

Twisted
WEDDING

a fake marriage romance

BB HAMMEL

Twisted Wedding

BB Hamel

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Chapter 1

Casey

I think my boss is stalking me.

He's not even my direct supervisor—that'd be Big Dan, floor manager of the illustrious Sunrise Hotel and Casino in the lovely Atlantic City. No, this guy's the big boss, the owner of the entire place, the guy that makes everyone tremble with fear the moment he walks into the room.

And I'm pretty sure he's following me around.

I know that sounds weird. I'm a nobody, a nothing, the lowest of the low. I deal blackjack and craps and keep to myself for the most part. But somehow, each and every shift, Adler Costa manages to bump into me, whether on purpose or by accident I genuinely can't tell.

He's one of the most powerful men in Atlantic City, and just about the most eligible bachelor in the world.

Tonight, his gorgeous scowl is searing into me from across the pit floor.

Which isn't anything new. Adler Costa always looks like someone's stabbing spikes into his feet.

Somehow it works on him—the guy's only in his mid-thirties, with the salt-and-pepper hair of a gracefully aging movie star, the physique of a professional soccer player, and the face of a billboard model. Seriously—the man is an impressive specimen, and half the waitresses in the place are madly in love with him. The other half are in committed relationships

but would still cheat if given the opportunity, and I suspect their husbands and boyfriends wouldn't even mind.

Except he's terrifying, and he's everywhere.

No matter how good-looking Adler Costa is, that man scares me deep to my core.

It's the stories people tell about him. His illicit connections to Midwest mobsters, the way his rivals and enemies all seem to disappear into the ocean, his cold-as-ice exterior. If half the rumors are true, Adler might be a straight-up serial killer.

I try to ignore him, which isn't easy. I concentrate on the game I'm dealing. My legs and back ache from working a long shift, and even though the casino makes generous exceptions for me—such as extra padding on my chairs, longer breaks, and nonstandard orthopedic shoes—dealing cards and craps is still pretty grueling for me, all thanks to a car accident seven years ago.

“Having a good night?” I look over as Roxie Rain, my closest friend and fellow dealer, leans down to whisper in my ear. She's a perky brunette with big, pretty eyes, and the top button of her shirt undone. The girl knows how to get tips. “I think Mr. Costa's watching you again.”

I glance toward the security room and sure enough, Adler's still there. And he looks particularly unhappy.

“What's his deal?” I ask, standing up to switch with her.

“Who knows with that man.” She winks at me as I collect my meager tips and thank the guests.

“Good luck,” I say, squeezing her arm as I walk off toward the cashier's office to close out and cash my tips. Working as a dealer isn't a bad gig—the base pay is lousy, but if my clients are winning and feeling generous, I can make some serious cash in tips. Which is kind of fun for me: it's like I'm gambling along with them, always secretly rooting for them to win while sticking to the rules of the game and making sure they don't get an edge.

There's always that tension between a dealer wanting better tips, but also making sure that nobody's cheating.

I shuffle slowly across the floor. Ever since the accident, I've been unable to walk right, and it took superhuman amounts of effort and lots of rehab to even reach this painful level. It's the first thing most people notice about me, the way I almost drag my legs along like my feet are dipped in concrete blocks.

But I'm lucky as hell and I know it. The doctors said if a dozen tiny things had gone differently, my spinal injury would've left me paralyzed. Instead, I'll be disabled for the rest of my life, but at least I can still get around without assistance, which is more than a lot of people in my situation can say.

All thanks to my angel. The man that saved me that night. I don't know his name and can't remember his face, but I still think about his voice. A quiet whisper in my ear, reassuring me that everything will be okay, that he'll take care of me.

Sometimes I dream about that voice, but no matter how hard I've tried to find him again, the man still remains a mystery.

"Excuse me."

I flinch halfway to the cashier's window and turn around. Kent Weller's standing there, hands clasped in front of him, looking serious. "What's up?" I ask, flashing him my best smile, but something feels wrong.

Kent's on the security team and we've always been friendly, but he's not smiling tonight. "Mr. Costa sent me to get you."

My eyebrows shoot up. "Mr. Costa? Wants me?"

"In the security office." His face gives me nothing.

"Am I in trouble? I haven't been doing anything wrong. Where's Dan?"

"Dan's not involved. Can you come with me?"

I clear my throat, feeling like my limbs are all going numb. "Kent, seriously, what's going on? You're scaring the crap out of me." I start walking after him, and he has to slow a lot so he doesn't outpace me.

I think watching me struggle to keep up softens him a little bit. I don't like the pity, but at least he's talking. "Look, honestly, I

have no clue what's up," he says softly, his eyes darting toward the security room on the far side of the floor. We pick our way through the crowd of guests, ignoring shouts of dismay and cries of ecstasy. It's all just another night of work for us. "Costa doesn't look happy. Will, Trish, and Zach are with him."

My jaw falls open. Will Hyde is Adler's second-in-command, the pit boss that oversees daily operations throughout the casino, and I've spoken to him maybe four times in all my years at Sunrise. The man's infamous.

Then there's Trish Wane, the head of hotel operations, third in the hierarchy. I've never even seen her before—she's practically a mythological creature.

Zach Layton is chief of security and the fourth most important person at the Sunrise.

Which means I'm meeting with the four people that run this place.

Floor dealers like me aren't supposed to have a meeting with people like Will, Trish, and Zach, much less with Adler Costa himself.

They're so far above me, it's like I'm a tiny ant, and they're elephants staggering around.

Fear, cold and intense, fills my body.

"This is crazy," I mutter as I force myself to walk faster. Adrenaline floods me, making my heart go wild.

"I know," Kent says then looks sheepish. "I mean, I'm sorry. I don't know what's going on, but maybe it's no big deal? Maybe they're doing an audit?"

"Those four don't audit. Those four chop off heads."

Kent grunts, not looking happy, but he doesn't argue.

What the heck is going on here? I'm freaking out as we approach the security office. Zach's standing out front, his face neutral. He's tall, dark hair, good-looking in a former linebacker sort of way. A big guy, muscular, dominates a room. Kent drops me off with his boss and gets out of there.

“Casey,” he says, frowning at me. “Come on in. Mr. Costa wants to talk to you.”

I’m too afraid to ask Zach what’s going on. Of everyone in this room, I know him the best since he works closely with the floor staff. I’ve gone to him with a dozen problems over the years and we have a good relationship.

But once we’re inside, the friendly, helpful Zach is gone, replaced by a no-bullshit doppelganger.

Four people stare at me as I stand in the doorway of the main security office. It’s a small, cramped room, but feels tiny at the moment, and it’s taking all my self-control not to scream and run away. I’m sweating and my hands tremble, and I’m pretty sure they can hear my teeth clacking.

The moment I spot Adler sitting in the control chair in front of the security monitors, I can’t seem to look away.

He’s staring right back. Up close, the man’s even more impressive. Muscular in an athletic way. His clothes are perfectly tailored, and his watch is obviously expensive. His graying hair makes him look distinguished, not old, and his deep blue eyes are distracting and beautiful.

I see him from afar all the time, but getting this close is overwhelming.

Now I understand why every woman in this place would happily let him get them pregnant.

“Ms. Kiernan.” Adler speaks first. His voice is a low rumble. Will and Trish say nothing, only stare at me from their chairs, and Zach remains standing at my elbow. “Thank you for joining us.”

“Uh,” I manage to say and my voice is suddenly very squeaky.

“I’m sure you’re wondering why you’re here.” Adler ignores the noise that came out of my face, since it wasn’t really language. “Something very disturbing came to light recently.”

Trish sighs, looking at her nails. She’s an attractive woman in her early thirties, young for her position, with sleek brown hair

and pale skin. “Come on, Adler, put her out of her misery. The poor girl looks like she’s going to pass out.”

“Fire her and be done with it,” Will grunts. He’s Adler’s age, stocky and hard looking. Handsome in a rugged way.

I nearly scream.

Fire me? Fire me *for what*? I’ve been a loyal member of the Sunrise team ever since my accident seven years ago. I owe this place my life—and the lives of my family members. I’m the primary breadwinner for my parents and my brother, which means if I lose this job, we are so beyond screwed.

I can’t get fired. I just—I can’t get fired.

What happens if I lose my health insurance? I still go to rehab once a month. I still get medications, checkups, doctor visits. What do I do if I can’t afford any of that?

Panic slams into my guts, hot and intense.

“Will, enough,” Adler says, glaring at his pit boss.

“I’m just saying, no need to drag this shit out. He’s on fucking camera, Adler. Get it over with so we can move on.”

“You want to move on? Go ahead and move on. We can handle this without you.”

Will snorts and stands. “By all means.” Will glances at me and his expression shows nothing. There’s no anger, no loathing, no pity. Just a mild curiosity as he leaves the room.

Adler turns to Trish. “Anything to add?”

“Will’s right,” she says with a shrug. “Did we all have to be here?”

“I had hoped we could discuss this turn amongst ourselves, but you two apparently don’t take this as seriously as I do.”

Trish spreads her hands placatingly. “It’s just, he’s not our rival, and I honestly think the whole thing is overblown.”

“It is *not* overblown.” Adler’s voice is low and grating. “You don’t know him like I do, Trish. If this is his first move—”

“We’ll deal with whatever comes. Look, Adler, just handle the girl, or get her manager to do it, okay?”

“Fine.” He glares at her. “You’re dismissed.”

“We both know you don’t get to do that,” she says, giving him a pointed look. Adler doesn’t back down, and she eventually follows after Will, not even glancing in my direction.

Zach clears his throat. “You want me to stay?” he asks.

Adler rubs his forehead. “No. You might as well go.”

“You think you’re good here? I mean—”

“I don’t think a girl that has trouble walking is going to pose a threat. I’ll handle it.”

Zach grunts, gives me an apologetic frown, and leaves.

I stare at Adler, not sure if I should be insulted. Panic still rushes through my body. He looks back, head cocked to the side, and I realize I’m suddenly very alone with the most handsome man I’ve ever seen in my life.

“I didn’t do anything.” My voice comes out small. Still squeaky, and more like a whisper, but at least I formed words this time.

“You’re right,” he says. “You didn’t.”

“Are you really going to fire me?”

His lips push together. “That’s what Will wants. Trish doesn’t really care either way. Zach says you’re a good employee and a nice person. What do you think I should do?”

I look around as if I might glean some truth from the pale beige walls and the stacks of files on the shelves. “Uh, I’d give me a raise?”

I don’t know why I say that. It’s the first thing that comes to mind. Sometimes, when my back’s to a wall, my stupid mouth takes control.

Adler’s eyebrows raise. And the smallest, barest hint of a smile cracks his lips before he turns to the computer monitor. “Come here.”

I hesitate, but I move closer so I can get a better view. He clicks around until a camera feed appears. The timestamp says it's from the night before, just after two in the morning.

"I wasn't working then," I say, totally stumped. The image shows the cashier windows where people go to exchange chips for money. It's empty, only the woman working the night shift in view, and she's busy going over the count at the edge of the screen.

"Watch," Adler says and hits play.

Nothing happens at first. The cashier's busy with something I can't see off screen and down below the counter. A set of chips are left up on the desk, waiting to be counted and secured. It's a minor breach of protocol, the sort of thing cashiers do every night for convenience.

Then a person comes into frame.

He's lanky. Dirty, dark hair. Wearing a black sweatshirt. He looks twitchy, awkward. He's staring all around him, his hands shoved into the front pouch of his sweatshirt. After a second of watching the cashier, he walks up to the window, reaches inside, and grabs the unsecured chips. It happens so fast, I'm not even sure he really took them. His hands disappear into his hoodie and he turns away.

Adler hits pause.

And I nearly throw up as my hands fly up to my mouth.

The guy's face is visible. Just for a second, and only barely.

Adler turns to look at me.

"Have you heard from your brother lately?" he asks.

Chapter 2

Casey

My brother, Shane, has to be the stupidest person alive. I don't know what to say. My head works into overtime. No, I haven't heard from Shane in a few days, which isn't unusual. He comes and goes, disappearing for hours, days, weeks, even a couple months one time. My mom assumed he was dead, but he showed up with a new tattoo like nothing happened.

Adler watches me patiently. My mouth moves, but no words come out. I've lost the ability to make sentences.

I am totally screwed.

Absolutely, positively, beyond screwed.

Yes, that's not me stealing. Yes, it's my brother that should be in trouble here.

But that's not how the casinos work.

There's a zero-tolerance policy for bullshit which extends to family members. If you're causing trouble, if your people are causing trouble, if your first-grade teacher is causing trouble—then you will suffer for it.

And since it's my brother, that's even worse.

"I don't know what the hell he's thinking," I say finally, the words rushing out in a geyser as I finally find the ability to form sentences. "Shane has always been the biggest idiot in the entire world and I would never, ever, *ever* condone stealing from the Sunrise. I've been a loyal employee and you've been really good to me, Mr. Costa, very accommodating, and this

job is so important, it's seriously everything to me and my family, and Shane knows that, and he must be going through something serious if he's dumb enough to steal—”

As I ramble, Adler's eyebrows raise higher, until he finally holds up a hand to silence me.

I click my jaw shut, breathing fast through my nose.

My life is over. And Shane is going to die.

Everyone knows the deal.

Yes, casinos call the police all the time. When a customer gets out of line, they get referred to the Atlantic City Police Department. The ACPD is happy to lock a drunk up for the night.

But if a local steps out of line and does something stupid, like stealing—

The ACPD doesn't get that call.

No, different people show up, and that local disappears.

“Your brother stole from me.” Adler sounds calm and composed. “There was approximately \$4,300 in that stack of chips. The cashier in that video was fired earlier, and I have my people out searching for my missing money. I suspect they'll also find the man that took those chips as well. When we catch him, what should I do with him?”

I shake my head, bewildered. “I don't know. I really don't. Mr. Costa, please—”

“You know what happens to people that steal from me.” This isn't a question. It's a statement of fact.

I nod my head. “I know,” I say, feeling absolutely miserable. God, Shane, what did you do? He's an idiot and a troublemaker, but he's never done anything like this before.

“Let me ask you again. What should I do with your brother?”

“Send him to the police,” I whisper, staring down at the floor. “Please, Mr. Costa. Shane's not a bad person, just misguided and an addict. Please send him to the police. Maybe jail will be good for him.”

It won't. He's been in jail before. Never helps.

"We're past that point. If I'm soft on your brother, what message does that send to this town? He stole from me."

"I understand," I say, sinking into myself. My back is aching and my thighs burn. It's not easy, standing this long, and I lean against the wall to take some of my weight.

