and then Tomasso went in last. It was a tight fit and the only sounds we heard were our own labored breathing. Well, until Barbie spoke up.

"What is going on?" she demanded; however, she was wise enough to keep her voice to a whisper thankfully. "Why are they shooting at us?"

Although it was dark inside, there was enough sunlight filtering in, and because we were packed in like sardines, we could at least see each other. Barbie's eyes widened when she looked at Tomasso. Or, rather, at the gun in his hand.

“Why do you have a gun?” she gasped, staring at Tomasso as if he’d suddenly become one of the bad guys.

“Would you rather we were defenseless?” Curtis responded, surprising me again. He’d made no secret that he didn’t like Tomasso because of his being in the mafia, but now my cousin was sticking up for him. And he was seemingly glad he had a gun.

I knew I was. It wasn’t much, and only Tomasso was armed, but I’d seen him in action and knew he could handle himself. Hell, he’d been shot, half delirious with fever, and hanging out of a car during a high-speed chase and had still been able to shoot out the tire of the brothers’ vehicle.

There was a sudden burst of gunshots that echoed through the woods and reverberated inside the cave. While Tomasso stood at the entrance way, his eyes trained outside, the rest of us covered our ears – it was so loud.

Behind me, Curtis stood with an arm wrapped around Barbie’s shoulder. Her face was pale and she was leaning into him as if his body could somehow absorb her. For a minute, I envied her. I wished that Tomasso could provide some of that same kind of security feeling.

But then I realized how stupid that was. He was busy standing in front of us all, ready to take any bullets to protect us. He was the one with the gun and, I thought, he was the best protection I could ask for.

Suddenly Tomasso’s large body stiffened. He leaned slightly forward, the gun firm in his hand. Without looking back, he waved his hand, indicating for us to move further into the cave.

Without a word, the three of us stepped back as far as we could. It wasn’t much, and we were all scrunched together so tightly a piece of paper couldn’t slide between us.

It was so tempting to ask Tomasso what was happening. In fact, I had my mouth open to do just that when I realized how stupid that would be. If I started talking, it could give our position away. Sound traveled in the forest, and that was

especially true in caves. I didn't know how far, but I didn't want to risk it.

It turned out, I didn't have to wait long to figure out why Tomasso had ordered us to the back of the cave because I heard it then, too.

Footsteps.

Coming closer to our position.

Tomasso stepped to the side so that he was partially shielded by the side of the entrance. As the footsteps drew closer, he flattened his back against the wall, his head turned to the side to see the entrance, and his gun held firmly in front of him.

He turned briefly, our eyes meeting, and I felt a sense of calm settle over me. Whatever happened, I had faith that Tomasso would be able to handle it. I didn't know why I suddenly felt that, but it was true.

The steps were right outside now. I didn't look at the cave entrance as much as I watched Tomasso, so it was a bit of a surprise when Tomasso suddenly lowered his gun and stepped away from the cave wall.

I glanced at the entrance, my eyes widening when I saw Marco, Tomasso's cousin, standing there. He'd been holding a gun, too, but like Tomasso, he'd lowered it to his side.

"You nearly got yourself shot," Tomasso growled, but it sounded more like he was teasing than berating the younger man.

"Not likely," Marco grinned. "But we don't have much time. I managed to take down the stragglers, but the brothers got away. I'm sure they'll be back just as soon as they've gathered their senses."

"Cops?" Tomasso asked, waving the rest of us forward and out of the cave.

Marco shook his head. "No. Hired thugs. Not worth the money if you ask me. It was like shooting apples in a barrel."

I didn't even want to think about how many bodies might be left at the cabin. Tomasso took the lead with me behind him. Curtis and Barbie were behind me, and Marco brought up the rear.

"My car!" Barbie shrieked when we rounded the cabin. She broke free of Curtis' hold and ran toward it.

The front window had been shot out and one of the tires was flat. Curtis followed her and was quietly telling her to keep her voice down, that they'd get it fixed later.

The most important thing was that we got the hell out of there before the brothers came back. While Marco went to his own vehicle, Tomasso and I went to mine, and Curtis and Barbie went to his.

The time at the cabin had come to an abrupt end.

TOMASSO

“I guess the cat’s out of the bag now.”

I glanced at Michelle who was sitting in the passenger seat staring out her window. I couldn’t see much of her profile because her hair was hanging around the side of her face.

I wanted to reach over and tuck it behind her ear but clenched my fist instead. She probably wouldn’t appreciate the gesture right now. Not after she’d witnessed all that violence again.

“What cat and what bag?” I answered, turning my attention back to the road. We’d been driving for nearly an hour now, and I still had no idea where I wanted to go. My only concern was to put distance between us and the brothers.

“That we were at the cabin,” Michelle answered softly. She turned in her chair to look at me. “I’m sure Barbie will say something. At the very least, she’ll have to get her car and report the damage to the insurance agency.”

“Marco will take care of it,” I assured her. “He followed them to make sure no one says anything, and he’ll get her car fixed and back to her home as soon as possible.”

“When you say, ‘take care of it,’ you don’t mean...”

When she trailed off, I winced and shook my head. “He’s not going to kill them, if that’s what you mean.” My voice was more irritated than I’d meant, but I really hated how Michelle always seemed to think the worst of me. She seemed to think

my first reaction would always be violence, even though she had seen that wasn't true.

That didn't seem to reassure her though, so I added, "He's not going to break their legs or hold them hostage either. He's just going to talk to them. Explain the danger of going to the police."

We fell into silence again, except for the loud flapping of the plastic that covered the back windshield that had been shot out by the brothers. I really needed to get that fixed. It didn't exactly help our trying to stay incognito.

"Are you hungry?" I asked, then grinned when her stomach responded with a loud growl.

"Obviously," she smiled wryly.

"How about we get some take out and check into a motel?"

She nodded. "I'm ready to relax for a while. Just have some peace and quiet."

I was all about that too. The longer we stayed on the road, the easier it was for the cops to find us since Michelle's car was so distinctive with the plastic over the window. Plus, they had an APB out on us, and probably this car.

It took another twenty minutes before we found a suitable motel that was off the main highway. It wasn't going to win any gold stars, but it was fairly clean and affordable since we were using the rest of the cash we had left.

After checking in, we went to a fast-food drive through. Michelle ordered a chicken sandwich and fries with tea, while I got a double-decker burger, onion rings and a soda, then we drove back to the motel.

We ate in silence, with just the television news playing in the background, both of us hungry after the day's events. When we were through, Michelle gathered our trash and put it in a garbage can, then she went to take a shower.

I stared after her, wanting desperately to join her, but somehow, I knew this wasn't the time. Instead, I called Paolo on the phone Marco had given me.

“Yeah, I’ve had a few visits from the cops,” Paolo said after I told him what had happened. “They think I know where you are and have placed tails on me.”

He paused to laugh. “As if I couldn’t spot them a mile away.”

“They aren’t bothering Tiffany and the children, are they?” I asked, concerned my mess had caused problems for the family.

“No. Mostly because Tiffany works from home anyway and with the twins so young, we don’t get out much right now.”

I nodded, feeling relieved. “Sorry about this,” I said. “I never meant to drag anyone into my mess. Especially since you got out.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Paolo admonished. “They are like gnats. A little buggy, but not a problem. However, they are seriously out for blood. They want you badly and are looking for Michelle too.

“They still have her listed as kidnapped, as far as I could tell, but I don’t think it will stay that way much longer.”

Michelle came out of the bathroom, dressed in a pair of leggings and a sweater. She had her head turned to the side as she towel-dried her hair, but when she heard me talking, she looked over and walked toward me.

“Is that Paolo?” she asked. When I nodded, she thrust out her hand. “Let me talk to Tiffany.”

“Hey Paolo, is Tiffany around? Michelle would like to talk to her.”

“Sure, just a minute.” There was a brief pause then Tiffany was on the phone, which led me to believe she’d been sitting by Paolo all this time.

“Hey Michelle. Are you okay?” she said as soon as she got on the phone.

“Hi Tiffany. Tomasso here. Here’s Michelle.”