Adler notices and pushes a chair over. "Sit down."

I hesitate, not sure if he's being nice or not, but it doesn't matter. I sink into the seat and let out a sigh, rubbing my knee. "Shane doesn't mean any harm," I say. "I know you need to punish him, but does it have to be—I don't know, permanent?"

Adler's head tilts. "Not necessarily."

A spark of something shoots through me. Not hope, exactly. But I see a little light where there was only dark. "There's got to be another solution here."

"I could fire you, burn down your family home, and beat your brother within an inch of his life. Does that work?"

I grimace. "Not really."

Adler presses his hands together and leans forward, elbows on his knees. I glance at his forearms, unable to help myself. Even in my mourning and my terror, I can't help but notice him. The man has a presence like he draws all the light and it shines back out from his skin.

"How about we make a deal instead?"

I sit back, not sure what to say. A deal? With me? I have nothing a man like Adler Costa could possibly want. I'm poor, I live with my parents at twenty-six, I'm disabled, and my brother's a thieving jackass. There's nothing in the world I could give Adler to make this right.

But I have no other options.

"What do you want?" I ask, feeling miserable.

"Come to my apartment tonight at ten," he says turning back to the monitor. He rewinds the video and replays it, pausing

perfectly on Shane's face a second time, a third time, a fourth time. "The hotel attendant will unlock the elevator for you."

I don't know what to say. An invitation to his apartment? I check my watch—that's four hours from now. "I, uh, okay, I can do that."

He replays, over and over, ignoring me completely.

I stand, not sure what to say, standing there feeling awkward until I finally shuffle to the door. As I grab the handle, Adler speaks one more time.

"Don't be late, Casey. And please, from now on, call me Adler. Although I do like the way you say *Mr. Costa*."

I gape at him, stunned at his tone, but he's still staring at the monitor, watching my brother kill himself over and over, until I force myself to leave.

Chapter 3

Casey

It's a twenty-minute drive from AC to Pomona. Cars still scare the heck out of me, but only when I'm walking—luckily, when I'm in one, they're fine. My therapist says it's something-something-state-dependent, but as long as it means I can keep driving, I don't question it.

Mom's out working at the diner, Shane's missing, and Dad's sitting in the living room like always. He's thickset, gray hair, lots of wrinkles. Both knees are in braces, and he grunts as me as I come through. "You gonna start dinner?" he asks by way of greeting. Dad hasn't been able to work for a long time after he hurt his back when he was a stonemason, and now he collects disability. It's not much, but it helps.

"Sure," I say and hurry into the kitchen. We live in a three-bedroom cottage, and when everyone's home, it feels like we're all jammed on top of each other.

I start breading chicken, heating up oil, and boiling water for pasta. My back's killing me, my thighs feel like someone stabbed metal rods into my bone, but if I complain or try to get out of this, Dad will shout at me for an hour, so I might as well get it done.

Fortunately, right now I'm happy to have something to keep my mind off my conversation with Adler.

The whole thing is impossible. I keep coming back to Shane. I can't believe he'd be that stupid, and what was he even doing in the Sunrise that late? He doesn't gamble—thankfully that's one vice he's not interested in—and his friends mostly hang

out at our rival casino, the Oceanview. It makes no sense that he'd be in the Sunrise, all alone, looking like he came in there planning on robbing the place.

But it was a crime of opportunity, wasn't it? He saw the chips were unattended and he grabbed them. My brother's quick, he used to be really good at sleight of hand magic, but he looked like he was dressed to cause mischief that night.

He knows better than to mess with the Sunrise or any of the major hotels. He knows what Adler Costa does to people that cross him.

What was he doing in the Sunrise, and why was he so stupid that night?

I can't stop thinking about it as I finish prepping the meal. Once the chicken's mostly done and the pasta's in to boil, I heat up some red sauce to finish it all off. My phone starts ringing, and I'm tempted to let it go to voicemail, but it's Roxie.

"Hey," she says and I can hear the buzz of the casino in the background. "I'm on my fifteen. What the hell happened?"

"I'm home making dinner," I say, trying to sound casual.

But Roxie's not having any of that. "Don't you make me start screaming, I swear to god, because I will. You had a meeting with freaking Trish, freaking Will, freaking Zach, and the freaking beyond divinely beautiful Adler Costa himself. Why the hell did the four heads of the hydra want to talk to *you*?" She's out of breath when she finishes, but she quickly adds, "No offense, I love you."

I close my eyes. I shouldn't be surprised. Gossip travels around a casino like venereal disease around a retirement village in Florida. Lots of people saw me enter that room, and they all must've seen Trish, Will, and Zach leave.

"It was nothing, just a family thing," I say, hoping she'll drop it when she realizes I don't want to go into details.

"I swear I'll hang you out a window by your freaking tits if you don't start talking right now! I have ten minutes left, don't you dare let me waste this break on nothing."

I groan, closing my eyes, and reluctantly tell her the story. I'd trust Roxie with my life—we've known each other since the day I started and she's my best friend in the world—but saying anything to *anyone* about Shane is a risk.

When I'm done, Roxie is uncharacteristically silent.

"I knew your brother was a piece of shit, but I didn't realize he had an actual death wish," she says softly.

I sigh in response. "I'm honestly having a hard time believing it myself."

"What are you gonna do?" She's not joking around anymore. The concern in her tone is palpable.

"I'm going to Adler's apartment in a few hours to discuss my options."

Another silence.

Then she shrieks. "You're going fucking *where*? Holy shit, you have *got* to be kidding me! You are not seriously going to Adler fucking Costa's fucking mystical top-floor fucking apartment."

I have to hold the phone away as she screams into it. "Can you calm down?" I hiss at her. "Everyone's going to hear, you dick."

She takes frantic breaths. "Tell me it's not true."

"It's true," I confirm. "I'm taking the special elevator up. Apparently, it's real."

Roxie lets out a peal of hysteric laughter.

The top-floor apartment is a piece of Sunrise history and lore. There are dozens of rumors about it. Some employees don't even believe it exists since nobody has ever been up there. Even the cleaning crew is cagey about whether or not anyone's allowed on the top floor. Most employees are aware of the special elevator, but there's debate on where it actually goes.

Now I know for sure. And I guess Roxie does too.

"I can't believe this happening. You're going to see the actual, honest-to-god, top-floor apartment, and you're taking the

freaking magic elevator. This is like finding the fountain of youth. No, this is better, because you get to fuck Adler Costa too.”

I let out a grunt of surprise and nearly drop the pot of boiling water. I fumble the phone, let it hit the floor, and finish draining the pasta before scooping it up. “I am *not* going to have sex with Adler Costa!” I say sharply.

“Are you okay?” she asks. “I heard some noises and figured you just fell into a fit of ecstasy.”

“Dropped the phone. Roxie, listen to me, I am unequivocally *not* sleeping with Adler Costa. Okay? That’s not what this is.”

“Uh, are you an idiot? Adler’s the most notorious bachelor in Atlantic City and he’s inviting you up to his apartment at ten o’clock at night to discuss what you can do to keep your brother out of trouble. Hon, he’s making you his concubine.”

I have it sit down. My back’s on fire and my head’s spinning. “Stop it. This isn’t funny.”

“Why not wait until tomorrow if he wants to talk about this like business people? Hon, face it. You’re going to be his side piece. You’re entering his harem. Nobody goes to a single guy like Adler’s apartment at ten o’clock at night and doesn’t expect to get fucked.”

I close my eyes.

God, she’s got a really good point.

“I’m not sleeping with him to save Shane,” I whisper furiously, aware of my father in the other room. “Okay? Do you understand me?”

“Screw Shane, this is Adler Costa! Fuck him because he’s a freaking god walking among us. Do you have any idea what I would do to be in your position? I wish someone in my family would steal from Sunrise so I could fuck Adler. I’d happily give myself to him as much as he wanted.”

“Stop,” I say, rubbing my eyes. “Please.”

“Why aren’t you excited? He’s gorgeous, and he’s always watching you, so you know he thinks you’re hot.”

“I’m not hot.”

“Oh, you totally are. You’ve got that sexy pear-shaped body.”

“I’m disabled.”

“Eh, you limp when you walk, get over it.”

“Don’t be a dick, Roxie.”

She sounds apologetic. “Look, I’m just saying, go into this with an open mind.” In the background, I hear someone shouting at her. “Shit, Dan’s pissed. I gotta go.”

“I’m not sleeping with Adler.”

“Wear something sexy, okay? Something that accentuates your ass. You’ve got an amazing ass and really good legs.”

“Small boobs.”

“Guys like small boobs. You’re a small girl! He’s going to throw you around. Okay, Dan, fuck, okay! I’m coming! Bye, hon, love you, enjoy getting turned inside-out by the most gorgeous man alive.”

Click.

The line goes dead.

I put my phone on the table and my face in my hands.

This can’t be happening.

I am not Adler Costa’s booty call.

He can’t seriously be using my brother to blackmail me into sleeping with him.

But the more I think about it, the more I think Roxie might be right.

It’s the way he watches me. It’s the ten o’clock timing. It’s his private apartment. All the implications point toward this being a very filthy booty call.

Can I seriously do it? Can I sleep with Adler Costa to save my brother’s life?

Adler’s beautiful, there’s no doubt about it. He’s about as handsome as it gets.

But there's one small problem.

I'm a virgin. I've never slept with anyone. My accident happened when I was nineteen, and I've basically spent the last seven years recovering. Sex and dating haven't been a priority.

Besides, I live with my asshole parents, so it's not like I'm bringing guys home. Assuming there are any guys that don't mind ugly back scars and a limp.

Which there aren't.

No, Adler doesn't want to sleep with me. Roxie's just being Roxie and getting me all worked up. There's another explanation for all this. There has to be.

But just in case—I'm already thinking about the outfit I'm going to wear and fantasizing about Adler worshipping between my legs.

"Hey, Case, I'm fuckin' starving," Dad calls from the other room.

And like that, my daydream disappears. "Nearly done," I call back, and forget all about this stupid sex stuff in the ugly, mundane reality of my life.

Chapter 4

Casey

“**R**ight this way.” The girl working the front desk has the straightest, whitest teeth I’ve ever seen in my life. She leads me over to an elevator tucked behind a pair of enormous potted plants. The doors are gilded, and they look like they were built in the twenties with scrawling Art Deco designs around the edges.

Nobody’s ever gone into this magic elevator. Not that I’ve seen anyway.

But the front desk girl puts a key into an old-fashioned lock, turns it, and the doors slide open.

Revealing the interior of an elevator. I’m weirdly disappointed—some part of me expected unicorns, rainbows, glitter, maybe an explosion or two.

“Head on up,” she says, “he’s expecting you. There’s only one button.”

“Uh, thanks,” I say, but the girl’s already walking off.

I chew on my lip, seriously reconsidering this madness. It’s five to ten and I don’t have to go through with this. I could head to the casino, find Roxie, and tell her that I’m a real chicken. She’ll scream at me, but eh, whatever.

Except if I don’t go, Shane will die.

I hit the only button, unmarked, and the doors slide shut.

The elevator begins moving and I look at myself in the mirror.

I chose a gray dress I bought for a wedding a few years ago but never wore. It's tight, clinging to my chest and hips, cut low but not so much that it shows my very-miniscule cleavage, with a belt in the middle.

I look appropriate for business, but also kind of sexy, with my shoulder blade-length dirty-blond hair down and parted. I wish I had on better shoes, but I can't really get around without my orthotics, so they'll have to serve.

I spent way too long agonizing over this outfit, and it's all Roxie's fault.

The worst part is—I have on black lacy underwear.

My only black lacy pair, something I considered a silly extravagance when I bought them two years ago, since I assumed nobody would ever see them.

Now I'm not so sure.

"We're not having sex," I whisper to myself in the mirror. Though the butterflies in my chest and stomach suggest I'd prefer it if we did.

I steel myself as the elevator slows and comes to a stop. All at once, the realization hits me.

I'm about to see the mythical top-floor apartment for myself.

I should be freaking out right now. I've been so distracted by the possibility of sleeping with Adler that I haven't really thought too hard about this moment.

Now it's hitting me full in the chest.

Countless hours have been wasted by thousands of employees speculating about his place. Adler is notoriously private and he rarely, if ever, talks about his home life. We all know he lives somewhere in the hotel, at least that's what common knowledge suggests, but exactly where remains a mystery. Gossiping about the top-floor apartment is practically a pastime for the Sunrise staff. Everyone's obsessed with Adler, and obsessed with his living arrangements by extension, which he only exacerbates by cultivating his silly air of mystery.

I've heard so many things about this place.

All of them totally made up, but still.

I've heard that it's not real, which is clearly wrong. At least I hope. It'd be pretty crappy if this were all some dream. I've heard that it's real, but jungle-themed. Which is doubtful, but a dishwasher in the kitchen swore it was true. I heard that it's more like a speakeasy mixed with a sex dungeon, which I believe. I heard that it's all pillows and beds, and Adler just uses it as an enormous fuck palace (that one is Roxie's favorite).

The doors slide open.

And I'm greeted by a normal apartment entryway.

I step out, feeling strangely let down. I sort of wanted the smell of sweat, musk, and perfume mingled with disco balls hanging from the ceiling or something equally opulent and over the top.

Instead, it's nothing special. Tile floor, simple walls decorated with bland landscape paintings, the smell of wood polish and the tang of brass in the air. It's extremely nice and borderline lavish, but I could open the pages of *Architectural Digest* and spot a dozen just like it. There's a hall straight ahead, a door a few feet on the left, and a staircase on the right.

"Hello?" I call out, feeling awkward. I wasn't told what to do once I got here, only that I had to show up.

"Back in here. Straight down the hall, on your left." Adler's voice comes from deeper into the apartment.

I head forward, feet killing me from walking more than usual, my limp more pronounced than I like.

I stare around me, at the paintings, at the photographs. I catch sight of what must be Adler when he was little surrounded by men and women, an entire group photograph taken down on the beach. I recognize his father, the former owner of the Sunrise, now deceased, and his mother, looking so young. Mrs. Costa's always around the Sunrise—she's as sweet as they come and is something like a mascot to the staff. She's treated like a queen, given whatever she wants, never charged

a dime, and always makes sure to leaves huge tips wherever she goes. Everyone loves Mrs. Costa.

Though the father, he was a piece of work. Stern like his son, except borderline abusive to staff that stepped out of line. I've heard stories of him screaming at waitresses for dropping drinks or berating dealers for making minor etiquette mistakes.