I handed the phone to Michelle who snatched it up eagerly and started walking around the room while she talked to her best friend.

While they talked, I took a shower. When I went out of the bathroom, Michelle was sitting cross-legged on the bed, still talking.

Using hand signals, I asked her if she wanted anything to drink. When she shook her head, I left the room and went to the office where they had complimentary coffee. It wasn't the best, but it worked in a pinch.

By the time I returned, Michelle had hung up and was watching television. She looked over as I walked inside and offered me a slight smile.

"Tiffany said she's been using her reporter contacts, too, and has some promising leads," Michelle said, sitting up straight on the bed with her back against the headboard.

"It won't be much longer, Michelle," I told her softly and sat at the small round table where we'd eaten earlier. "Something will break soon, then we can get back to our lives."

Hopefully with Michelle in it, I thought.

She cocked her head and looked at me thoughtfully. "Have you always wanted to be in the mafia?"

I shrugged. "I never gave it much thought. I was born into it. It was a way of life and the only thing I'd ever known."

She nodded as if that made sense to her. "Do you ever think about doing something else?" She shook her head and waved a dismissive hand in the air. "I mean, have you ever wondered what you would have done had you not been in the mafia?"

I frowned because writing was a secret passion of mine, something I'd always wanted to do. But did I want to open up that much to her? It was very personal but somehow, I knew I could trust Michelle.

Besides, maybe telling her might help her to see me as something other than the head of a mafia family. Something besides violence and breaking the law.

“I have,” I admitted but said nothing else for a few minutes. Michelle didn’t try to urge me to continue. She just sat there patiently waiting for me to explain.

“No one knows this, not even Paolo,” I said, giving her a mock stern look.

“I won’t say a word,” she said seriously, dragging two fingers across her mouth to indicate her lips were sealed.

“I write science fiction,” I said quietly. She leaned forward and I realized she hadn’t heard what I’d said. “I write science fiction,” I repeated. “I’ve always wanted to be a novelist.”

MICHELLE

I couldn't have been more surprised had he said he wanted to be a belly dancer. Tomasso? A writer? And a science fiction one at that? The idea just blew me away.

He must have recognized my skepticism from my expression because he scowled at me.

"Do you find that so hard to believe?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

He was confiding in me something he said he had never told anyone else, so I didn't feel right making him feel uncomfortable. It was just that it was so surprising to me.

"No," I said. "Well, a little. You have to admit it's a big difference from being the head of a mafia family."

Tomasso nodded in understanding. "And that is precisely one of the reasons I like it so much. Besides, I like the ability to create. I find it relaxing, and it intrigues me how I have particular plans for a story, but then the characters end up sending me on a totally different path."

"But science fiction?" I still could not wrap my head around that. Maybe a Western or a mystery, but science fiction or fantasy? I found that about as plausible as him writing romance.

That thought had me chuckling and had him raising an eyebrow.

"Yes, science fiction. What is so funny about that?"

“Nothing is wrong with it. I’m glad you found something outside of the business, something productive and, well, less violent.”

“Do you think there isn’t any violence in science fiction?” Tomasso asked, pushing the toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other.

“You know what I mean. But seriously, I would like to read something you’ve written someday.”

“Someday maybe I will let you.”

That night we both slept in the same bed, but we didn’t have sex. I wasn’t sure if I was happy about that or not.

In a way, I wanted to have that closeness with him. But the logical side of my brain, the one that keeps giving me so much trouble, was all about keeping the distance between us.

Even though it felt kind of uncomfortable sleeping next to him, waiting for one of his strong arms to wrap around me, or his leg to rub up against me, I still ended up falling asleep pretty fast.

The next morning we got up and took our showers and packed up our few belongings, which just consisted of a couple of things we had picked up at a convenience store. Then we checked out of the motel and got back on the road.

As we drove, I kept casting sideways looks at Tomasso. I would have never guessed he had a secret desire to be a writer. But somehow that knowledge endeared me to him even more.

He was no longer just the scary mafia man. He was a man with hopes and dreams that went beyond the violence of his regular life.

And that was something I could definitely get behind.

We drove for about fifty miles just so that we could use an ATM since we were out of cash. It was pouring down rain when Tomasso got out of the car and ran to the banking machine.

By the time he got back to the car he was soaking wet. He shook his head like a dog and sprayed me with water droplets.

I screeched at him and slapped him on the shoulder.

Tomasso shot me a sideways look and grinned cheekily.

“Jerk,” I said, but I was smiling when I said it.

Looking at his wet hair all slicked back reminded me of when we had shower sex. My eyes traveled to his hands on the steering wheel, how his long fingers were strong and gentle at the same time. And the way those hands had roamed over my body and brought me such great pleasure.

I looked back at his profile, the strong jaw and high cheekbone. I had the sudden urge to grab his face and kiss him.

Mentally shaking my head, I tried to push those thoughts from my mind. We were on the run from corrupted cops who wanted us dead. This was no time to fantasize, no matter how hot the guy.

Apparently I wasn't the only one fantasizing, though. Tomasso kept looking at me out of the corner of his eyes. I swear I could actually feel the heat as they swept over my chest and my legs.

My nipples started tightening and tingling while my lower belly fluttered. Even though my mind was telling me no, my body was already preparing itself in anticipation of being with Tomasso.

When we happened to look at each other at the same time and our eyes met, my belly flip-flopped. His eyes were hooded, and passion gleamed from them.

He removed his hand from the steering wheel and reached across to settle it over the top of mine. Out of reflex, I wrapped my fingers around his hand, and just like that we were holding hands. Without a word exchanged.

It was strange how it felt so right to be sitting here holding hands with Tomasso. I didn't understand it, but it was true.

Despite everything, I suddenly felt relaxed. The fact that the brothers were looking for us didn't seem to be as much of

a problem right now. Even the loud flapping of the plastic covering the back window didn't intrude into my thoughts.

We continued to drive for another three and a half hours in the opposite direction of where we'd stopped to use the ATM before Tomasso announced it was time to find a motel.

I didn't catch the name of the small little town we pulled into, but it seemed charming and old fashioned. The houses looked older, but well kept with bright and clean paint jobs.

As we drove down the main road, many of the houses had flower beds and gardens adding a splash of color.

It was only sprinkling now, and even though dusk was starting to fall, there was a patch of blue sky shining through the gray clouds. It was idyllic and serene.

By the time we checked into a quaint little motel on the far side of town, I was tired but feeling more positive about our situation.

"Why don't you go ahead and turn on the TV, and I'll order us some pizza," Tomasso suggested.

"Sounds like a plan."

I plopped down on the bed and turned on the TV, using the remote to switch through channels until I found a local news station.

As I listened to a newscast about the rise of inflation, I dimly heard Tomasso ordering our pizza, telling the person on the other end that we would be paying with cash.

I looked over at Tomaso and smiled, only to frown when I saw his stern expression as he looked at the TV. I returned my attention to the news program and my mouth dropped open. I literally felt all the blood drain from my face.

Staring back at me was a picture of Tomasso with the words "wanted for attempted murder," and next to that was my picture with the words "wanted for accessory."

TOMASSO

Seeing my picture on the news had pissed me off, but seeing Michelle's had twisted my gut. When I looked over at her, her face was so pale I was afraid she might faint.

Her brown eyes were wide in her face and her hands were shaking. The fact that I was responsible for her absolute fear tormented me. She was a good woman who didn't deserve this.

The next day as we drove to a new location, I couldn't stop thinking about what I was putting her through. And not just being wanted by the police.

Because of me, her life was in danger. She had her house shot up, her car shot up, she had been shot at, and was now wanted by the law.

Before the news cast, Michelle at least had a job to go back to. But what would happen to that now that they thought she was an accessory to attempted murder of a cop?

I have ruined her life. Because of me, she could end up getting killed.

The thought of seeing Michelle bleeding out and dying sent a terror through me like nothing I've ever experienced in my life. And that was saying a lot considering what I do.

She was sitting next to me in the passenger's seat, but she had been very quiet. She hadn't even been sending looks my way like she used to. Instead, her head was turned and she was

looking out the side window with her hands clasped tightly in her lap.

Everything in me wanted to protect her, to make things right, but I was not sure how. Yet.

But I knew I would get those bastards, one way or another. The sooner the better.

I pulled into a gas station and while I pumped gas I kept glancing at Michelle. She hadn't moved, except for looking out of the side window now she was looking down at her lap. Her long dark hair shielded her expression from me.

I went inside the store and grabbed us each a bottle of water and some trail mix. When I returned to the car and handed her the bottle of water, she just nodded her thanks. Her hand was cool to the touch.

I started the car and we drove out of the gas station.

"Do you need anything?" I asked, trying to start some kind of conversation.

She only shook her head as answer.

I drove for a few more minutes, then looked over at her again.

"Would you like to stop somewhere and get out and stretch your legs?" I asked. We'd been driving for a few hours already today and I thought maybe she might like to get some air.

But she only shook her head and continued looking out the side window.

She must be in shock. Michelle was never one to be quiet and was quick to speak her mind. This resigned, almost depressed attitude was really starting to worry me.

"Everything will be okay," I promised.

Finally, a response from her. Not the best granted, but it was something. She snapped her head around to glare at me.

"How? How in the world will everything be okay?"

“Because I will make it so,” I said, and I meant it with every fiber of my being. I’d rather take another bullet than see her suffering another second.

And that thought sent fear zinging through every part of my body. I knew what that meant. It meant that I had fallen in love with her.

I had never been in love with any woman, ever. And honestly I never expected to. In my experience, except for maybe Paolo and Tiffany, love only brought heartache and troubles.

I never thought I would be one to fall for that trap. Yet here I was, ready and willing to take a bullet just to make a woman feel better.

“Just because you say it doesn’t make it so.”

For a second, I thought Michelle had read my thoughts. But then I realized she was talking about my comment where I said I would make it happen, I would make everything better.

“You should know me well enough by now to know that when I say something, I mean it. When I say I will get something done, it will get done.”

I could feel her staring at me for a long minute before she turned back to look out the window. Her hands were not gripped in her lap anymore, now they were balled into fists and I wasn’t sure if that was a good or a bad thing.

After a couple of more hours on the road, I turned off the highway and found a motel for the night. While Michelle took a shower, I drove into town and picked us up some burgers, chicken sandwich for her though.

By the time I returned, she was showered and dressed in a pair of leggings and long T-shirt. She must have used the blow dryer in the bathroom because her hair was dry and pulled back into a sleek ponytail.

“Do you want to watch some TV while we eat?” I asked.

She walked over to the table where I had set the food down and shook her head. I didn’t blame her, I’m sure she didn’t

want to see her picture plastered all over the TV again. It was a stupid suggestion in the first place and I could have kicked myself in the ass for even saying it.

I took a shower after eating, and when I came out Michelle was laying on the bed. She glanced over at me and then quickly looked away and scrubbed at her eyes with her hands. Fuck, she'd been crying.

A pain started squeezing my chest and at first I thought maybe I was having a heart attack, but then I realized that my pain was because she was in pain.

Wearing just a pair of sweatpants, I set the towel I'd been drying my hair with on the chair by the desk, and crawled onto the bed next to her.

When I pulled her into my arms, she didn't resist and in fact snuggled closer to me. I held her tightly, rubbing my hand up and down her back while she buried her face against my naked chest.

I could feel the wetness from her tears on my skin and I frowned, kissing the top of her head.

"I'm so sorry, Michelle. I am so sorry I got you into this. But I promise you, I will not stop until this is finished, and you are safe, and you have your job back."

The top of her head bumped my chin when she looked up at me.

"You're going to get my job back for me too?" She said it sarcastically, actually with a little bit of a hint of humor to it. So I smiled.

"Yes."

The way she was looking at me, so lost and vulnerable, tore at something inside me. It brought out protective instincts I didn't even know I had.

It seemed like the most natural thing in the world to lean forward and press my lips to hers. She didn't pull back. In fact, she pressed her lips harder against mine and one of her arms sneaked up between our bodies to wrap behind my neck.

I felt her nipples pressing against my chest as I deepened the kiss, our tongues meeting, entangling, caressing, and exploring.

She moaned slightly into my mouth and I tightened my hold on her. The feel of her in my arms, pressed against my body, was the best feeling of my life.

I broke the kiss long enough to kiss the tip of her nose, then each eye lid. And before I knew it, I looked into her eyes and whispered:

“I love you.”

Her response was not what I expected. She jerked and then pulled away. Her eyes were wide as she looked at me, then she turned over, swung her legs off to the side of the bed, and practically ran to the bathroom.

MICHELLE

Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God! That did not just happen. That could not have happened! Tomasso did not just tell me he loved me!

Tomasso just told me he loved me, and what did I do? I panicked and ran into the bathroom like an idiot. But I wasn't prepared to hear that. I never expected to hear it either, especially from him.

I had been so caught up in kissing him, and letting him distract me from my thoughts and fears. The last thing I had expected were those three big words.

The motel bathroom was small, and it didn't allow for much pacing as I was trying to do. I'd take three steps one way and have to turn and walk the other way only to repeat the process over and over.

Yanking the hair tie out of my hair, I ran my fingers through it and then dropped my head into my hands. What was I supposed to do now? How was I supposed to respond?

Running away from him like a scared little rabbit obviously wasn't the best approach. And now I've got myself trapped in the bathroom, in a motel somewhere God only knows where, with no way to escape and no idea what to say to him.

Could it be true? Could Tomasso really love me? Or had he just been caught up in the moment and the words had just tumbled out?

I looked in the mirror at my reflection and pulled my hair over my shoulders. My eyes looked wild and haunted, perfectly reflecting how I felt on the inside.

My face was a little pale, but my cheekbones had color. And my lips, they couldn't seem to close over my teeth, stuck as they were in a state of surprise.

I shook my head. I looked like a scared rabbit.

Turning the cold water faucet on, I cupped some water and splashed it on my face. That helped to cool the heat from my cheeks, but not the fear in my heart.

And I was terrified. For one split second, I almost repeated those words back to Tomasso. I had almost told him I loved him too.

That is what scared me the most. My feelings. Not his. I had fallen for him so hard back in Italy at the wedding, when we decided to have impromptu sex in the wine cellar. And then I had been devastated to see him with another woman practically minutes afterward.

Even though I now knew he had not been moving on to another conquest, the pain I had felt was so strong even though I hadn't known him that long at the time. Now that I've known him a lot longer, and I've gotten closer to him, I was terrified of getting hurt again.

Using a freshly folded hand towel, I pat my face dry and then set the cloth on the side of the sink. Staring at my reflection again, I gave myself a stern look.

No matter how I felt about him, there was just no way we could be together. Not as long as he was in the mafia. Not as long as I was afraid of getting my heart torn out.

But I had to face him. Tomasso deserved at least that much. I took a deep breath, put my hair back into a ponytail, and stepped outside of the bathroom.

Tomasso was reclining on the bed. His bare chest was tan and so damn inviting. My fingers itched to trail across all that flesh. I balled my hands into fists and tucked them under my

arms as I walked over to the table and sat down in the chair. No way was I going to get on that bed with him again.

I felt his eyes following me with every step I took and staying on me as I sat down. But he didn't say anything. I guess he was waiting for me to talk.

But now that I'm out here, what was I supposed to say? Stupid me, I hadn't given that much thought before I marched my happy ass out here.

I looked up and met his blue eyes, then ducked my head like a chicken. Chewing on my bottom lip, I forced myself to look back at him. His eyes hadn't left me and he met mine steadily.

"Tomasso," I began. "I'm sorry for my reaction."

I waited a couple of heartbeats, but he didn't say anything. He continued to stare at me with those knowing blue eyes.

"Listen, I think we just got a little carried away. It's been a hectic few days-

"I meant what I said, Michelle," he interrupted. His voice was soft, but steady and sure.

I shook my head. "I know it may seem like that right now, but that's just because we've been in such an intense situation."