Though Adler runs the Sunrise with strict rules, at least he's fair.

Nobody gets shouted at. Nobody gets straight up abused.

Everything I've heard suggests Adler's a much better boss than his father was.

I step out of the hall and shuffle left straight into a large, gourmet kitchen. The island's huge, and there's Adler, standing in front of the stove poking with a wooden spoon at something that smells absolutely incredible. He's frowning and wipes his forehead with a dishtowel.

"Take a seat," he says, not looking over. Like the guy's clairvoyant or something and knows where I am.

I clear my throat, not moving. "Uh, sorry, is this a bad time?" I didn't expect to find him cooking, of all things. It's like seeing him take off his shirt or something: way too intimate.

Though seeing him shirtless wouldn't be so bad.

"I'm almost done. Take a seat." He still hasn't look over, fully concentrating on whatever's in the Dutch oven. I find a tall chair at the island and manage to lever myself onto it with a satisfied and grateful sigh. That makes him finally glance over, a deep scowl on his lips.

"Feet hurt," I say, feeling deeply uncomfortable, but I learned a long time ago that it doesn't do me any good to pretend like my disability doesn't exist.

Generally, people want to help. They're awkward about it, but most people mean well.

He grunts in reply then begins to slice a loaf of thick, crusty bread.

The kitchen smells incredible. Tomatoes, spices, onion, garlic. I'm practically vibrating with excitement as he sets up two large bowls, places in two big pieces of bread each, and spoons something saucy and red inside. He slides one bowl over to me along with a fork and a knife.

"Shakshuka," he says, taking the other bowl and placing it down in front of him. "Enjoy."

"Shak-what?" I ask, bewildered. What's actually happening right now? I expected another stern lecture—followed by something a bit raunchy—not whatever this is.

"Dinner," he says, gesturing with a fork. "It's a Mediterranean dish. Onions and peppers sautéed until soft, garlic thrown in, spices added, then everything gets stewed with some tomatoes. Once the sauce is done, you crack in a few eggs, cover the pot, let the eggs set, and that's it. Eat with good bread." He leans forward over his bowl, dips in the bread, and gets to work.

I stare at him. Then I look at the food.

I'm having trouble processing everything. We're alone in the kitchen—which means Adler made this all himself. The remnants of his cooking are left all over: used cutting board, dirty knives. But that can't be right. Adler Costa's rich, spoiled, and above all, too busy to learn how to make food like this.

Except... it's real.

It's sitting in a bowl in front of me.

I'm sitting in Adler's mysterious inner sanctum, and he cooked me dinner.

Nobody's going to believe any of this happened. I might as well tell them his place looked like the Serengeti.

I take a tentative bite. And it's absolutely delicious.

I gape at the guy as he glances up. "Holy crap," I say. "Did you seriously make this?"

"I'm not sure if I should be insulted by that tone."

"I'm sorry, it's just, I assumed you'd have a personal chef."

“I do, but I chose to give him the night off.” He pauses his ravenous demolition of the meal. “You don’t like it?”

“No, no, it’s actually amazing,” I say with an awkward laugh. “I just didn’t realize you were inviting me over for dinner.”

His eyebrows raise. “What did you think this was then?”

“I don’t know, I mean, it’s late. Who eats at ten?”

“People that work fifteen hours a day.”

“Right.” I shift awkwardly in my chair. “I mean, I guess I just figured, uh, you know, you invite a girl over this late—” My cheeks turn bright red.

His lips curl into a smile. “Did you think this was something else?”

Shit. Shit, shit, shit. My cheeks turn burning red. I could scream, I’m so mortified. “No, I mean, I assumed you were pissed at me, you know, because of my brother.”

Totally saved it.

His smile doesn’t budge. “Right, and so you were expecting me to... dress you down?”

The way he says *dress you down* is so obscene I could cry.

“Yes,” I say in a very small voice.

“That comes later.” His grin is huge now as he gestures with his bread. “Eat while it’s still hot. We’ll discuss what you can do for me in a little while.”

I could keel over right now, and that would be preferable to this.

There’s no way I’m finishing my bowl. My stomach’s an embarrassed, nervous wreck, though I manage to take a few bites. The stuff really is good—shakshuka, or whatever he called it. Adler seems extremely amused as he finishes everything in front of him, eating methodically and robotically, and only then does he pour two glasses of wine.

I accept one, unable to turn it down. I could use the alcohol right about now.

“Thank you,” I say as he takes my plate away, not commenting on the amount leftover. “That was good.”

“Happy to do it. I don’t get many opportunities to cook. My mother used to make that when we were younger, and it’s something of a comfort food for me now.” He says all this without looking at me as he puts the dish in the sink, straightening up a little bit as he goes.

I have a feeling that’s the most he’s talked about himself to an employee ever in the history of the Sunrise.

“Your mom’s really nice,” I say, feeling better on more comfortable footing. “Everyone at the hotel loves her.”

“And she loves the Sunrise,” he says though he sounds almost sarcastic about it. “A little bit too much.”

“Oh, uh, I didn’t know that. I mean, I knew she loved the place, but—” I shut my mouth, not even sure what I’m trying to say, and drown my uncomfortable awkwardness with a big gulp of wine.

Come on, Casey, get it together!

He studies me for a moment, his smile fading away as the meal disappears into the refrigerator. Once the remnants are packed up, he grabs his wine glass and gestures for me to follow.

I struggle down from the chair. When he notices how tentative I’m moving, he comes close and offers me his hand. I hesitate, but accept the help. “Thanks,” I mumble. “Tall chairs aren’t easy for me.”

Another thing I learned early: don’t try to do too much.

Test my own boundaries, and I’ll end up flat on my face.

So when a handsome man gives me a hand, I don’t say no.

I have pride, and I’m stubborn as hell, but I’m not stupid.

He says nothing, only keeps me steady. For a beat, I stand beside him, still holding onto his arm. I feel muscle under his dress shirt and stare into his deep blue eyes, feeling like I’m tumbling into them. He smells like dinner, but also like spice

and whiskey and a faint musk. There's a shadow on his cheeks and chin, and his full lips are pressed together.

I'm struck all over again at how handsome this man is.

He's big, athletic, a specimen of a human being—and yet he's always in this hotel.

It's a shame that a creature like him keeps himself locked away from the world, like he's some rare animal that should be paraded around.

“This way,” he says, leading me back into the main hall.

I shuffle after him. He slows his pace when he notices me falling behind. We end up back in the foyer, and I glance toward the stairs. “Is there, uh, another floor? You know, for the bedroom?”

His eyebrows raise as he stops. “Yes, there is, and yes, the bedroom is up there.”

“Steps are hard for me.”

Why the hell did I just say that?!

I must be the dumbest girl alive. It just tumbled out of my lips, unbidden, my moronic thoughts vomiting between my lips.

God, I am the absolute worst sometimes.

His lips tug into another smile. “I think you might be mistaken about something, Casey.”

“No, I'm sorry, I'm just nervous and I'm babbling,” I say quickly, raising my hands. Scratch what I said earlier—I am the dumbest person in the whole freaking world.

If I'd just stop thinking about sex for one stupid second, maybe I might get out of this with my dignity intact—though it's probably too late for that already.

His smile grows. “Why would you be nervous?”

“My boss invited me to his apartment at ten o'clock at night to discuss the fate of my older brother,” I say, tilting my chin up.

“Can you blame me? It's an unusual situation.”

“I get off work at nine thirty. I needed a half hour to cook.”

“You didn’t tell me that.”

“I didn’t know I had to spell everything out for you.” He leans closer, his smile fading. “Like, for example, how I don’t plan on fucking you tonight.”

My jaw falls open. My eyes go wide.

But yeah, I deserved that.

And a strange pang of bitter regret jolts into my core, only briefly.

Like I wish he actually would.

“I didn’t think you were,” I say, shaking my head rapidly. “It’s just, I talked to Roxie and she pointed out that a ten o’clock invite is a booty call for most normal humans, and I thought —”

“You thought I was going to blackmail you into sex?” He crosses his muscular arms, smile fading. Leaning away from me.

“Uh,” I say, not really sure how to respond. Since yes, that’s pretty much what I thought. I mean, I didn’t use the word *blackmail* but that’s what it would be.

Maybe blackmail I’d enjoy, but still.

“I do not need to coerce my employees into fucking if all I want is sex,” he says, shaking his head. “I’m filthy rich, relatively young, and I live in goddamn Las Vegas. If I want sex, I can have it whenever I need it. While you are attractive, Ms. Kiernan, you are far from my type.”

I take a step back, totally stunned.

What a wild freaking ride that sentence was.

Did he just say I’m attractive? Did Adler Costa, most perfect bachelor in the whole world, call me attractive?

Then he smashed me back to earth with one stunning move.

“You’re not my type either,” I snap at him, starting to fume. I don’t know why I’m having this reaction. I don’t even care if he’s into me or not—actually, it’s better if he’s not. “Seriously,

how are you standing there acting all appalled? Did you not even consider the implication of inviting your young, female employee to your private house in the middle of the night?”

His jaw works. “People at the Sunrise gossip too much. I wanted our discussion to be between us. This is the only room in this entire building that I can guarantee is truly private.”

“Maybe you should’ve said that instead of, I don’t know, freaking me out!”

He takes several deep breaths. I can tell he’s annoyed, but I’m finding it hard to empathize at the moment.

He’s the one that dragged me up here. He’s the one that set our meeting for the middle of the night. He’s the one that made it seem like he was getting something from me tonight, something serious, something big, in exchange for my brother’s life.

I thought Roxie might be right—I figured he wanted to fuck me.

Nobody mentioned freaking shakshuka.

“Okay,” he says at last. “I acknowledge how you *might* get that idea.”

His concession surprises me, even though it’s half-assed. “Wow. Really? Huh. Okay, I didn’t expect you to say that.”

“But,” he says, talking over me. “I am *not* going to apologize for your own filthy mind. Now will you please follow me so I can take you into my dungeon, tie you up, and fuck you in every hole until you beg for more?”

My mouth falls open again. How is this guy doing this? Shocking me into total silence? Words try to come out of my throat, but I can only make a weird grunting sound. I’m half angry, half ringing with a sudden, piercing desire.

Then he laughs, shaking his head.

“Couldn’t help myself,” he says, turning away. “Just fucking with you. Come on, we’re going to the balcony. There’s something I want you to see.”

Then he walks off, going through the double doors, which lead into an office.

I gape after him, head reeling.

Then I get mad. “You asshole!” I call after him.

I’m tempted to get back on the elevator. It’s right there—I could press the button and disappear from this psychotic situation.

Adler is clearly torturing me for fun.

But Shane’s life still hangs in the balance, and even if I’m having some bizarre hate-flirt situation with my boss right now, I still need to have a serious talk with him about not murdering any of my family members.

I follow, not feeling happy, and somewhat hoping he throws me over the railing and puts me out of my misery.

Chapter 5

Casey

The view is absolutely gorgeous.

Once I head through an austere office-slash-library and through another set of French doors, the whole of Atlantic City spreads out in front of me. The strip disappears in a spew of lights and motion, and beyond that, the ocean fades into the darkness. The smell of salt and brine fills the air, and I breathe it deep. There's nothing I love more than that smell and the sound of the surf against the sand. For all the pain my family's put me through, part of me feels lucky to have grown up so close to the ocean.

Adler stands at the edge of the railing, staring down at the buildings. I pause, looking around. We're nearly on the roof; only one floor is above us. Chairs are scattered against the walls and an ornate, crystal ashtray sits alone on a wooden table. He looks back and catches me staring. "My father was a smoker," he says. "Haven't been able to get rid of that yet."

Another hint of sentimentality. His mother's comfort food recipe, and now this little reminder of his late father. I never would've imagined that from a man like Adler.

"Oh," I say and join him at the railing. "I'm, uh, sorry. About your dad."

Even though I never knew him and he died a year before I started working here.

Adler tilts his head to the side. "It's been a long time, though in some ways, my father never left this place. Did you know he built the Sunrise when he was only twenty-eight?"

“Really?” I let out an impressed laugh. “How’d he manage to get the money?”

“Atlantic City was different back then. He started as a bookie at twelve, began robbing houses at fifteen, then got involved in casinos at nineteen. Nobody’s sure how he came up with the cash, but I’m betting you can venture some guesses, and one of them might be right.”

I chew on my lip, not sure how to respond to that. Everyone knows the Costa family is in deep with organized crime, or at least that’s the rumor on the Sunrise floor. I figured it must be true, since this whole city is corrupt and crawling with criminals, cheats, killers, sharks, and worse.

Except Adler doesn’t seem like a gangster.

No, he’s more like the image of the perfect industrialist. Young, handsome, even rakish to a fault, but still serious and intimidating. There’s nothing unseemly or gritty about the man—he’s as polished as they get, at least in this business.

Still, his implication is pretty clear.

There’s dark money at the core of this place.

“Why do you say your father is still here?” I ask instead, not willing to speculate on his criminal connections.

“The way it’s run, for one thing. He set up the Sunrise exactly the way he liked it, and even eight years after his death, we still haven’t changed much. His people remain in positions of power, though some have moved on. I believe you’re familiar with Big Dan? That’s one of my father’s.”

I stroke my hair, not really surprised. Big Dan’s old-school Atlantic City: loud, brash, working-class with an edge. I like him, but I wouldn’t want to be on his bad side. “That must be hard for you.”

“In some ways,” he agrees as his eyes scan the horizon. “But I didn’t come up here to complain about my family, although my father also plays a role in what we’re going to do, for better or for worse.” He holds up a hand and points toward the far end of Pacific Avenue. “You see that?”

I follow his finger. “The new hotel they’re building?”

“That is Tony Vetch’s new place.” His face tightens into a sour glare. “The Oceanview wasn’t enough for him.” He points toward our rival hotel five buildings away. Both the Sunrise and the Oceanview are right up against the boardwalk, and that new hotel will occupy some prime real estate only one block inland. “The city is changing, and I’ve come to realize that it will leave me and the Sunrise behind if I don’t change with it.”

I have no clue what he’s talking about. AC is always under construction, especially since a horrible hurricane nearly swept the whole town away. Since then, things have been shifting, but it still feels like the same old AC.

Still, Tony Vetch is another big hotel owner in the area—the Oceanview is as popular as the Sunrise, though I think it’s way seedier—and the rumors about his relationship with Adler go back decades. They used to be partners and best friends, but something happened to push them apart, and now they hate each other with a passion. At least according to what I’ve heard.

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” I say, shifting my weight toward him. My knees ache and my feet throb, but I do my best to hide it. “The Sunrise is always full though, and people love it down there. I mean, I love being a dealer too.”

“Do you?” he murmurs and glances at me. “What do you love about it?”

I stare out at the lights of the city. Down below, the world crawls on, thousands of people acting out their own stories, while beyond them the ocean continues lapping against the sand, going through its ceaseless movement. Everything seems so small, but also so big from this high up. It makes me feel strangely introspective, and I let some of my guard down.

“The Sunrise is like a family,” I say, glancing up at his face. He seems contemplative. “The money’s good, but the people make it worthwhile. I mean, I meet so many different kinds of people every shift, you know? Then there’s the staff, some of my best friends work here.”

“Like Roxie?” he asks, trying not to smile, but he’s not doing a good job at it.

“Yes, like Roxie,” I say through my teeth.

“The Roxie that convinced you to come up here even though you thought I wanted to fuck you tonight?”

“She didn’t, I mean, I didn’t—” I glare at him. “Did you have to bring that up again?”

“Yes,” he says. “Did you wear nice underwear for me? You don’t have to show it, unless you want to.”

“You’re unbelievable. You realize this is sexual harassment, right?”

“I guess I am taking advantage of you then.” He covers his smirk with a sip of wine.

I move away from him, over to a chair, and sit down on the edge, rubbing my knee. He frowns at that, but says nothing.

“Can we just skip all this bullshit and get to why I’m here? My legs are killing me and I want to go home.”

He turns, leaning against the railing with his back to the ocean. I’d be terrified of dropping over, but he seems unconcerned.

“You want to save your brother’s life,” he says, not a question. “And you’d do almost anything to make that happen.”

“Yes,” I say, staring into his eyes.

Even sleep with you. If it came to that.

“I mentioned my father plays a part in this. Well, he was a difficult man, as I’m sure you’ve heard. Controlling to a fault, both with the Sunrise and with his family. When he passed, I found out that there’s a stipulation in his will. In order to receive his full inheritance, I need to be married and have at least one child by the time I’m forty years old. If I fail to meet that requirement, the money will be placed in a trust under the control of a half-dozen men, some of which are dead already, but those remaining remain loyal to my father even after all this time. They represent the old guard. The old Atlantic City. The old way of doing business. I want to drag this hotel and

this family into the future, even if the old, fat bastards that nip at my heels don't want me to. Which means I need to get married. And I need to reproduce. I've been putting it off for eight years, but now it's time. Things are changing, Casey, and I have to change with it."

He falls silent. I try to process all that but I'm having trouble placing the pieces in a row.

There's a faction in his family—in his business—and they're working against him, and somehow, he needs a wife and a baby, and for whatever reason he's telling *me* about this, and—

Understanding hits me.

Like a punch to the teeth.

I sink back into the chair, my hands numb and tingling.

Adler tilts his head to the side. "Well?" he asks.

I can't speak. I can't make my brain work.

He wants to marry me.

"Can't we just have sex?" I blurt out, leaning forward to put my face in my hands.

Adler laughs. He laughs loud and deep, a satisfying kind of laugh. When he finishes, he steps forward from the railing, and finishes his wine. He picks up my glass, left forgotten on the table, and drinks from that as well.

"No," he says. "We can't."

Chapter 6

Casey

“I am absolutely *not* marrying you,” I say, throwing my hands in the air.

His smirk burns into me like a brush fire. It’s like he’s enjoying my misery. I could scream, except I’m alone on this balcony with a criminal—self-confessed, pretty much—and there’s nobody in the world that can help me.

I really, really wish Roxie had been right.

Giving Adler my virginity would beat marrying him.

At least sex would last a night.

But this? It’s too much. It’s freaking impossible.

“This isn’t my first choice either,” he says, swirling my glass of wine. “I’ve considered dozens of other options over the years, but none make sense, at least until you.”

“Why me?” I say, confused beyond reason. “I’m... nobody. I’m nothing! Just some random dealer on your floor.”

“Exactly, that’s exactly why you’re perfect. You have no ties to my world, no loyalties to anyone beyond me, and you’ll owe me everything when I spare your brother’s life.”

“Let me get this straight. You want a wife that you can completely and utterly control? Is that what you’re saying?”

“More or less, yes, that’s correct.”

“You’re insane.” I shove myself to my feet. My knee buckles, and I catch myself on the arm of the chair. He comes toward

me, reaching out to help, but I swat him away. “Don’t touch me. I’m done here.”

I know when to accept help, and I also know when to tell assholes to fuck off.

“Think about it,” he says as I shuffle back into the office, hurrying to the elevator. “If you go through with my proposal, it’ll save your brother’s life. But more than that, it’ll save your whole family. Your father doesn’t work. Your mother’s getting old. Do they have enough savings to retire? Does that mean you’ll be working for the rest of your life to take care of them in their old age? Can you even afford that, and what happens if you can’t? This is your way out of that misery. I’m offering you freedom.”

“Stop it,” I snap, whirling on him. “How the hell do you know any of that stuff?”

“I did my research,” he says coolly. “I’m not fool enough to propose marriage to a total stranger.”

“That’s exactly what you’re doing. Reciting facts doesn’t mean you actually know me.”

“No, that’s where you’re wrong. Facts tell me everything I need to know. You grew up in Pomona. Went to Grand View High School, got decent grades, even applied to some colleges. You were accepted to Rutgers, Temple, Penn State, and Villanova, but couldn’t afford tuition. Then you got in an accident.”

“Stop it right now,” I snap at him, rubbing my knee. “I don’t want to hear about my accident, okay? You don’t know a damn thing about it.”

Facts can’t tell him about the scream of tires, about the crunch of glass, about the pain of lying face-down on concrete unable to move, terrified I’m going to die. Facts can’t tell him about the agony and struggles since then.

“I know you’ve been in rehabilitation for seven years,” he says softly, looking down at my legs. “I know we’ve bent the rules and made accommodations for you, and we’re happy to do it.

Like you said, Sunrise is a family. I'm inviting you deeper into that family."

"This is insanity," I say, backing away.

But my knee gives out again, and I stumble.

Adler comes forward. Too fast for me to stop. He grabs my arms, steadying me, the big man standing so close I can smell him all over again. I would've been fine, I stumble all the damn time, but I can see the concern in his eyes. His mouth is close to my lips, and I take in a sudden, sharp breath. Spice, musk, a hint of wine. He smells as good as he looks, and my heart's going wild.

"I'm okay," I say, not trying to extract myself. A hammer-sharp pulse grinds in between my legs. "Just overwhelmed."

"Why don't you sit?"

"No, I'm not staying. I can't do this. I can't... I can't marry you."

"What, I'm not your type either?"

"Not remotely."

"Why not?"

"For one, you're a controlling psychopath."

He inclines his head. "Okay. That's fair. What else?"

I can't believe I'm doing this, but since he invited it, I decide to give him the truth.

"You're too rich. We're from different worlds, and I don't think I could ever fit in somewhere like this." I glance around the opulently furnished office filled with art and small statues that are probably worth more than the house I grew up in. "You're an arrogant asshole. You're blackmailing me into it, which doesn't help. You're difficult, picky, selfish—"

"You seem to know a lot about me," he says quietly.

"I've been working for you for a long time now. I've learned a few things."

"Not everything you heard on the floor is true."

“If you think you can learn everything you need to know about me from a few lines in a dossier, then I can learn everything I need to know about you from a few rumors in the break room. I don’t want this.”

“Not even to save your brother? Not even to guarantee a comfortable future for your parents? You can move them out of that house. Get them a decent car. Pay for healthcare for your father. Get your mother’s teeth fixed. Hire a dozen private detectives to keep your brother out of trouble. Imagine what you could accomplish as my wife.”

It’s tempting.

God, it’s so tempting, because all the problems he points out have been nagging at me for a while now.

That’s the sickest part of all this.

I’ve been struggling for years, juggling my disability, my parents, my brother, all the financial needs of this family, and barely keeping my head above water.

Now here comes Adler, offering me a way out.

An absolutely crazy way out, but still.

“No,” I say, shaking my head. “No, I just can’t. Something else. *Anything* else.”

“You could be my sex pet instead,” he says, practically purring the words. “Would you prefer that? I’ll keep you tied up in my dungeon, your mouth gagged, your legs spread, so you’re ready and waiting for me to use you however I choose.”

“I, uh—”

But he lets me go. “Sorry, pet. I was kidding.”

I take a step away from him, crossing and uncrossing my arms. “Can you *not* call me that, please?” I rub my face, trying to get control of myself. The idea of being *his* that way scares the hell out of me, but there’s a dark temptation deep inside my chest.

“I’m offering you one deal and one deal only. Marry me, commit to giving me a baby, and I will pardon your brother

and provide you all the money you'll ever need to take care of your family. Once I've met the requirements of the will and the money is put into my control, we can amicably divorce."

"Will I get half your assets when I walk away?"

"We'll write a prenup with a very generous allowance for you. Say what you want about me, but I take care of my people."

I'm so tempted it hurts.

How bad could it be, marrying this man?

I'd give him a couple years, have a baby, and then—

Then what? Leave my baby in his care? Walk away from my own child? The logistics of the situation are insane, let alone the moral implications.

Can I lie to my family about this whole situation?

What will my life be like as the wife of Adler Costa, and could I ever go back to the way things are now?

Would I even want to?

There's so much to consider, so many tangled problems to unwind, and it's very hard to think with that gorgeous man staring at me with those pouty lips and intense blue eyes.

"I need to get out of here." I start backing away toward the elevators.

He doesn't try to stop me. "I understand this is a lot, but I'm offering something women in your position dream of."

That gets my attention. "My position? What exactly is my *position*?"

"You have a deadbeat criminal brother, a father that can't work, a mother that pushes herself ragged, and your own medical bills to worry about. You have problems that would send most people into therapy or out onto the streets. Yet you're dealing with it. That's your position. And I want to help you."

Okay, Casey, get it together, he's not wrong. But for some reason, the way he said that rubs me the wrong way. "I get it,

my life's hard, especially compared to this." I gesture at the lavish apartment. "But just because you have money and privilege doesn't mean you can own me too. You don't want to help me, you're only doing this for yourself."

He leans against the doorframe watching as I jab the elevator call button furiously. The doors ding and slide open, and I limp across the threshold, embarrassed that I wore this dress, mortified that I wore my good underwear, and so pissed off that Adler Costa thinks he can buy me.

"If I wanted to own you, Casey, you'd be tied up in my bedroom right now, your pretty little underwear tossed on the floor, moans escaping those lovely lips of yours as I took out all my frustrations on that beautiful pear-shaped body of yours. I'm offering you a business deal, and nothing more. Think about it."

The doors slide shut and I'm left alone in the magic elevator, stunned to silence.

A business deal. That's what he's calling it.

A marriage for money and nothing more.

Except if it were only marriage, that'd be one thing, but he wants a baby too.

A baby, and I suspect even more of me, because Adler Costa doesn't seem like the kind of man content with taking only a little bit.

No, he's going to want it all.

And if I want to keep my brother alive, I'm going to have to give it to him.

Chapter 7

Adler

The floor of the Sunrise on a busy Saturday night is a riot of activity.

I don't love anything more than the noise, the motion, the people going through the extremes of human of emotions. Screams of joy at the roulette wheel, cries of dismay at the slots, an argument that gets broken up by security before it can turn to violence. Laughter, cries of ecstasy, shouts of despair. This is the human experience in miniature.

I watch my people. My dealers, waitresses, bartenders, cashiers, receptionists, even the valet guys poke their heads inside. Security runs a tight ship, with Zach at the top, keeping the drunks and the cheaters in line. It helps that we have state-of-the-art anti-gambling technology spread all over this place searching out the serial cheaters, the edge players, the hustlers, and allowing us to kick them out before they even take a seat.

This is my kingdom. My tiny little slice of heaven.

And somebody wants to steal it from me.

“You know, if I didn't know you better, I'd think you were an evil genius plotting your next move. You have some serious Bond-villain vibes going on right now.”

I glance back as Will joins me at the railing. We're standing on a hidden balcony, obscured from the patrons below by some cleverly placed artwork and fake plants.

“You're confusing me for my father.”

“Nobody would do that.”

“You think I’m not capable of stomping my boot down on an innocent’s face?”

“You’re more than capable, except you wouldn’t take pleasure in it like your old man did.”

I grunt in response and half turn to look at him. “How’s the night going?”

“Smooth,” he answers. “You know the worst part of being the pit boss here? Nothing ever happens.”

“Nothing ever happens because you’re good at your job.”

“True, but still. Sometimes I wish there’d be a disaster. Something suitably fun.” He sighs, leaning forward and craning his neck. “Hey, your girl’s working.”

I glance down at the craps table. I was trying to pretend like I hadn’t noticed, but Casey’s dealing tonight. She’s sitting in her signature high stool, wearing her thick orthopedic shoes, her hair in a high ponytail, her hands moving with practiced grace.

I love the way she deals. There’s a strange efficiency to how she handles the chips. Some dealers, they like a little flourish, as if they’re part of the show, but not Casey. She’s no-bullshit, takes the bets quickly, places them where they need to be, pays out what’s owed. She laughs with the patrons, makes jokes with them, cheers when they win and commiserates when they lose. Casey’s one of my best by far, and it’s a pleasure to keep an eye on her.

It’s no accident she’s always assigned to the craps table within best view of my hiding spot.

There are nights when she’s working and I can’t move from this spot.

Transfixed by her every move.

“Her table’s doing well,” I note, nodding at the stacks of chips in front of her patrons.

“That’s just Casey. She’s good luck. The dice love her.”

“More than just the dice,” I say, looking at my friend. “I spoke to her a couple nights ago.”

He grimaces and doesn't return my stare. "What'd she say?"

"You can probably guess."

"Ran screaming?"

"Hobbled screaming, but yes."

He sighs, shaking his head. "You shouldn't joke."

"You're right. That was in poor taste." I glance back down at her. "It's just, I thought this would be easier."

"She'll come around." Will leans back with a groan. "And if she doesn't, we'll drop her piece-of-shit brother into the Atlantic Ocean and let him sink to the bottom with the dozens of other thieving assholes we've caught over the years."

"She won't like that."

"You worry too much about what she wants."

"That's a good point."

Though Will knows damn well I can't help myself.

"She'll come around," he insists, leaning on his elbows again. His voice turns contemplative. "Worry less about her and more about Tony taking over this town."

"Fucking Tony," I murmur.

"Fucking Tony," Will agrees.