Tomasso pushed against the mattress with his hands until he was sitting straight up with his back against the headboard. He crossed his arms over his wide chest and met my gaze steadily.

"Are you trying to tell me you don't have any feelings for me?" he asked.

Well shit. How was I supposed to answer that? I squirmed a little in my chair, then crossed one leg over my knee.

"I care about you. I would have never slept with you if I didn't, Italy notwithstanding. But I think-

"That's the problem," he interrupted again. "You are too busy thinking instead of feeling."

“And maybe you’re feeling too much instead of thinking logically,” I countered. “I think we both are reacting to the danger and closeness we’ve been forced into for the last few days. Intense situations like this can lead to heightened emotions.”

“You sound more like a shrink than a nurse,” he said with a scowl.

Suddenly it seemed like a vice was squeezing around my heart. I could see the pain in his eyes and I hated that I was hurting him. I was hurting too, but some pain now was better than absolute pain later. Or at least that’s what I kept telling myself.

“I’m just trying to be realistic,” I tried to explain, but it only made his frown more severe.

“Why are you finding this so hard, Michelle? Is it because you are afraid of your own feelings?”

When the cup on the table started rattling I realized I was wildly shaking my leg that was crossed over my knee. I pressed a hand against it to keep it from bouncing and shook my head at him. He didn’t give me a chance to answer.

“Other than my mama, you are the only woman I have ever said those words to,” he said, swinging his legs off the side of the bed.

I watched as he put on his socks and shoes and pulled his shirt over his head. He grabbed his jacket off the back of the chair and walked over to me until he stood directly in front of me. I had to crane my head backward to look up at him.

“There are times in life where taking risks pay off. But you will never know if you keep your head buried in the sand.”

I didn’t say anything as I watched him walk out the door. When the door shut I felt like something had just slammed over my heart.

What had I done? Had I done the right thing? What if he had been telling the absolute truth? What if he really did love me? Had I just thrown everything away?

Tears filled my eyes and then spilled down my cheeks. His heart wasn't the only one that was breaking, but it was my fault we were both in this pain. Well, actually, it's his fault for ruining everything by saying those three words in the first place.

I didn't know how long I sat at the table crying and wondering if I had done the right thing, but something made me look out the window. I pulled the curtains aside, and at first saw nothing out of place. But then I saw him. One of the brothers.

And he was walking into the office.

TOMASSO

She didn't believe me. The only woman I've ever said I love you too, didn't believe me.

I shook my head as I walked around to the back of the motel. There was a small dirt path that led around to the back and to a little park. There was only a bench, a small round table with benches that circled it, a swing set with two swings, and a short slide.

Night had fallen and the closest street light was a block away so this area was pretty dark. But it was secluded and empty, which suited me perfectly.

I sat on top of the table with my feet on the bench and my elbows on my knees. Why wouldn't Michelle believe me? I could name at least ten women who would have been thrilled if I admitted my love for them. But not Michelle. She'd practically thrown my words in my face.

Stretching out one leg, I dug into my front jeans pocket and pulled out the phone Marco had given me. I called Paolo who answered on the second ring.

"Nothing yet," he said as a way of greeting.

"That's not why I'm calling. I actually want some advice." Now that I was talking to him, I felt like an idiot. Like a high school teen with his first serious relationship instead of a grown man who's had too many relationships to count.

"Oh?" Paolo responded, and I could hear the smile in his voice. Unless I was just being paranoid.

This was fucking uncomfortable and embarrassing. I thought about just hanging up, but I knew Paolo wouldn't give up trying to figure out what I wanted to talk to him about.

"I told Michelle I love her."

"You do?" he asked, the surprise evident in his voice. "You did?"

"Yes and yes," I grumbled.

There was a beat of silence. "And? What did she say?"

I grimaced, knowing this next part would be a source of amusement for him. "She ran to the bathroom."

I waited a full three minutes for his laughter to die down. "Are you finished?"

Paolo started chuckling again. "Give me another minute."

Reaching into the jacket pocket, I grabbed a toothpick and shoved it into my mouth, poking my lip in the process. "Shit," I muttered, rubbing my lip. At least there wasn't any blood.

"Okay. I think I'm done," Paolo said, then laughed again. "Nope, not quite yet."

"I knew this was a mistake."

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry. What happened next?"

I switched the toothpick to the other side of my mouth, then winced when it brushed against my injured lip. I pushed it to the other side again before answering.

"She doesn't believe me. She thinks it's all because we're under some heightened adventure, or some shit."

Paolo was quiet for a second. "Well, they do say that relationships that start out in intense situations don't last."

"You and Michelle, you both sound like shrinks."

"Seriously, though. I know you and I know it wasn't easy to tell her how you feel. From Tiffany, I've learned that Michelle is love-shy and afraid of getting hurt. She probably just needs some time."

“I wish it were that simple,” I sighed. A car drove by slowly and I watched it until it was out of sight, my thoughts on Michelle.

“But I think Michelle is too against me being mafia. She hates the business and always seems to think the worst of me, that I’m just a finger snap away from shooting someone.”

“Remember Tiffany was the same way,” Paolo advised. “And her parents were killed by mafia, so she had every reason to hate us. But she came around.”

“Tomasso is in love with Michelle?” I heard Tiffany screech and grimaced. “Give me the phone. Let me talk to him.”

There was a shuffling sound as presumably the phone was transferred from Paolo to Tiffany.

“Don’t you give up on Michelle,” Tiffany admonished without preamble. “She will come around.”

Suddenly a glimmer of hope blossomed. Women liked to talk. Had Michelle talked to Tiffany and told her something?

“How do you know?”

Tiffany sighed dramatically. “Because I’m a woman and because Michelle is my best friend.”

“She doesn’t believe me, Tiffany. I told her straight up that I loved her and she ran to the bathroom.”

To my shock and chagrin, Tiffany started laughing. I scowled and seriously thought about throwing the phone across the park.

“That sounds like Michelle,” Tiffany said with a smile in her voice. “She’s a strong, independent woman, but when it comes to relationships, she’s just a scaredy cat.”

Tiffany sighed. “Because of her looks, she’s had guys chase her practically her whole life. She never knows whether a guy likes her for her looks or her brains and she has a hard time trusting when a man shows interest in her because of that.

“But I know she cares about you,” Tiffany continued, “even before all this crap happened. She wouldn’t have been so angry after Italy for so long if she didn’t.”

Okay, that at least made me feel a little bit better. A half smile lifted the corner of my mouth. What Tiffany said was true, Michelle would not have been so mad at me if she hadn’t had feelings in the first place. And after all this time we spent together, and grown closer, I was sure her feelings had only grown, like mine.

Now to devise a plan to convince her that I was telling the truth and that she has nothing to fear by admitting how she felt about me too.

I must have been quiet for too long, because Tiffany spoke up again.

“Don’t you give up on her, Tomasso. She’s worth the wait and the fight.”

“I won’t,” I promised. And I meant it. Tiffany was right about Michelle, she was worth going through just about anything if it meant she’d be mine in the end.

“I’m going to head back to the motel and check on Michelle. Thanks for the talk.”

As I disconnected the call, I saw that same car driving by slowly again. My instincts or paranoia, or whatever you wanted to call it, kicked into gear and my heart thumped in my chest.

I took off at a jog staying in the shadows, and headed back to the hotel. I had just rounded the corner when I saw that car pull into the parking lot.

Ducking behind the perimeter fence, I looked through a large knot hole as the car parked in front of the office. The door on the driver side squeaked open slowly, and then I saw a jean clad leg step out.

A few seconds later I saw a head duck out, then the man stood and my heart slowed down to a steady, rhythmic beat. Just like it did every time I got into a dangerous situation where my ability to remain calm usually meant life or death.

It was one of the brothers, and he was headed straight for the office.

Thankfully, our room was just on the other side of the fence I was hiding behind. Once the brother went into the office, I ran around the fence and to our motel room.

Swiping the key card against the pad, the door unlocked and I hurried inside. Michelle was standing in the middle of the room, her eyes wide.