We lapse into silence. The mention of Tony never fails to put me in a terrible mood. My former best friend and ex-business partner is a constant source of pain and frustration. I never wanted our relationship to devolve into this mess we're currently in, but years of fighting, backstabbing, sabotage, and outright war has made sure that so long as the other is standing, there will always be hell in Atlantic City.

"What I don't understand is where he got the money from," I say as if we'd been having this discussion all night.

Will knows exactly what I mean. "The Oceanview isn't doing all that great. I hear gambling income's down across the board and the place is only partially booked on a good night."

“Tony doesn’t have deep contacts, he doesn’t have a family backing him, he’s got nothing. A bank isn’t going to fund a new casino. I haven’t heard of any big investors sniffing around. So where is the money coming from?”

“That’s the question,” Will admits. “If we can figure that out, we might be able to figure out who’s been trying to pay off the Sunrise board.”

I grunt in reply, unable to form a coherent sentence. The mention of the board always sends me into a tailspin of rage.

They’re a constant pain in my ass and a relic of an older time. My father set up the board and stocked it with his own people—which worked great for him, since they were loyal. The board gave him some semblance of accountability without actually ever holding him accountable.

Now though, the board doesn’t always follow orders. Instead, the old fucks my father installed think they know what’s best for the Sunrise, though most of them rarely ever step foot in this place.

The Sunrise is my home. It’s my life. I grew up in these halls and I know every inch of the building from the freezers in the kitchens to the storage in the roof. I know every duct, every screw, every doorjamb. And still the board second-guesses every move I make.

Technically, I don’t own the Sunrise. It’s held in trust which is managed by—no shock here—that same fucking board of directors. We don’t have outside investors, however, no stock, no bonds, no debt, and ownership of the Sunrise should pass into my hands when I turn forty according to the bylaws.

Unless the board decides to sell the place out from under me.

“If Tony gets elected to Congress, my life is going to get extremely difficult.” I watch Casey pay out on a good roll, her clients cheering. She’s smiling like she’s winning along with them, and that’s what I love about her. No matter how many years she works here, her joy is still infectious.

“He’s not going to win.” Will doesn’t sound sure. “There’s no way he can afford both a new hotel and a fucking campaign.”

“This is New Jersey. You know how much dark money’s flowing around here. I wouldn’t be shocked if whoever is behind Tony’s sudden rise is also behind the sudden flood of offers to buy this place.”

“You might be right.” Will’s lips press together. “You have any clue what you’ll do about it? Maybe you can uncover some of the big, fat skeletons he’s got hanging in his closet.”

“He’s been making those skeletons disappear the last few weeks.” I give him a pointed look. We’ve both heard about the murder of a man that used to do business with Tony years ago, the disappearance of a few dealers from Oceanview, the high-ranked fixer that fled the country. “He’s clearing house.”

Which makes him very dangerous.

Down below, Casey stands as her break starts. Her clients shout their goodbyes, and I watch her shuffle away with a smile on her face.

I turn to leave. Will watches me, and I can tell he wants to say more, but he keeps his mouth shut. He knows me better than most, and he knows the subject of Tony Vetch does nothing but fucking ruin my day.

Time to turn things around.

I head down the back stairs and onto the main floor. I greet my employees, saying hello to an old blackjack dealer, shaking hands with a couple high rollers that recognize me, snatching a comped drink from a waitress. She laughs and waves me off, and I raise it in salute.

I find Casey sitting alone at the far end of the bar sipping on a ginger ale and looking exhausted.

I slide into the stool beside her. She glances over, does a double-take, and sighs audibly.

“Here to put a ring on my finger?” she asks.

“Happily.” I sip my drink. It’s a gin and tonic, heavy on the gin. Typical Sunrise move—get the big spenders drunk, make them spend even more. Alcohol is cheap, but a whale with deep pockets and an extremely high risk tolerance is priceless.

“I still don’t have an answer for you.”

“It’s been two days.”

“I know that.”

“How much longer do you need?”

“I don’t know. A week? Three years might get it done.”

“How about until Monday, end of the day.” I tap my fingers on the top of the bar. “That’s the rest of tonight and all day tomorrow. That should be enough to figure out if you love your brother enough to save his life.”

“Don’t do that,” she says, her tone turning hard. “You don’t know anything about my relationship with Shane.”

That’s where she’s extremely wrong. I know *a lot* about her relationship with her scumbag brother.

But I don’t tell her that.

“What I do know for sure is my people are going to find him sooner or later. Unless you hurry, it’ll be sooner. How good can he swim?”

“Please don’t threaten my brother right now.” She rubs her forehead. “It’s been a long night and I’m only half done.”

“My other offer stands as well.”

“Which was?”

“My bedroom. Lots of rope. I’ll keep on calling you pet.”

“No thanks.” Her cheeks turn red. “You know, we didn’t go into detail about how exactly you’d get me pregnant.”

“Well, you see, when a daddy loves a beautiful girl like you —”

“I am *not* calling you daddy.”

“That’s a shame. But you do know how women get pregnant, don’t you?”

“Of course I do, I’m just saying, does marrying you involve, you know—”

“Fucking me?” My eyebrow quirks. God, I love how embarrassed she gets. It drives me fucking wild. “Yes, I do believe it would.”

“That’s a deal breaker.”

“How else am I supposed to put my child inside of you?”

She groans. “Please don’t ever say that again.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I don’t know, artificial insemination? We can always use a turkey baster. You can jerk off into a dish—”

“Absolutely not. I am not jerking off into a dish.”

She leans forward on her elbows. “I can’t believe we’re talking about this right now.”

I move closer to her, pitching my voice lower. “You do know that half the people in the Sunrise are watching us right now, correct? Imagine what the gossip will be once you’re back on the floor.”

She sits up straighter, looking around as if she might catch one of the waitresses whispering into a bartender’s ear while staring at her like something from a teen movie.

“You’re right. I should get the hell out of here.” She pushes up to her feet. I hate watching the discomfort on her face, but she’s gotten good at masking it. I want to help, though I’m also very aware that my touch might not be what’s best for her in this moment.

“You have until Monday to decide,” I say, turning back to my drink with some reluctance.

I love staring at this girl. At her beautiful, full lips, her green eyes, her dirty-blonde hair in thick ringlets, her pear-shaped body with that fantastic fucking ass. She’s tiny, though her legs are still long, with smaller breasts that still drive me wild. I want to hold one in my hand while I suck the other nipple, making her groan in my ear. Maybe then she’ll call me daddy.

“Can I ask you something?” She’s looking away from me. “Why the urgency?”

“I told you already. The will.”

“You’re thirty-eight. You have another two years.”

“That’s a good point. Maybe I’m capitalizing on an opportunity.”

“Maybe,” she says, eyeing me for a moment. I wonder if she can tell that I have an ulterior motive, but then she tilts her head. “Or maybe you’re just an asshole that does whatever he wants on a total whim.”

“That could be it,” I say, swirling my drink.

She walks off, moving as fast as her legs will take her. I watch her go, marveling at her lovely ass, wondering if she really will wear my ring—

Or if I will have to resort to even more drastic measures to make sure she stays safe.

Chapter 8

Casey

Roxie lounges on my bed. We're heading to see a movie in a little while, but we've still got some time to kill. My dad's watching baseball on TV downstairs while my mom's out at work like always.

"Okay, so tell me again why you haven't thrown yourself at Adler yet?" She kicks her legs up, staring up at my childhood bedroom's ceiling.

"Well, for one, I'm twenty-six and I still live with my parents. You do know that I'm sort of a loser, right?"

"Ah, stop it, plenty of younger people live at home for a while. Times are tough out there, and you've got it even tougher."

I instinctively touch my knee. "For another, he's like a total alien to me. It's like we're different species."

"Ah, yes, he's homo-richerus and you're homo-povertium. Everyone knows those two can't mate."

"That's the other problem." I give her a look as she props herself up on an elbow. "The whole mating thing."

She laughs, unable to help herself. I'm at the most desperate point in my life being forced into a totally insane situation, and she's laughing. "I know, I know, it's crazy, but god, what a situation. You can either sit around and let your brother get killed, or you can marry an absolutely loaded billionaire hunk, fuck him a bit until he knocks you up, then be set for the rest of your life. *Terrible*, I say. Just *terrible*."

"You act like you'd let him stick it in you right now."

“Hon, I’d let him fuck me in your bathroom if that’s what it took to get rich.” He sighs and stretches. “You think I’m getting out of this shithole town otherwise?”

She’s got a good point. Roxie’s beautiful, intelligent, hilarious, motivated—but she was born poor just like me, and girls like us don’t leave Pomona, not without luck and help.

My phone starts ringing. I grab it from my nightstand and stare at Shane’s name on the screen. “I have to take this,” I say, hurrying from the room. Roxie says nothing—she must’ve seen who it was.

I head into my bathroom and shut the door. “Hello? Shane?”

“Hey, Case.” He sounds tired. But it’s definitely him, alive and well. “How you doin’?”

“Better than you. Where the hell are you?”

“I’m good, don’t worry about me, just lying low. Hey, uh, have you heard anything? You know, about, uh, me?”

“Maybe like how you stole chips from the Sunrise and now half the town wants to find you?”

He’s quiet for a beat. “Yeah. Like that.”

“What the fuck were you thinking?” I hiss at him.

“Hey, come on, don’t start giving me crap now.”

“I’m serious, Shane. I’ve protected you, bailed you out, and backed you up a dozen times, but you went too far. Everyone knows the one freaking rule—”

“Don’t steal from the casinos,” he finishes for me. “I know, Case, I know. Listen, I bet it seems like I just did something stupid, but big stuff’s going down, okay?”

“Like what?” I ask, incredulous. “You’re an addict. You hang around the Oceanview all freaking day with your addict friends. How is something *big* happening?”

Normally, he’d be pissed about that, and I shouldn’t have said it—but I’m upset and trying to get a rise out of him. Except this time, he sounds calm.

“I’m in over my head.” His voice is small. Tiny, even. I’ve never heard him sounding so contrite. “I’m practically drowning already, Case. I know you can’t help me. I’m not calling for that. I just—shit, I guess I just wanted to hear your voice. You sure you’re doing okay? Not letting Mom and Dad drain you too much? You haven’t skipped your rehab?”

I actually did skip my rehab appointment this week, but I decide not to tell him that. “Mom and Dad are fine,” I say, most of my anger dissipating. “Where are you right now? Can I come pick you up?”

“Better stay away.” He laughs, but it’s the laughter of a man that knows he’s on the edge. “I always knew you were the good one, even when we were kids back because I started fucking up so much. Mom and Dad were so proud of you when you got accepted into college, do you remember that? I bragged about you to all my friends. Mikey Bluenose punched me in the chest to get me to shut up, but I kneed him in the guts and kept on talking. My sister, smartest person I know. Don’t let this town ruin you, Case, okay? Please?”

I blink back tears, coming hot and sudden. “You’re talking like you’re already dead.”

“I stole from the Sunrise.”

“Still, there’s got to be something you can do. Get out of town. Disappear somewhere.”

“Case,” he says, sounding regretful. “We both know I won’t.”

I say nothing. Tears drop onto the tile floor. He’s right—we both know it. Shane’s an addict, and no matter what, addicts stick around where they can get their supply. He might disappear for a bit, but he’ll resurface sooner or later in some drug den with some asshole dealer.

“Anyway,” he says after a little while. “I should go. Just wanted to check in, you know?”

“Yeah. I know.”

“Be good. I mean it, Case. Be good. I love you, kid.”

“I love you too.” I bite back a sob. I hate this so much. He hasn’t said that to me in years, not since we were little kids.

“Yeah, all right. See you.”

Then he hangs up.

I stare at the phone in my hand.

Shane knows he’s going to die.

This was his way of saying goodbye. And instead of railing against it, instead of sounding angry, he only sounded resigned, like he always knew he’d be brutally murdered by a casino boss one day.

That’s what the city does to its wayward sons. That city, Atlantic City, it’s built on the spines and the corpses of all those that got sucked into its darkness and sin. That city corrupts, it kills. I can feel its pull at night in the desperation of my clients as they roll their dice, make their bets, hope for that one final score, that one moment of ease and bliss in an otherwise bleak walk from gambling floor to bland room and back again. Over and over, stuck in a loop. My brother is stuck too, and he knows it.

I leave the bathroom, wiping my eyes. Roxie sits up straight when I come back into the room.

“Casey, what the heck? Are you okay? Is Shane okay?”

“He’s fine,” I say, shaking my head. “But he knows, you know? He knows what’s going to happen to him.”

Roxie’s quiet. She stares at her lap before gesturing me over. I sit down next to her, and she wraps her arms around me in a tight hug.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. “I’m so, so sorry.”

I nod against her, release one last sob, then pull myself together.

Because I don’t have to mourn my brother’s death.

I can stop it. I can save him. I have the power, only I’ve tried to avoid it.

Hearing Shane like that, it crystallized the stakes, how this is about more than me.

I hate Adler Costa with a passion that hurts in this moment. I hate him so much—he's the source of all our pain.

He's the killer, the blackmailer, the beast.

And on Monday, I'm going to marry him.

Chapter 9

Casey

On Monday morning, I march my ass into the Sunrise an hour before my shift, hunt for Zach, and demand a meeting with Adler.

Zach stares at me for a long while as he leans up against the bar closest to the front door. It's a space-themed lounge—patrons love the twinkling star lights and the vaguely retro sci-fi decorations—and I get the sudden feeling that I'm drifting out into the blackness, lost in between the planets, in the infinite nothingness between stars.

"You sure about that?" he asks as if he knows what I need a meeting for. His tone isn't judgmental, only curious.

"Please, can you just tell him I'm ready to talk?"

Zach shrugs. "All right. I hope it's good though. Mr. Costa doesn't like to be bothered."

"Zach," I say through my teeth. "Please." It's frustrating that I have to jump through hoops when all I want is to forget about this whole situation.

He winks at me and walks off. I ask the bartender, a young girl named Macy, for a shot of bourbon. "Bit early for it?" she asks, eyebrows raised. "And aren't you working today?"

"Macy. *Please.*"

She shrugs, sets me up, and I knock it back to help calm my racing heart. I pay her in cash and leave a decent tip. Hopefully, that keeps her from blabbing about my moment of weakness.

Unfortunately, it doesn't work, and Macy shakes her head when I request another.

I'm left sitting alone at the bar for a few minutes. The hotel wakes around me. Some patrons are still gambling away from the night before, and others are stumbling down after a mediocre night of restless sleep, but they all look the same to me. Same haunted expression, same eagerness. Like they might find meaning in the cards.

But there's nothing, never was, never will be. I see it all the time, how the cards don't even fix what's wrong.

Adler takes the stool next to mine. I don't even see him approach, too lost in my own depression. He signals Macy and she brings him over a coffee as if she knew he was coming.

"Want something?" he asks. "On the house."

"Already took a shot."

"Did you?" He looks at me sideways. "You're not usually much of a drinker."

"Needed some courage for this."

"Courage for what?" he croons, leaning closer. "Courage to run away and let your brother die?"

I shift myself, facing him, and straighten my back. The least I can do is cling to whatever dignity I have left.

He looks into my eyes, the handsome bastard, and some of my resolve quavers.

Adler's going to destroy me.

There's no doubt in my mind. He's playing a game at an entirely different level, and if I let him, he'll drag me around taking what he wants when he wants it, and he'll toss me aside when he's done.

I narrow my eyes. Sharpen my focus.

No, that'll only happen if I roll over and let him.

Because he needs me.

This whole marriage, it's not a one-way street.

It's a business arrangement, which means I have power.

I start the negotiations. "When we get divorced, I want ten million, guaranteed, and I want that in writing so you can't weasel out of it."

"Five," he counters. "And I'd never go back on a deal."

"Eight. I won't take less. Kill Shane for all I care."

He shrugs. "Fine. Eight."

Sweat dribbles down my shoulder blades.

Focus, Casey.

"I won't stay with you longer than five years. If I don't get pregnant in that time, it's your problem."

"Done. Though we won't fail for lack of trying. What else?"

I try to ignore the spark of excitement I feel between my legs.

"I'm free to keep working here for as long as I want to," I say quickly.

He seems surprised by that. "Okay, done."

I'm not sure how I feel about getting everything I want with very little pushback, but I barrel forward anyway.

"When we're together, you will remain faithful to me." I feel myself losing steam as embarrassment wars against my determination. "I don't want you to make me look stupid."

"Casey, I will never, *ever* cheat on you," he says and for some crazy reason, I believe it.

"I want a nice ring. I want you to give Roxie a raise. I want Shane to walk free."

"All done. Go ahead, my darling. Take what you want while I'm in a giving mood."

I rack my brain searching for something else to ask him for. He sips his coffee, looking amused. "No sex," I say.

"That's off the table. There will be sex. You *will* carry my child."

I don't love the intense way he says that. I bristle a little, setting my jaw. "Fine, we'll have sex, but only for reproductive reasons."

"God, you know how to make me hard. Say *reproductive* again."

"Stop it. Deal?"

"Deal." He holds out his hand.

I stare at him, hesitating. "And if I do have a baby," I say, my voice very tiny, "I want to be in their life. You won't just steal them from me."

His hand doesn't move. "You will always be the mother of this child, no matter what, and I will put all of this into writing. Do we have a deal?"

I take a long, deep breath, thinking back to my conversation with Shane. He told me to be good, but this isn't good, this is the total opposite of good.

This is very, very bad.

"Deal," I say and shake his hand.

He holds tighter than he should and pulls me forward. I'm surprised by his sudden strength as he wraps his other around me—

And presses his lips to mine.

The kiss comes sudden and hot. I'm too shocked to put my walls up, and I kiss him back without thinking.

It's a good kiss. Oh my god, it's so good.

His lips are soft, but he kisses with a confidence and a firmness that totally dominates my mouth. He tastes like coffee, but also like mint and straw. His tongue laps against mine, and there's a hunger in the way he grips me, like he's been waiting for this moment his entire life.

It's an amazing kiss. I sink into it, letting myself melt under his man's touch. I forget all about the Sunrise, about my brother, about my life. I'm disembodied, tumbling into a star.

Adler's that star, a supernova, a black hole. Explosive and inevitable.

We break apart as suddenly as it started and I'm left totally breathless.

I'm dimly aware of Macy staring, but we're lucky there's nobody else around.

"Now it's official," Adler says and gets to his feet. "I'll have Will call ahead. We can leave when you're ready."

"Leave? I don't know what you mean?"

"We're getting married right now," he says, glancing at his watch. "I suspect the judge will need about a half hour to prepare. There's enough time to invite one guest if you're quick."

"Guest? Judge?" My head's a mess of desire and confusion. That kiss really screwed me up. "Are you being serious?"

He spreads his hands. "This is Atlantic City. I own this town. I'll make a call, and we'll have our license. Are you ready?"

"No," I say, pushing back to my feet. This time, I steady myself, making sure he doesn't have to reach out for me.

"Time's wasting," he says, tapping his watch. "Better hurry. Meet me out front in ten." He stands and walks off, striding with purpose, leaving me alone in the bar.

I watch him go, reeling.

We're doing this. We're really doing it.

"You lucky *bitch*."

I jump, surprised. Macy's standing behind the bar, her eyes wide in total shock.

"Uh," I say, "we just, uh—"

"You are *so* fucking lucky." She groans, leaning back against the wall. "I'd murder you to get a shot at kissing that man. How'd you do it? Seriously, was it drugs? Did you slip him something? I bet it's drugs."

“Um, no, it wasn’t drugs,” I say, getting the hell out of there before Creepy Macy can freak me out even more.

I make one call to Roxie and tell her to be ready for my wedding. I hear her screeching on the other end, but can’t make out any words. I assume she’s coming and hang up.

Then I head out front to meet with my future husband.

Chapter 10

Casey

We meet at the Atlantic City Municipal Courthouse.

“Not the most elegant place for a wedding,” I murmur as we step out of Adler’s SUV. Will Hyde is with us, and the driver is a quiet member of the security team.

“Do you want a big party?” he asks, striding up the courthouse stairs.

The building a square, beige-colored structure. It looks like an old brick lying on its side with blocky windows scattered in the side.

“No, not really,” I say, struggling to keep up. He notices my pace and slows without having to be asked. I appreciate that about him, though I can tell he’s itching to get inside. “I guess I just always pictured, you know, an actual chapel.”

“The judge will make it official.”

“I’m guessing this guy’s on your payroll?”

He glances at me, frowning. “Yes. He is.”

“And how many other judges do you have in your pocket?”

“You’re not entitled to that information.”

“Ah, come on, I’m your future wife.” I bat my eyelashes at him. “Don’t you wanna tell your spouse about all the crooked cops and judges you own?”

“No,” he says, and before I can keep teasing him, I spot Roxie standing over near the front entrance.

She's wearing a dress. The kind of dress you'd wear to an actual wedding: strapless, black, clinging to her body. She's teetering in heels and clutching a bag at her side, her hair done, her make-up on point.

"Well, crap, nobody told me we were keeping it casual," she says, rushing over to give me a hug. "*Is this for real?*" she whispers in my ear.

"You look great," I say, squeezing her back. "*And yes, it's real, unfortunately,*" I whisper in return.

We pull apart and Roxie straightens. She extends her hand to Adler. "Mr. Costa, nice to see you, sir."

Adler grumbles and shakes. "Just call me Adler, please."

"Sure, whatever you say, sir." Adler rolls his eyes as Roxie turns to Will.

"Are you going to call me sir too, Rox?" Will's smirk is painfully sharp, and Roxie's back straightens.

"It's nice to see you, Mr. Hyde."

"Always a pleasure. You are my favorite waitress, after all."

Roxie doesn't move like she's pinned to the spot. It's an odd moment—I didn't know they were aware of each other. Will is Roxie's manager's manager, sitting atop the big pyramid of the Sunrise's bureaucracy, and most of the lowly floor workers don't know him at all. I'd never met him until that meeting in the security room.

But Roxie's staring at him like she's intimately familiar with Will Hyde, pit boss of the Sunrise, and she is *not* happy to see him again.

Adler breaks up the strange moment and gets moving away. I take Roxie's arm and lean on her for support as Will falls in behind Adler and we bring up the rear.

"What was *that?*" I ask, looking from her to Will and back again.

"Nothing," she says. "He's just my boss. That's all." She's clearly lying, but before I can push, she changes the subject.

“So are you excited to get married in what looks like a chain big box store?”

“It’s a courthouse,” I say, a little defensively. “Besides, it’s not a real wedding.”

“How’s that?” Roxie asks, but I’m interrupted by the security guards. We go through metal detectors, which beep twice because of Roxie’s jewelry, but eventually we’re in.

“This is just a contract,” I say softly, keeping my voice low so Adler and Will can’t overhear. We walk down a heavily carpeted corridor with offices lining the sides.

“Right, to save your brother. But you negotiated for more, right?”

“Well, I’m not an idiot.”

“That’s my girl. What’d you get?”

“A lot. Oh, you’re getting a raise.”

She lets out a laugh. “Seriously?” Will shoots her a predatory grin. Her laughter dies on her lips. “Did you really get me a raise?”

“Yep, plus a bunch of other concessions I’ll tell you about later. Right now I just want to get through this.”

She pats my arm. “I’m here for you, don’t worry. No matter what.”

I nod, and before we can start talking again, we step into the judge’s chambers.

It happens fast. The judge is an older man in his late sixties with thinning gray hair and a sunken face. He presides over the ceremony, if we can even call it that. I stand in front of his desk with Adler as the judge asks some simple questions, fills out a form, has us both sign a couple documents, and pronounces us married. “You may kiss the bride, if you’d like,” the judge says with a shrug. “Most folks want to.”

Adler turns to me. I stare into his face, acutely aware of Roxie, Will, and the judge watching. I don’t know what to do with my hands—what to say—what to think. I just married a rich

gangster, and my life is about to change. I'm terrified, I'm sweating, I'm nervous—

But all of that disappears when Adler presses a hand to my chin, tilts it toward him, and touches my lips with his own.

This is a different kiss than the one we shared in the space lounge. This is softer, more appropriate for the setting—much less tongue, much less heat—but it still sends a jolt of pure want skittering down my spine like a nail across raw bone. I resist the need to yelp in surprise, and barely control the impulse to throw myself against him.

The kiss ends faster than the first one, but leaves me wanting more.

“Thank you, Judge Steward,” Adler says, though he’s still staring at me. “I assume everything is in order?”

“Yes, it’s all in order. Do you know the last time I performed a wedding? It was for my niece twenty-five years ago.”

“You’re still very good at it.” Adler nods to the old man and ushers me out of the chambers.

Once in the hall, I lace my arm through Adler’s and we move slowly back to the front. Roxie’s stuck behind us with Will, and I can tell she doesn’t like it. They’re actively not speaking, and Roxie’s doing her best to walk a few steps behind him.

“*What’s with them?*” I whisper to Adler.

He only shakes his head. “No idea.”

Strange. A mystery. But one I don’t get to consider for long. Once we’re outside, Adler turns to his second-in-command. “Grab the car. Roxie, would you mind giving me and my wife a moment?”

“Uh, sure,” Roxie says, and only moves off when I nod.

Adler’s presence leans closer. He’s a big man, suddenly bigger as the reality of what just happened begins to crush against my chest.

I just married into the Costa family.

Gangsters, hotel owners, rich and powerful business people.

And now I'm the first wife of the new generation.

It's hard to wrap my head around it, and unlucky for me, Adler doesn't seem interested in giving me some time to acclimate.

"I sent my men to your house," he says, leaning down to speak quietly. "They'll gather your things and bring them to our apartment."

"Wait, hold on," I say, heart racing. "They're going to my *house*?"

"Yes, is there a problem?"

"My dad's there. My mom might be there. They'll freak out."

"My men can handle your parents." Adler's head tilts. Then his eyes narrow. "You didn't tell them, did you?"

I clench my jaw. "No, and that's none of your business."

"We just got married, in case you weren't paying attention in there. Your family is my family now."

"Oh, really? Does that mean your brothers are my family now too?"

"And my mother."

I shiver and look away. Crap. I forgot about his mother. "Just, can I break the news to them?"

"You'd better do it fast." He glances at his watch. "They should arrive shortly."

"Shit." I push away from him and pull out my phone. I have just enough time to glare at him before my father answers the home number.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Dad, it's Casey. Listen, this is going to sound weird, but a bunch of guys are on their way to the house right now. They're going to clear out my room. Don't freak out, it's okay."

A short silence. "Are you joking right now? Are you high?"

"No, Dad, I'm not joking," I say and drop my voice. "And I'm not high. Just listen, please. They're coming to move my stuff

into a new apartment. I'll be living somewhere else for a while."

"You will?" He sounds surprised. "Really?"

"Yes, and—"

"Who the fuck's going to help me?" His voice turns to a rough growl. "Who's gonna cook when your mother's not home?"

"Dad, there are cans of soup in the pantry, and we can figure something else out. For now, just please, don't bother the guys."

"What the hell is going on, Casey? What'd you get mixed up in? I thought you were the good one. Do I gotta worry about you too on top of your piece-of-shit brother?"

"Dad." I close my eyes, rubbing my forehead. "Just don't get in their way, all right?"

"Why shouldn't I? You can't just spring this shit on me now, Casey, god damn it. I'm gonna—"

"Dad, they're Adler Costa's men. I just married him, and if you make a stink, they're going to hurt you. So *please*, just keep your mouth shut for once, okay?"

I'm talking too loud. Everyone's staring at me now, including Roxie, though she knows my situation better than most. Adler's eyes are narrowed and he doesn't look happy, and I'm willing to bet he'd be livid if he knew the way my father spoke to me.

It's always been like this. Dad's disabled, in pain, and he takes it out on me. I wait on him the best I can, along with mom's help, but it's never enough. Shane fucked off a while ago and doesn't care if Dad yells at him, which means I'm stuck acting as the maid, the cook, and the punching bag.

I'm used to it. I've become numb to the constant abuse. Dad's got his own demons to deal with and I know it's not really about me. But still—I can see the unnerving way Adler's staring at me, and I know what that means.

Fortunately, Dad hears my urgency. "Adler Costa?" he asks, sounding worried now. "Are you serious, Casey? The hotel

guy?”

“Yes, the hotel guy. Don’t make a scene, please. I’ll tell you and Mom more about it later. I’ve got to go.” I hang up before he can say more.

Adler comes to my side. “That didn’t sound like it went well.”

“Family’s complicated.” I give him a cold, level look. “Do you get along perfectly with everyone in yours?”

His head tilts. “Conlan can be a prick sometimes.”

“There you go.” I shove my phone back into my bag. “All right, so we’re married. Now can you please call off the hunt for my brother?”

“Already done.” The SUV pulls up to the curb and Adler helps me to the door.

Before we leave, Roxie runs over and kisses my cheek. “Call me later,” she says as I get into back seat.

Adler slides in beside me, so close that our knees touch. I glance at him and shuffle further away.