“They’re here,” she said breathlessly. “Or at least one of the brothers. I saw him head towards the office just a second ago.”

I nodded, and grabbed her hand, pulling her toward the door. I put my finger to my mouth to tell her to stay quiet, and we ran, half ducking, to her car.

We were just pulling out of the driveway as I saw the brother walk out of the office through the car’s rear view mirror. Michelle’s car with the plastic covering the back window was pretty distinctive. One of the brothers’ cop friends must have recognized it and informed them.

MICHELLE

I was so tired of this. The last few days have been nothing but running and hiding. Hours and hours a day driving, trying to put distance between us and the brothers. The police were looking for us, our pictures have been plastered all over the television and internet. Every time we stop for gas, food, or lodging we risk being recognized.

I just wanted my life back. I wanted to go back to the hospital and work. I wanted to stop looking over my shoulder and expecting to be shot at or arrested at any second.

It felt as if this would never end. Would this be the rest of my life? And if it was, how long could I expect my life expectancy under these circumstances?

Tomasso was in more danger too because the families against him could team up with the cops. He wasn't on his own turf, so he didn't have the protection he used to.

We were both just sitting ducks, waiting for that one lucky shot to take us out.

I knew I was being morbid, but I couldn't help it. I was so tired. Body and spirit. I just didn't feel like I had anything left. It wasn't in me to give up, but sometimes there's no other choice.

"I think it's time we call the police and tell them our side of the story," I said into the silence.

We've been driving all day again. Night was falling and it was getting cold outside. We were on some back road where

we only saw a car every half hour or so. We had no idea where we were going, or when we would stop for the night.

Tomasso turned to look at me. We'd had this discussion before. A couple of times, actually, and he was always adamant against it. Apparently, nothing had changed.

"I told you, that would basically be signing our death warrants."

Maybe he was right, but maybe he wasn't. I just felt like we had to do something.

"We can't keep running forever."

"Not forever, Michelle. Just until we have what we need against the brothers."

He pulled off the side of the road and turned the engine off, then turned in his seat to look at me. It was dark inside the car, but there was some moonlight that added a little bit of light to see by.

"I know you're tired," he said. "I know you just want this all to be over. I do too. But we have to be smart about this. We're close. We just need a little bit more time."

"Maybe if we talk to the right police, we can end this a lot sooner."

He shook his head and reached out and grabbed my cold hand rubbing it between both of his. The friction brought warmth to my skin, but did nothing to improve my mood.

"We don't know which cops are on the take. Even though the brothers worked for me, I still didn't know who all were on their side.

"If we go to the cops now," he continued, "we could end up going straight to some of their friends. We cannot take that chance."

Deep down I knew he was right. But I was so mentally and physically drained, I just wanted it all to end. Of course I didn't want to die, but I didn't know how much longer I could do this.

“How much longer?” I asked out loud. “How much longer are we going to stay on the run? Sooner or later they’re going to catch up to us.”

“We will do this as long as we have to.” He paused to grab my other hand and now he rubbed both of them between his. “Hang in there, Michelle. It won’t be much longer.”

“You can’t know that for sure,” I argued.

He released my hands and started the car again. We pulled back on the road and continued driving.

“Just take it one day at a time,” Tomasso encouraged. “We only need to survive one day at a time. If you look too far into the future it seems like an impossible task.”

For some reason I felt that his words had a double meaning. Was he also talking about his feelings for me? And my unsaid feelings for him? Instead of trying to worry about if things will work out in the future, just take it one day at a time?

We passed by a gas station, the only business or building we had seen for the past several miles. Its neon lights lit up the inside of the car, almost blinding me after being in the dark for so long.

I glanced at Tomasso. His jaw was clenched tight, his expression determined. Seeing his resolve and determination helped to boost mine.

The man had enough courage and stubbornness for both of us. Slowly, my spirit started to lift. He was doing everything he could to keep us safe and to fix this mess. The least I could do was not be a big baby and complain about everything.

“I’m sorry, Tomasso. I shouldn’t be so negative, especially when you are trying so hard to protect us.”

He glanced at me and then looked back at the road. “Never apologize for your feelings or for telling the truth.”

Again I wondered if his words had a double meaning. He had not apologized for saying he loved me, in other words, for

speaking his feelings. But when I looked at him, it was too dark to see his full expression.

As we continued to drive, my eyes started getting heavy. I stared out the window at the dark road and the trees as we passed by rows of orchards. I couldn't tell what kind of trees they were, but the way they were lined up suggested they were produce of some kind.

I didn't even realize I had fallen asleep until I opened my eyes and saw we had pulled into a motel parking lot. Tomaso was just turning off the engine and then he unbuckled his seat belt. It's as if he felt my eyes on him, because he looked at me and smiled.

“You're awake.”

“How long was I out?”

He shrugged. “I don't know. An hour or two.”

He leaned over and tucked my hair behind my ears, but he didn't remove his hands. Instead he cupped the sides of my face and pulled me toward him.

When his lips touched mine, I felt rejuvenated. I kissed him back, but it was a gentle kiss. It was sweet and caring, the kind of kiss you gave someone you care about just because you're thinking about them.

I was disappointed when he ended the kiss and opened his car door. With a sigh, I unbuckled my seatbelt and opened my door as well.

What looked to be a teenage boy was working the office desk when we went inside. He looked bored and like he'd rather be anywhere else but the motel. He barely said two words to us as he checked us in and gave us a key.

Compared to the other motel rooms we'd been staying at, this one was pretty nice. There was some kind of air freshener being pumped inside the room, so it smelled fresh and clean. The bathroom, while not large, was a good size and I took immediate advantage of the shower.

When I came out of the bathroom, Tomasso was on the phone. He looked at me with such a huge smile, I felt my heart flutter. Not just because of how handsome he looked, which he did, but because I had a feeling we finally had some good news.

“I’m talking to Paolo,” he said, pointing at the phone held up to his ear. “Tiffany’s contacts came through. We might just have what we need to go home.”

TOMASSO

A grin spread across Michelle's face, showing her straight white teeth. Her eyes crinkled at the corners and a glimmer of hope shown through them.

She walked over to the table where I was sitting, her head cocked to one side as she towel dried her hair. I turned my phone on speaker, and set it on top of the table.

"Tiffany's contacts at the district attorney's office confirmed that they have been building a case against the brothers," Paolo explained.

"That's great news, right?" Michelle asked hopefully.

"It's a start," Paolo said. "There are witnesses who have given testimony, but they refuse to testify in court. They are too scared."

Before my eyes, Michelle's hopeful expression dimmed into one of almost despair. I frowned, wanting to do anything to put that hopeful look back into her dark eyes.

Before I could say anything, Paolo continued.

"You can't really blame them. The brothers are some of the dirtiest cops around, and I'm sure they've been busy threatening the witnesses if they ever came forward with their stories."

"There has to be something we can do," Michelle argued. "I mean they have the testimony. Can't the DA use that and keep them anonymous? For their own protection?"

“Unfortunately, no,” I answered before Paolo could. “Suspects have the right to face their accusers.”

“Well that sucks.”

I laughed at Michelle’s disgruntled opinion. I agreed, it did suck. But there was nothing we could do about it.

“Unless you wanted to testify, Tomasso,” Paolo suggested.

I frowned. “I’m not a rat.”

“Your call,” Paolo said nonchalantly. “But right now, it’s the only way until we can think of something different.”

I could tell Michelle wanted to say something. She opened her mouth, closed it, then opened it again and shook her head.

“Can I talk to Tiffany?” she asked.

“Sorry. Tiffany left for the store just before Tomasso called. She probably won’t be back for another hour or so.” He laughed. “When she gets a chance to escape alone, she takes it.”

We talked for a few more minutes then hung up. Tiffany looked at me, her brows drawn into a frown.

“You said you’d do what it took to get us out of this,” she began, and I frowned, having an idea I knew where this was going.

“And I meant it.”

She raised an eyebrow in challenge. “Then why won’t you testify? Our testimonies would surely be enough with all the intel the DA has been putting together. It sounds like all they need is an eyewitness or two to seal the deal.”