“Do you remember how you got to make demands of me?” he asks as we drive back toward the Sunrise.

“Don’t tell me this is the part where you ruin an already terrible day.”

His smirk does not reassure me.

“Now it’s my turn to set down some rules, my new wife, and I hope you’re ready to follow them, because I can be very—” He leans closer, so closer I think he’s about to kiss me again. “I can be very *strict*.”

The emphasis he puts on that last word is obscene, and I’m terrified of what I’ve gotten myself into.

Chapter II

Casey

Everyone's staring as I walk through the lobby of the Sunrise with Adler. Will veers away and goes about his own business, but I struggle to keep up with Adler as he approaches the magic elevator. The front desk girl gapes as I stick with him, and Adler uses his own key to summon our ride up to his apartment.

"The gossip is going to go insane now, you know that, right?" I say as the elevator doors slide shut.

"Don't worry what they think."

"I have to work with them, I am *very* worried about what they think."

He glances at me, frowning slightly. "You weren't joking about still keeping your job?"

My eyebrows shoot up. "You really thought I wasn't serious?"

"I thought you had more sense."

"Clearly, you were wrong about that."

He's about to say something, but the elevator reaches his floor and the doors slide open. I limp out after him, my knees already killing me, a knot in my back aching like hell. Adler turns right and heads for the stairs.

"Hold on," I say, not ready to climb just yet. "Where are you going?"

"To get you settled." He glances back at me. "Do you need help? I can have a lift installed."

My hands ball into fists. “That might actually be nice,” I admit, feeling helpless and stubborn all at the same time. “But I’ll suffer for now, thank you. Why are we going upstairs?”

“You’ve seen the downstairs, now it’s time to see where you’ll be sleeping.” He turns and comes toward me. “Maybe I’m going about this all wrong.”

“You think? You’ve basically been dragging me around all day without any regard for how this looks or what I’m feeling. Maybe you could, like, I don’t know, tell me what’s going on before you—”

I don’t finish that sentence because he sweeps me off my feet.

Literally. The massive bastard reaches down and lifts me up into his arms like I’m a tiny child. I yelp in shock and wrap my arms around his neck automatically before I even register what’s going on.

“That’s better,” he says as he carries me up the stairs.

“This is *exactly* what I’m talking about,” I say, fighting back panic. “You can’t just lift me up, you asshole! You need to tell me what you’re doing first.”

“I’m making this climb easy on you. And besides, you’re my wife, you deserve to be carried over the threshold.”

“Too late for that.”

“Never too late for anything.” He reaches the top and goes straight to the end of the hall toward the largest sets of doors.

“Where are you taking me? Hey, hold on, put me down, I can walk now. Hey, Adler—”

He kicks open the door and strides into an enormous master bedroom.

It’s huge, bigger than my living room back home. There’s a large king-sized bed, nightstands, a sitting area, a television, a fireplace, another door that leads to another balcony, a closet, and a bathroom. He dumps me on the bed and I bounce twice before I kick out, making sure he can’t come after me.

Adler only stands there, staring at me with this strange expression on his face—like it almost pains him to see me in his bed.

I get control of myself, brush my hair from my face, and sit up.

The room is all gray, black, and white. The only color comes from the drab paintings on the walls, though even those are plain. There's hardly any personality in this space at all, like it'd been scrubbed clean of all human interiority and updated by a hotel's decorator.

"You can't just pick me up," I say, glaring at him as I get onto my knees. "You can't just dump me onto your bed. There have to be rules."

"Here's a rule," he says. "You're staying in here, with me, so long as we're married."

I let out a sharp laugh. "Absolutely not. How many bedrooms did we pass coming here? I'll take the nicest one."

"Out of the question. The safest place you can be is by my side, and that's where you'll stay."

"Safest?" My eyebrows shoot up. "Adler, we're in the Sunrise. This is the safest place on the strip. You really think I'm going to buy that I need to sleep in your *bed* for freaking *safety*? I can't think of anywhere more dangerous."

His head tilts. I've come to associate that look with a very deep frustration. "You got what you asked for, wife. Now you will accept my terms or we can always end this agreement."

"Nice, that's your move, isn't it?" I shuffle off the bed, grunting with strain as I do it. I'm not very mobile, especially not from awkward positions. "Every time you don't get your way, you'll just blackmail me?"

"I don't want to resort to that."

"And yet here we are." I gesture around us. "Seems like a great life."

He stares at me, clearly annoyed, taking deep breaths. If he weren't such a handsome bastard, I would've looked away by

now—but I find it impossible not to stare when he’s in the room. He sucks up my attention, grabs it and won’t release it, and I resent him for that. Even if it’s not his fault.

“We’re entering into a long-term business deal.” He speaks quietly, but firmly. “We might as well try to get along.”

“Great idea. Let’s start by not blackmailing each other anymore, okay?”

“Only if you’re willing to give an inch.”

I bark a laugh. “An inch? I gave a freaking lightyear when I agreed to marry you.”

“As if you’re not getting anything from this arrangement.”

“Oh, yeah, I’m getting some money, but you’re getting *a freaking baby*. Which one of us has it harder?”

“You’re not doing anything millions of surrogates haven’t done before you.”

“Great, minimize, awesome.” I throw up my hands. “You’re impossible to deal with.”

“And you’re too damn stubborn.”

“Pot kettle black.” I put my hands on my hips, glaring hard.

He glares right back, nostrils flared. Both of us are pissed. I’m about to storm out of here, except I can’t really storm places—it’s more like an aggressive limping.

Instead, he turns his back to me and strides toward the fireplace, visibly composing himself. I give him a moment, waiting until he turns back, his tone softer.

“I want to make this work,” he says, which seems absurd to me, considering *this* isn’t real. “I want things to be amiable between us.”

“I do too,” I admit.

“But we’re going to have to do things in public.”

“Like what?”

“Kiss. Hold hands. Act like a damn couple. That’s part of the deal—we have to convince the board this is *real*. You think

they'll release anything if they catch wind of our arrangement?"

"I thought all you needed was a warm vagina and a baby?"

"That's the letter of the law. They only give a fuck about the spirit." He runs a hand through his hair, showing off a muscular bicep. God damn, this man is beautiful, and I hate him for it. "Sleeping in the same bed together will build a bond and create some intimacy, which we will need in the coming months. I need you to be on board with this, wholly and fully."

I suck in a deep breath, glancing at the bed. I understand what he's saying, and I can't deny it makes some sense—I'm not exactly the best actress in the world. If sleeping next to him might make our lives easier in public, then it might be worth the initial awkward inconvenience.

But I've never slept with a man before. Not just *never had sex with* but also never slept in the same bed.

Now I'm supposed to somehow find a way to undress, put on my pajamas, do something extremely intimate and vulnerable with a total freaking stranger.

No, not a stranger—with Adler Costa, an intimidating asshole, a gorgeous specimen of a human being, and a selfish prick.

"This isn't easy for me," I say after a pause. "It's all so new."

"I acknowledge that. What will help?"

"You can stop being such an aggressive dick for starters."

"We both know that won't happen, so you should get used to it." He comes toward me again. "What can I do to make you more comfortable, my new wife?"

"Stop calling me your wife," I mutter then grimace. "I don't know, okay?"

"I'll have your things brought in here. Do you want to put them in drawers and in the closet, or should my people do it for you?"

"They can do it."

“That’s fine.” He sits on the end of the bed, leaning his elbows on his knees. It’s the first time I’ve seen him look so tired. “I’ll also have a ring sent up. Since you’re my wife, you’ll need to look the part.”

“What about my job?”

He glances back. “My wife can’t deal blackjack.”

“We agreed that I could keep my job.” I stay very still, trying to keep myself calm.

“Yes, we did, *after* we divorce. I never said anything about during our marriage.”

I shake my head, feeling like I’m about to tumble off a cliff. “Please don’t take that away from me.”

“You *want* to work long shifts? Isn’t it uncomfortable for you?”

“I love working,” I say, hating my pleading tone. “I love the floor. My best friends work down there. It’s just—” I stop talking. How the hell could he ever understand? What I’m on the Sunrise’s floor, I’m free. That seems strange, counterintuitive, but it’s the truth. I’m free and doing something that matters, bringing joy to people.

“How about this. I’ll be flexible and allow you to keep working your shifts, if you agree to be flexible and sleep in bed with me tonight.”

I bite my lip. It’s not exactly ideal, but it’s a start.

“Fine,” I say. “We can do that.”

“Good.” He stands. “Get yourself acclimated to the apartment. Everything in here is yours, and if you need something else, dial star-nine on any house phone and room service will bring up anything you need. From now on, you have total freedom in this hotel.”

“I won’t be charged for drinks?”

He smiles at that. “You’re my wife. If you want to smash a bottle of expensive wine on the craps table, they’ll ask you which bottle and what table. The Sunrise is now yours.”

He walks off, leaving me stunned and trying to process how drastically my world just changed.

Chapter 12

Casey

I can feel the stares on my skin.

It's not so bad at first. A few whispers here, a few turned heads there, but nothing too unusual. I'm used to getting glances and looks because of my limp, and at first, it barely registers.

But then I'm assigned to a table. Big Dan seems annoyed about it. "Just keep your head down, all right?" he asks as if I'm running around screaming during my work shift normally.

"Sure, Dan," I say, bewildered. He's usually a pretty jovial guy, lots of loud laughs, lots of high-fives, but right now he's glaring at me like I just shit on his floor.

It looks like he wants to say more, but he only grunts and waves my away.

I step into my rotation and take over a blackjack table. If there are a few more looks, even more whispers, it's not that big of a deal, right? Probably something happened on the floor earlier and everyone's talking about it.

It doesn't have anything to do with me.

I deal, blissfully unaware. I have a full table and it keeps my attention dialed in on the game in front of me. This is what I love the most about my job: when I'm doing it, the rest of the world disappears.

I know it's gambling. I'm not saving the world, feeding starving orphans, housing the homeless, nothing like that. I'm

just a piece of machinery in the vast system of money that flows through the casino on any given afternoon.

But it feels like purpose. For the time I'm dealing, I don't have any other worries.

I don't have to think about my father, out of work for nearly a decade now with horrible back pain. Or my mother, working her ass off to help support the family, taking double shifts constantly despite her age. Or my shithead brother, always one step away from getting himself killed.

None of that matters. There's only me, the cards, and my clients.

The game progresses, and I manage to stop thinking about Adler, at least for a little while.

But the whispers continue.

I notice a few waitresses chatting nearby, two of them staring right at me while a third whispers something in their ears.

I spot two security goons lurking right behind me—not talking, just looming like a couple of tombstones.

Even Big Dan seems to be going out of his way to pass my table and give me really dirty looks.

After an hour, I'm starting to think something's going on.

When my break arrives and I'm rotated off the table, I hurry toward a nearby bar. Not for a drink—but to find out what the heck is happening.

“Leon.” I wave at the bartender from the far end. He spots me, does a double-take, and hurries over. “You busy?”

He shrugs, glancing at the four older folks sitting in their stools. “Not really. Hey, uh, you good? How are you feeling, do you want to sit down?”

I stare at him, frowning. I've known Leon for years now. He's older, in his forties, been bartending all over AC since he was a kid. We're friends, but I can't remember a single time he's ever asked if I needed a chair. Mostly he makes fun of my

limp and teases me about being tired all the time, while I mock his clearly dyed blond hair and his stupidly tight black t-shirts.

“I’m fine. Is something going on that I don’t know about?”

“Not sure what you mean.” He beams at me. It’s the fakest smile I’ve seen in my life.

“What the hell is with you?”

“What do you mean?” His smile slips. “Did I do something? Casey, listen, we’re friends, right? If you need anything—”

“Why the hell are you talking like I’m dying?” I stare at him for a few beats then lean forward, pitching my voice lower.

“What did you hear, Leon?”

He looks around, panic in his eyes, before crouching closer. “It’s just a rumor, okay? I figured it was bullshit because, I mean, come on, it’s you—”

“Leon, don’t mess around right now. Just tell me.”

“Right. Okay. The word is, you were seen kissing Adler Costa in the space lounge this morning.” He pauses and laughs, already some of his tension melting away. “Honestly, saying it out loud like that, I realize it’s pretty silly.”

“Why would that be silly?” I say carefully.

“I mean, come on, Case, you’ve seen Adler. He’s fucking gorgeous. *Way* out of your league, no offense, darling, you’re extremely cute and all that, but that’s the sort of man who goes for six-foot-whatever models. No fun-sized blondes.”

“I’m not *fun-sized*,” I say through my teeth. “And is that what everyone whispering about?”

He shrugs, looking uncomfortable. “I guess so. That’s the big story of the day, at least. Also, uh, you did notice the two security guys following you around? I don’t even recognize them.”

I glance over my shoulder and sure enough, the two goons that were lingering near my table are standing not far away, doing their best to look nonchalant, which only makes it worse.

“I don’t recognize them either,” I admit, and I know everyone on the security team. At least everyone that works in this hotel. It just now occurs to me that the Costa family is bigger than the Sunrise.

“Whatever, that’s weird, but it’s all just bullshit, right? You know how this place is, somebody tells a story and suddenly that’s the gospel truth.” Leon laughs, slapping the bar. “God, you and Adler Costa. That’s fucking hilarious.”

“Yeah. Hilarious.” I move away from his bar. “All right, I’ve got to get back.”

“I’ll see what I can do about squashing this rumor for you. God, Casey and Adler Costa, what a stupid joke.”

I walk away, cheeks burning red.

Suddenly, I’m aware of *everyone* staring at me. All the waitresses, the bartenders, the security guys, the other dealers, the cashiers, even the janitorial staff. I feel like spiders are crawling down my spine, like my name’s on everyone’s lips.

I turn, spinning around, and spot the two goons trailing only a few feet away.

“Who the hell are you guys?” I march up to them, arms crossed.

They exchange a look. One’s tall and square with dark hair and pale eyes. The other’s thinner, muscular, covered in tattoos. Both wear black slacks and black shirts. “Adler hired us to make sure you’re safe,” the square guy says. “Don’t worry about us. Pretend like we don’t exist.”

“Kind of hard when you’re lurking around like creeps.”

“We’re not lurking,” the tattooed guy says. “We’re protecting.”

“You’re drawing even more attention to me, and I don’t need that right now.” I jab a finger at them. “I assume you’re not going to go against Adler’s orders, right?”

They both shake their heads. “Sorry,” square guy says.

“Then do me a favor and at least *try* to look like you belong.” I turn around, storming back to my next assigned table.