I was shaking my head throughout her little speech. She leaned forward and stretched her arm out across the table to place her hand atop of mine. I looked down at her smaller, more feminine hand on mine and realized this was the first time she had reached out to make physical contact with me. I didn’t have time to relish it though, because when I looked up, her dark eyes were pleading with me.

“We could end this,” she said softly.

Removing my hand from beneath hers, I leaned back in my chair and crossed my arms over my chest.

“Do you understand what that would mean for me?” I asked her? I kept my tone calm because I didn’t think she understood the total ramifications should I testify.

She frowned and shook her head. “I know what it would mean for *us*. We would finally be able to return to our lives.”

And that was something she wanted with all her heart. I didn’t have the heart to explain how dangerous it was for mafioso to rat, even on dirty cops. My reputation would be damaged. I might lose support in my own family. We took care of our problems our own way, we didn’t tattle on others.

But looking at the hope in her eyes and the dark circles beneath that testified to the stress and fear she’d been under, I kept my mouth shut. I loved her and I would do anything for her. But this? Could I actually turn into a rat for Michelle?

Yes, I decided. Yes I would.

When I nodded, that beautiful grin spread across her face again. Apparently, I didn’t have to say anything, she could tell my answer by my expression. She jumped to her feet, ran around the table, and practically fell into my lap trying to give me a hug.

The force of her body against mine almost sent my chair over backward, but I didn’t care. I wrapped my arms around her and held her tightly to me.

“Thank you, Tomasso!” she breathed against my ear. “Thank you for doing this!”

Reluctantly, I pulled back from her embrace. “If we’re going to do this, I need to make some phone calls.”

She jumped up from my lap, nodding eagerly. “Of course. Whatever you need to do. Is there anything I can help with?”

I loved her enthusiasm and willingness to help, but there was nothing she could do yet, except: “Prepare yourself. Testifying against the brothers isn’t going to be easy. Hopefully, we’ll just have to give our testimonies to the DA

and they can work out a deal with the brothers so that we'll never have to go to court."

"Do you think that's possible?" she asked, biting her bottom lip.

I nodded. "The police department will want to keep this as quiet as possible so they'll be motivated to convince the brothers to cooperate."

Michelle grabbed the towel off the floor where it had fallen earlier and walked it to the bathroom. I could hear her humming happily as I made my first of several phone calls.

First, I talked to my underboss and explained what had happened. I told him to get in touch with Paolo so that Tiffany could work her magic and get the names of the witnesses who were too scared to testify. I ordered protection for them because everyone knew protection from the mafia was much more reliable than the police, especially if you were testifying against a dirty cop.

As expected, there was some grumbling about me testifying, but I put my foot down and explained my reasoning. There might be hell to pay later, I'd just have to wait and see. Besides, I'd been considering leaving the business, so if worse came to worse, I still had that option. As long as I didn't find myself swimming with the fishes that was.

The next calls I made were to set up protection for me and Michelle as we made our way back to town. I didn't give any two people the same information and instead said I would contact them with instructions and locations as I arrived.

When I finished with my calls, I leaned back in the chair and wondered if I had done the right thing. It was a dangerous game I played and it could backfire on me. But hearing Michelle still humming away in the bathroom made me smile and I decided I couldn't have done anything different.

Now the real challenge began, though. I had to get us home and to the DA's office before the brothers could find us and take us out.

MICHELLE

The next three days were nerve-wracking as we made our way back to town. We were constantly looking over our shoulders to see if we were being followed. I was half excited that this was finally going to be over, and half freaked out that we weren't going to make it - that we would be killed before we could testify.

On the second day, Marco called to say he'd heard chatter about us providing testimony to the DA. This meant that the brothers knew about it too, and that they were desperate to find us before we could reach home.

I couldn't count how many times I thought we were being followed, but so far it had turned out to be just my paranoia.

When we pulled into town, that's when things really got hectic. Tomasso had arranged with the DA's office to meet at a seedy little bar on the outskirts of town.

We'd barely pulled into a parking stall, before we were surrounded by agents. They escorted us to two separate cars and I panicked realizing Tomasso and I were being separated.

"Everything will be okay," Tomaso said over his shoulder as he was being ushered into a dark sedan.

Biting my bottom lip almost to the point of drawing blood, I followed an agent to a different dark sedan. He opened the back door and I got inside.

Tomasso and I had talked about this on the way back to town. He had warned we would probably be separated. That would make it harder for the brothers to find us, or maybe they

would only be able to find one of us and there would still be another to testify. It was a morbid thought, but strategically sound I supposed.

But even though he'd warned me and I half expected to be separated, when it actually happened I was panicked. I'd been on the run with Tomasso for so long, I couldn't imagine not going through the finish line with him.

I wanted him by my side, as he'd been. He'd been my rock and I trusted him. Despite his being a mafia boss, a man capable of killing another person, I knew I was safe with him. Now, I'd have to face the rest of this crazy and terrifying journey by myself and I had no idea when I'd see Tomasso again.

I was taken to a safe house, which was barely more than a one room little shack, where I stayed in my room while the agent kept watch in the living room. I didn't have to stay in my room, I wasn't ordered to, but I didn't feel like being around anyone right now. Unless it was Tomasso.

How was he doing with all of this? Was he being treated differently because he was a mafia boss? I worried about that for a while. I'd watched too many television shows and movies where informants that were also mafia, were treated badly because law enforcement didn't like them.

But I couldn't dwell on that. Tomasso could take care of himself.

It was another four days before the agent informed me they had caught the brothers. They took me to the police station and asked to file a formal police report, and then a lineup.

I had already given my testimony to the DA when they came the other day to the safe house, so I repeated what I had said and wrote it down for the police department as well.

That's when I was told they had physical evidence against the brothers. Police had recovered the bullet I'd removed from Tomasso that I'd left at my house when we'd escaped to the cabin. They'd also found a bullet in my trunk, one of several that had been shot at my car.

Although they were still waiting on the ballistics report, which could take a while, I was told it was the same caliber as standard issued police bullets. They matched the type of bullets used in the brothers' guns.

Then I was taken to another part of the police department for the lineup.

I stood behind the mirrored window and looked at the six men in front of me. Even though I knew they couldn't see me, I still felt like the brothers were looking at me.

"Can you identify the men who broke into your house and who chased you?" the DA asked me.

I nodded and pointed. "Number one, and number five."

"Are you positive?" an officer asked.

I nodded my head again. "Absolutely."

I thought I was done but they asked me to remain and turned off the light to the viewing room. A few minutes later, the light came back on and now there were six women standing in there.

"Now, can you identify the woman you saw at the restaurant yelling and demanding to see Tomasso?"

Startled, not having expected to identify Sonya, I carefully examined the women, but I recognized her right off the bat. She looked pissed and a little frightened.

I nodded and pointed at her. "Number three."

Again I was asked if I was positive, and I assured them I was.

Curious, I asked why I had to identify Sonya.

"She is being charged with conspiracy to hire someone to kill Tomasso," the DA's assistant told me.

And that was it. I was free to go. I couldn't believe it. I could now just simply walk out the door and get back to my life.

I was still thinking about this as I headed out of the police station. But then I saw Tomasso. Our eyes met, and he smiled at me encouragingly, but we didn't talk to each other. We weren't allowed to.

I stopped in my tracks though, just to get a good look at him and make sure he was okay, that he hadn't been harmed in any way. Except for looking tired, he looked good. Damn good. I wanted to run over to him and throw my arms around him. The urge was so strong, my legs twitched and I nearly started to run.

Tomasso looked like he had the same idea. He stopped to look at me, too, but when an officer tugged on his arm to keep him moving, Tomasso yanked his arm out of the man's grasp. He started to walk toward me and I shook my head, seeing the impatient and angry looks on the officers' faces.

He stopped and reluctantly allowed the police to escort him down the hall where I presumed he would go through the same process I had just finished. I watched him until they got onto an elevator and I couldn't see him anymore. Then, with a sigh, I left the station.

TOMASSO

This was no normal meteoroid shower.

The rocks, or whatever they were, were vibrant reds, blues, and oranges. And they seemed to have some kind of intelligence. Whichever direction she maneuvered the ship to get it out of the path, the rocks switched course and moved to block them.

I sat staring at my laptop screen, or more precisely the blinking cursor. Ever since I'd been back, I have tried to work on my book, but I just could not concentrate.

Everything had turned out good. Better than good. The brothers had been arrested and the word was they were making a deal so we wouldn't have to go to court and testify against them. And even though I ratted the cops out, the family has stood behind me.

Things turned out better than I even expected. Except for one major part: Michelle.

I knew by talking to Paolo that Michelle was able to get her job back. Her life was back on track and she was no longer in danger.

But I had expected her to call me. I had been giving her time, time to consider everything we had been through and my feelings for her, but a week has passed since I saw her that day at the police station, and not a word.

I didn't want to pressure her. I wanted to give her time to readjust. But I missed her. And I needed to know if she was

going to be in my life.

The blinking cursor on my computer screen seemed to be mocking me. It just sat there in limbo, waiting for me to do something. And that's how I felt about Michelle. Maybe that's what she was doing, waiting for me.

Closing the laptop lid, I stood and grabbed my jacket off my chair and swung it over my shoulder. I was done waiting for her. It was time I grabbed my balls and found out the truth once and for all.

Decision made, I went out to the garage and got into my Jeep. I had it started and backed out of the driveway in no time, and drove straight to Michelle's house.

But when I got there, I parked on the side of the road and just sat there. My heart was in my throat. Out of everything that has happened, this was the most important outcome to me. What if she said she never wanted to see me again? What if she couldn't forgive me for putting her in such danger? I did not know how I would handle that.

Well, I would never know the truth if I didn't get off my ass and go find out. I got out of my Jeep and walked up to her house. I rang the doorbell, and she answered after just a few seconds.

I really hadn't thought this out, I realized as I stood there staring at her. So I simply blurted out the truth.

"I love you."

A huge smile spread across her face. "I love you too, you dope."

She reached out and grabbed the edges of my jacket and jerked me into her house.

MICHELLE

This past week was miserable. I kept waiting for Tomasso to contact me. Everyday that went by without a phone call from him made me more convinced that I had been right when I

accused him of not really being in love with me, but reacting because of the situation.

But here he was at my house telling me he loved me. All of my worries and concerns were gone, just like that.

Grabbing him by the edges of his jacket, I jerked him into my house. I started kissing him before the door was even closed. Somewhere in my consciousness, I noticed him using his foot to close the door, but I was too busy trying to meld my body into his to care.

Tomasso chuckled, sending vibrations through my chest. I just kissed him harder, wrapping my arms around his neck while I continued to walk backward, pulling him along with me. He wrapped his arms around me and snaked one hand up through my hair, pulling my head back to deepen the kiss.

Even walking backward, I was able to maneuver us toward the couch. When the back of my legs hit the edge of the couch, I lost my balance and fell onto my butt, pulling him down with me.

Tomasso reached out and caught himself by placing his hands on the back of the couch so that he didn't fall on top of me. He stood like that, leaning over me, a wide grin pulling across his face.

"I missed you too," he chuckled.

"What the hell took you so long?" I demanded.

Tomasso straightened up to a standing position. He reached down and grabbed both of my hands and pulled me to my feet, but he didn't let go of my hands. We stood there staring into each other's eyes.

"I was waiting for you," he answered.

"Well, I was waiting for you," I retorted.

He leaned down and kissed me and I felt butterflies take off in my stomach. He always had that effect on me and I doubted it would ever go away.

"I'm through waiting," he growled against my lips.

“So am I,” I agreed.

He swung me up into his arms and carried me into the bedroom.

We continued kissing for a long while, just standing in my bedroom in each other’s arms. It was like we could not get enough of each other. These last couple of weeks apart had made us even more hungry to taste each other’s lips and hold one another.

When we finally came up for air, my whole body was on fire. My panties were wet, and my nipples were so swollen they almost hurt. Tomasso looked at me with eyes so filled with passion the blue was nearly black.

“Before we go any further,” he said, and I nearly groaned out loud, “I want you to know I’ve done a lot of thinking. I am getting out of the business. I’ve been considering it for a while, but now that I have you, that is all I need in my life.”

I couldn’t help it, tears sprung from my eyes. “I realized how much I loved you, but I was too scared,” I told him truthfully.

“I’ve also done some thinking since we’ve been apart,” I continued my confession. “And I realized that without you. my life is empty. I would have taken you even if you were still going to stay in the mafia, but I am so happy you have decided to leave the business.”

After those confessions, words were no longer needed. What was most important now, was coming together as man and woman.

He reached down to the hem of my shirt and slowly pulled it over my head. I had put on a bra with snaps in the front this morning, and now his nimble fingers quickly unclasped it. The material sprang apart and my breasts were bare for his hungry eyes.

His large hands cupped my breasts and he gently squeezed and massaged, his thumbs plucking at my nipples and sending zinging tingles of pleasure along every nerve in my body.

I divested him of his shirt, and then we finished undressing ourselves and climbed onto my bed. We laid on our sides just looking into each other's eyes and realizing how special a relationship we had. I had almost thrown it all away because I was too afraid, but now the only thing that terrified me was losing him.

Tomasso reached down and grabbed behind my knee and pulled my leg over his hip. I scooted up a little bit so that our bodies were aligned perfectly and he slid his dick inside me.

We both groaned at the exquisite feel of his erection stretching me, filling me completely.

We stayed like that, making love slowly and passionately for several minutes, just staring into each others eyes, our hands roaming over the other's body.

But that could only last for so long before passion took over and our bodies demanded release.

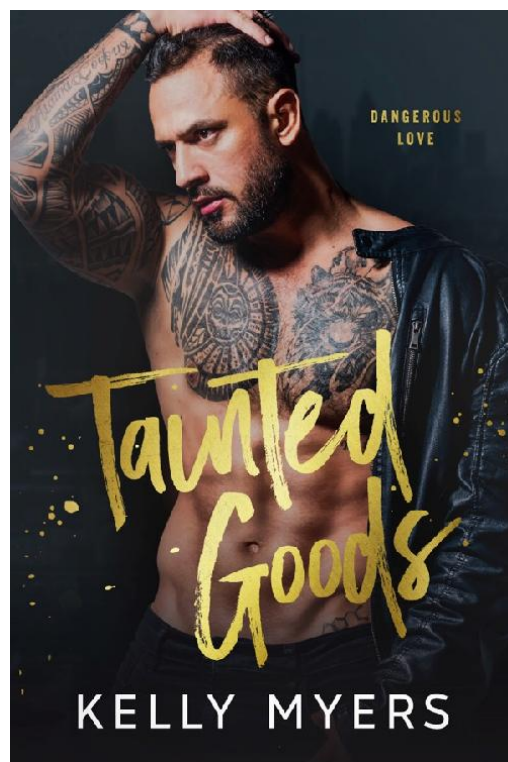
Tomasso rolled me onto my back without slipping out of me, and started pumping into me with stronger, deeper strokes. I arched my back and lifted my hips, while my nails scored down his back.

We came together with shouts and grunts, my inner muscles gripping his dick, pulsing around it and milking every last ounce of cum.

We collapsed breathlessly and he rolled onto his side, pulling me close to him. I smiled, closed my eyes, and fell asleep. The last thing I heard was his whispered "I love you."

If you enjoyed Tomasso and Michelle's story, you'll love reading about Nico and Samantha. Nico is a hitman seeking revenge against the Barone mafia boss that killed his wife. Samantha is the step-daughter of said mafioso. Find out what happens when their worlds collide in [*Tainted Goods*](#).

EXCERPT: TAINTED GOODS



I had heard stories about women falling in love with their kidnappers, but didn't think it could happen in real life.

Well, it happened to me... and it wasn't pretty.

Nico killed the man that my mother was married to.

It was unreal to think that I'd ever fall in love with his killer.

Yes, he was a hitman, but he also did the world a favor by ending that man's life.

He didn't deserve to take another breath.

But I deserved to be loved the way that Nico loved me.

I could feel his protection even while we were apart.

It was true that my mother was against our relationship.

I understood why, but my heart would never listen.

Especially when he was the one that showed up when my life was in danger.

Real danger.

And if only I could make it out alive... I'd confess my love for him and never look back.

Chapter One: Nico Amato

My heart rate rose steadily at the feel of the cold steel of the perfectly balanced Para Ordnance pistol hugging my hand. Soon the sulfurous cloud of gunpowder would assault my senses as I meted out long overdue punishment. I caressed the barrel with my trigger finger, preparing myself mentally for the task that lay ahead.

I'd followed the portly man around, unseen, for a week. His daily routine was fairly mundane—all the outward appearances of a caring, family man. But at night, while his wife and two daughters lay asleep, Randolph Zimmerman shifted into another persona—one his loved ones knew nothing about.

I followed at a distance as he cruised the strip, searching for a young piece of ass. Granted, what a man did in his private time was his business. I was no prude but getting off on torturing and murdering young prostitutes was crossing the line. That's when I stepped in. The cops had dropped the ball on the sadist. Procedural fuckups, they claimed. Funny how perps seemed to have more rights than the innocents they preyed upon.

Consequently, when my agent offered me the contract taken out by a heartbroken father of a pummeled seventeen-year-old girl, I accepted. Randolph had beaten the poor girl so severely that she was barely recognizable before he dumped her in an alley next to a garbage bin. It was more than fair to

say that the world would be a better place without Randolph's murderous soul.

I twisted the silencer securely onto the barrel of my gun. Stealth is key to a hitman's survival, and I never took unnecessary chances. Randolph's bald head glistened under the streetlight as he stopped and leaned out of his Mustang's window to talk to a young prostitute. The scantily clad girl couldn't have been older than fifteen, but the streets had already made an ace negotiator out of her.

I'd learned from Randolph's file that he liked them young, and this teen fitted the profile perfectly. I had my reservations about killing him in front of the girl, but Randolph had given me little choice. He was a wealthy man, who surrounded himself with protection wherever he went. Only at night, when he was out on the prowl, did the church-going hypocrite hunt alone.

Perhaps, if I was lucky, the girl would open her eyes to the dangers of living on the streets and go home to her parents. But I wasn't going to hold my breath. She scratched her arm, then opened the passenger door of the Mustang and got in. The young prostitute's drug habit was firmly in charge.

The green Mustang pulled slowly back into the lane and as it did, I saw the girl's head disappearing from sight. No prizes for guessing what Randolph wanted. The bile of anger and disgust rose inside of me as I followed the pair with my lights off. I stayed just out of sight as the car turned down an alley not too far from where the girl got in. I turned off my car's engine once the Mustang came to a stop and waited.

I cracked open the window so I could hear better. The alley smelled like a sewer, which it probably was on account of the homeless who traversed it. A large metal dumpster to the left of where I'd parked was overflowing with uncollected trash. There were about a hundred other places I'd rather be, I thought. What a shit hole.

Had the poor girl's father ever wondered where she was? Had her mother? And, on the off chance that they had, would they do anything about her plight?

My thoughts were interrupted by an escalating argument coming from inside Randolph's car. The girl swore at her *John*, who unceremoniously slapped her across the face. I couldn't wait any longer, as the fight would soon escalate to a full-on assault, leaving the girl in a world of pain and Randolph with a raging hardon for blood.

I made my way as quickly and quietly as I could to the car, yanked the driver's door open, and grabbed Randolph by his collar. In a smooth motion, I jerked him out of the car and threw him down on the dirty curb. Randolph's eyes were as big as saucers, clearly completely surprised by my sudden presence.

The girl screamed, leaped out of the car, and got the hell out of there. She didn't stop to look back.

"What the fuck! Who are you?" he barked at me.

I didn't say a word. There was no point in attempting to rehabilitate a predator like Randolph—he was rotten to the core. I simply pointed my Para Ordnance at his head and pulled the trigger twice. Then I picked up the spent shells and left the scene.

My old friend nausea caught up to me as I drove away. I wasn't nauseous at the sight of Randolph lying bleeding in the alley behind me. It was because I saw Julia's eyes every time I heard the sound of a gunshot ringing in my ears. My innocent, beautiful Julia, was taken too soon. In my mind's eye, I saw her falling to the ground, her lifeless body splayed out in a pool of her own blood.

I willed away nausea and shook my head until I felt the blood that had pooled move again.

'When will you stop this, Nico?' I heard Julia's voice pleading in my mind.

In my head, Julia would always be twenty-one. Her young voice spoke to me often.

"I can't Julia," I said out loud, well aware that I was talking to a ghost.

'Yes, you can.'

“I will never stop, my love,” I said softly. “Never.”

I locked away my weapon once I got home. Then I poured myself a whiskey, downed it, and showered, washing the filth of the alley and Randolph Zimmerman off me. I felt better afterward. I burned Randolph’s file before I went to bed. In my mind, he had never existed. I was the lucky one—the father of the murdered prostitute would never have peace.

I dreamed of Julia. It was our wedding day. My bride wore her pearly white dress and smiled at me the way she used to do when she thought I was being a putz. Julia was holding a bouquet of red roses and I wondered why the petals were falling onto her dress, as the roses were freshly picked.

It wasn’t until I looked closely that I realized the red patches on Julia’s dress weren’t fallen rose petals but bright blood seeping through from her porcelain skin.

I cried out as Julia’s eyes grew glassy, but as fast as I ran, I couldn’t get to her.

“No! Julia!” I heard myself screaming.

I sat up in bed, sweat pouring down my face. It was morning and the sun bathed my bedroom in an orange glow. I was breathing heavily.

It’s okay, Nico. It was just a dream. You’re okay.

“Fuck,” I moaned and wiped the sweat from my forehead.

Blue, my blue lacy, was sitting on the edge of my bed, watching me with his soulful eyes.

“Hey, boy.”

He wagged his tail wildly.

“I don’t know about you, Blue, but I could do with a good breakfast.”

Blue barked in agreement and bounded out of the room, leaving me behind in anticipation of a tasty treat. I got up, went to the bathroom, and splashed my face with cold water before going to the kitchen.

I switched on the television and switched to the news channel. A pretty woman with strawberry blonde hair, a bright smile, and a very long pair of legs was pointing to a map behind her and talking about the cold front moving in from the south. The newsroom banter was centered on the upcoming baseball game, and as she finished her weather report, the woman reminded viewers to wrap up and stay warm.

The music changed and a newsreader came on.

“Family and friends of Mister Randolph Zimmerman are stunned and emotional this morning as the police found the man gunned down in an alley.”

The studio switched to a reporter on the scene. He was holding the microphone while a family friend was commenting.

“We’re heartbroken. Randy was such a wonderful man. I can’t imagine why anyone would want to hurt him. Everyone loved him.”

“Yeah,” I grunted. “Everyone but the poor women he beat the life out of.”

I knew of at least one man who wouldn’t mourn his death. Where were the cameras when his daughter was beaten to death in an alley and discarded like yesterday’s trash?

I gave Blue a fresh hoof to gnaw on. He grabbed it enthusiastically and ran outside to chew it in his favorite spot in the morning sun. I switched on the coffee maker and ground some Arabica coffee beans. I needed a shot of primo caffeine to snap me out of my funk.

“We have launched a manhunt for the killer and hope to have this miscreant in custody soon,” a policeman said into the mic. “The killer will be brought to justice, as I promise the people of this good city.”

“Cry me a fucking river,” I grunted and switched off the TV.

The cops couldn’t find their assholes with a mirror. I put the unsavory business behind me and whipped up three eggs for an omelet. I ate my breakfast outside on the deck and

enjoyed the views of nature. My property was isolated and liked it just fine that way.

The silence gave me plenty of opportunities to pursue my passion. Fine art was my other love—Julia would always be my first.

[Read the full story: Tainted Goods](#)

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