I rotate in for a young girl named Addie, and she gapes at me as we switch places. I can tell she wants to say anything, but I purposefully ignore her as I try to get into the game.

It's not easy. The next couple hours are a nightmare of stumbling mistakes. I catch Big Dan watching me at least once, and he must be able to tell I'm struggling, but he doesn't pull me off the table.

Instead, I'm left alone, with my two goons lingering nearby.

Everyone knows. At least, they heard about me kissing Adler in the space lounge. That was a stupid mistake; we never, ever should've done that in front of Macy.

Heck, we never should've done it at all.

And now here I am, paying the price.

The Sunrise does two things well: manage table games, and spread gossip. The moment I sat down with Adler somewhere a staff member could see it was the moment I basically begged for the whole world to hear about it.

And the worst part is, it's only going to get worse.

I manage to make it halfway through my shift. That's a solid four hours of ignoring the simmering conversations all around me. Whatever Leon did, he somehow made things worse, and by the time I finish my fourth rotation, I'm all but sick of it.

This is exactly what I didn't want to happen.

Sunrise is my home. It's the only place where I ever felt at peace. The cards, the coworkers, the people—I loved it all.

Now I feel like I'm an outsider and it's killing me.

I turn on the goons the first chance I get. Square guy seems a little taken aback when I approach them feeling like I might punch them both straight in the face.

Though I'm pretty sure that'd hurt my fist more than it would hurt their jaws.

"I want to see Adler," I say, crossing my arms.

The two guys exchange a look.

“Who?” Square guy asks.

I roll my eyes at him. “Don’t do that. You know who I am. I want to see *my husband*, please.”

“Uh, I don’t think—” Tattooed guy starts, but Square interrupts him.

“If we take you to Mr. Costa, promise you’ll stop giving us shit for doing our job.”

“I’m not promising anything.” I step closer to them, pitching my voice lower. “You know who I am now, right?”

They exchange another look, but this one’s different.

Is that a hint of fear?

“All right, Mrs. Costa,” Square says and turns away. “If you’ll follow me.”

I stare at his back as he starts to walk away. Tattooed gives me an appraising grin, head tilted to the side like he’s impressed.

I didn’t expect that to work.

But there’s no time to think about my newfound power. I hurry after Square, through the bustling late-afternoon crowd, and toward the elevators that lead up to management.

Chapter 13

Casey

We pass through a series of increasingly bewildered secretaries, assistants, and lackeys until I'm deposited into an unoccupied office. "He'll be with you shortly," an older woman says. She gives me an uncertain glare before disappearing.

I've never been on this floor of the Sunrise before, much less in Adler's private office. I look around, unable to help myself, poking through the bookshelves and prodding at things on his desk.

It reminds me of his apartment: strangely impersonal. There are decorations, but they look like things he picked out of a catalogue instead of items that mean anything to him.

There's only one picture. It's of a young Adler, maybe teenaged, standing with his mother on the beach. She's wearing a huge hat and a shawl, while he's in a t-shirt and a bathing suit. She's hugging him tightly, and they're both beaming at the camera like someone said something funny.

I've never seen him smile like that before.

The door opens. Adler appears, looking annoyed as he lingers on the threshold. I put the picture down quickly as if he might not notice that I was looking at it, though he doesn't seem to care.

"I was told my wife was making a lot of noise about seeing me." He brushes past me and sits down heavily in his chair behind his desk. "What can I do for you, Casey?"

“First of all, don’t act like I’m such an imposition.”

“You realize I’m busy, right?”

“I’ve seen how busy you are, wandering around the floor aimlessly.”

“Aimlessly?” His eyebrows raise.

“I’ve also noticed that you’re always conveniently showing up nearby when I’m working. Should we talk about that?”

“I’m stalking you,” he says, looking at his nails. “Have been for a long time.”

“Right.” I sit down, crossing my legs, fighting back frustration. “We have a problem.”

“Which is?”

“People are talking.”

His lips quirk down. “That doesn’t sound like a problem.”

“They’re talking *about us*.” I give him a quick rundown of my day and the brief conversation with Leon. “What are we going to do about it?”

“Nothing,” he says, leaning back.

“Nothing?” I stare at him in alarm. “You can’t be serious.”

His hands spread. “This is the price of marrying me. You think you can wear the boss’s ring and everyone will just ignore it?”

“No, but—”

“But you hoped nothing would change, and now you’re realizing how naive and short-sighted that was.”

I grind my jaw. “I am *not* naive, only I hoped you’d have a plan to break the news to the staff in a way that doesn’t make me look terrible.”

“How is that, exactly?”

“I don’t know,” I say, throwing up my hands. “They’re all going to assume I’m some money-grubbing gold digger or something.”

“Why?” he asks, sounding genuinely curious.

“Because you’re rich!”

“And women can’t marry rich men out of love?”

“Not in this case they can’t.”

“I should be insulted.”

“Yep, you should.” I lean forward. “Adler, I can’t work if everyone staring at me and talking behind my back all day. You have to help me.”

He pauses for a second, considering. “I don’t think I do.”

“Is that how our fake marriage is going to go? You get the benefits and I get all the crap down on the floor?”

“If you think this is easy on me, you’re fooling yourself.”

“Oh, I feel so bad for you. Poor boy gets the wife he needs, a future baby, and access to his rich daddy’s money. What a terrible situation.”

Now it’s his turn to look annoyed. “There are people in my life that counseled against marrying you.”

“Me? What the hell do they have against me? Actually, never mind, forget it, I really don’t care.” Except I definitely care and I will be thinking about that little nugget for the next forever.

“I can’t help you, Casey. Not because I don’t want to, but because I *can’t*. Think about how it’ll look if your husband-slash-boss orders everyone to be nice to you. You don’t want them to assume favoritism, right? That’ll all but guarantee they will.”

I sit still, thinking about it, and I hate to admit that he’s right. If I get Adler involved, that’ll only make things worse. “How the hell am I supposed to deal with this then?”

“Keep doing what you always do,” he says.

“Easy for you to say. You’re used to people whispering about you.”

“Not really, but I’m serious.”

“I should ignore it? That’s your advice? Gee, thanks, that’s some brilliant stuff.”

“Some people are never going to get over it,” he concedes with a dismissive gesture. “You can write them off. No matter what you’ll do, you’ll always be *my wife*, full stop. But to everyone else, you can still be Casey if you keep on acting like Casey. Show up for work. Do your job.”

“With goons hanging around watching over my shoulder? Yes, I noticed your little care package.”

“My *goons* are meant to keep you safe, and they are nonnegotiable.”

I give him a look. “Everything’s negotiable with you.”

That makes him smile. “Mostly, yes, that’s true, but not in this case. Your safety will not be not be compromised for anything.”

I let that sink in. It’s almost sweet—if it weren’t so damn annoying.

How does he expect me to be regular old Casey with my own freaking security detail?

But that’s his point: I can’t be regular old Casey anymore. That version of me is gone now that I committed to this deal and married Adler.

Even if I haven’t changed, the way everyone’s going to perceive me has.

Or at least it will.

“Fine,” I say, standing up.

“That’s it? No argument?”

“You said it’s nonnegotiable and I am respecting your wishes.” I tilt my chin up. “Got a problem with that?”

“Not at all.”

“Good. I’m going back to work now.”

“Are you taking my advice?”

“Yes, I am.” I walk to the door but look back. “Big Dan is annoyed.”

“He’s one of my father’s old creatures. I assume he’s unhappy that you’re my wife. I also assume it’s awkward for him to have to manage the woman that married his boss.”

“I can see how that would make things difficult for him. I’ll figure it out.”

“I’m sure you will. And, Casey? Please, next time don’t pull me out of a meeting so we can brainstorm your feelings.”

“That’s not—” I grab the doorknob. “You were *almost* nice. You know that?”

“No, I wasn’t. See you tonight, my wife.”

I glare at him then slam the door behind me.

Square and Tattoo are standing in the hall, waiting. I give them a look, arms crossed. “All right, you two are with me.”

“He didn’t budge, huh?” Square asks.

“Not an inch. But you’d better improve your lingering skills.”

“We’ll blend in more,” Tattoo promises. “Well, I will, I don’t know about blockhead over here.”

“Don’t push it, cocksucker.” Square glares at Tattoo then marches off.

I am *not* going to enjoy having these two around.

Chapter 14

Casey

I survive my shift. It doesn't get much better—the gossip mill's still churning when I'm back on the floor—but I manage to push it from my mind better.

When I'm off-duty, I find Big Dan and wait until he's done chatting with Zach before I approach. "I think you know what's going on between me and Adler," I say without preamble.

He looks surprised. Big Dan's used to meek little Casey Kiernan, but today I'm being Casey Costa, wife of a notorious gangster, and it's giving me a little confidence.

"I've heard some things."

"They're true," I confirm. His eyes widen. "Actually, it's worse. I married Adler this morning. No ring yet, but it's coming."

He laughs awkwardly, clearly not sure if I'm joking, but the laughter fades when he sees that I'm not smiling. "You're fucking serious."

"Yes, I'm fucking serious, and I'm telling you first before anyone else finds out because I want you to know that nothing will change. You're still my manager. I still answer to you."

"If you're really Costa's wife, then you answer to nobody."

"Dan, listen to me, I want nothing more in this world than to keep on working like I always have. You give me the benefit of the doubt and I won't screw you on it. Can we make that deal?"

He seems skeptical, but slowly nods. “All right, Casey. You’ve been a good employee all these years. Never had a problem with you. If that’s what you want, that’s how we’ll play it, but don’t fuck me on that.”

“So long as you don’t fuck me either.” I grin at him. “Adler wouldn’t like it.”

He bursts out laughing.

I’m exhausted when I head up to the apartment. Riding the magic elevator lost most of its shine. At least the place is empty and I’m able to call down to room service for something to eat. I know exactly what I want: crab risotto, a diet Coke, and French fries.

The food arrives ten minutes later and I treat myself to a feast.

Except the apartment is quiet.

Empty and too silent.

I’m used to my tiny house back in Pomona with my loud father, my obnoxious brother, and my mother, a woman with more lung power than Pavarotti. There were nights when I would’ve given a hand to have a beautiful apartment all to myself like this, but now it feels strange and foreign, like I’m an invader and it’s waiting to eject me.

I call home, unable to bear it for long, and I’m surprised when my mother answers.

“Mom? I thought you’d be at work.”

“Lou said I could take off early and for once in my life I took him up on it. So here I am, at home. But where are you?”

“I’m, uh—” How do I explain this to her? “Did you talk to Dad?”

“He mentioned a bunch of guys showed up and carted all your crap away. Did you finally move out?”

“Something like that.”

There’s a short silence. “That’s great, honey.”

“Really?” I sit up straight, honestly shocked. “Seriously?”

“Yes, really, it’s great. You’re gonna make me say it again? God, Casey, just like you.”

“No, I mean, sorry, Mom. I just thought you’d, you know, want me to stay.”

“If you think it’ll be easy dealing with your fucking father without your help, think again, because it fucking won’t be. Only it’s probably good for you, you know, for you to move on.”

I look down at my mostly empty plate. “I moved on. It’s just been hard.”

“Casey,” Mom says, voice softer than I’ve ever heard. “You’ve been stuck ever since that accident. Don’t try to tell me different. I know life is harder for you now since you can’t walk that good and whatever, but you make plenty of money at the casino. You could’ve gotten your own place ages ago.”

She’s right. I know she’s right. But I had no clue she thought any of this. “But what about you guys?”

“Ah, we’ll be fine. Your father will have to get off his lazy fucking ass from time to time and make his own goddamn dinner—” She’s yelling that last part at him. “—but we’ll be fine otherwise.”

“Mom,” I say, fighting back sudden tears. All my life, my mother’s been hard on me. When the accident happened, she was the first one encouraging me to get my lazy ass out of bed and start walking again. She pushes, always has, and doesn’t give an inch.

So hearing her talk like this nearly kills me.

“What’s the matter?” she snaps. “You sound emotional. Don’t tell me you’re getting emotional.”

“No, I’m not,” I say, wiping my eyes, because I totally am. “I’m just trying to tell you something.”

“Oh, god, you didn’t move out for a good reason. You fucked up, didn’t you? Are you pregnant? Tell me you’re pregnant. Are there drugs involved? You’re not pregnant and doing drugs? Because that’s how you fuck up your baby—”

“No, Mom, I got married.”

She’s quiet. My tears are all gone now—this is more like the mother I’ve always known. “How?” she asks. “When? And to *who*?”

“I married Adler Costa this morning.”

Another silence. I can hear my father’s TV in the background playing some sports talk show. Mom’s breathing gets heavy, and I start to worry I might’ve killed her.

But she’s finally says, “This is a prank, right?”

“No, Mom. I’m sitting in his apartment right now. We’re married. It’s just this—it’s a long story and I can’t get into it right now. But I’m okay.”

She lets out a long breath. “I knew it was too good to be true. You’re pregnant.”

“Mom! I’m not pregnant. Will you stop?”

“Why the hell else would Adler Costa want to marry *you*?”

“Why is everyone saying that?” I mutter, glaring at the window.

“You’re a piney!” she says, laughing at the stupid name for poor New Jersey folks that live in the pine barrens. “And it’s Adler Costa. How do you even know the man?”

“I don’t, I mean, I do now, but—” There’s no way I can explain this. “Just trust that I’m safe, okay?”

She snorts. “If you’re really married to that Costa gangster, you’re definitely not safe. Not by a long shot. Probably better if you were pregnant.”

I’ll be pregnant eventually. I rub my face, trying to get it together. “It was great talking to you, Mom. You really made me feel better for a second there.”

“Ah, come on, don’t be so fucking sensitive. Why are you pissed? Is it because I can’t imagine Adler Costa would marry a poor girl with small boobs like you? I mean, honey, you’re young now, but—”

“*Mom*,” I hiss at her. “Okay, conversation over. Goodbye!”

I hang up the phone before she can start insulting me some more.

That’s my mother. It’s rare to catch a glimpse of kindness from her, but criticizing my looks is definitely firmly in her wheelhouse.

I finish eating, send the plates back down to the kitchen, and head up to take a long bath. At least I can get some peace and quiet, light some candles, enjoy a bath bomb that’s probably ten years past its expiration. I soak, trying not to think about my mother and my father back in that tiny house, slowly killing each other.

They aren’t my responsibility.

Even if they have been for years. With my mother working all the time, caring for Dad fell to me.

Now that I’m out of the house, what’s he going to do? The guy can barely walk around without pain and he sure as hell can’t cook. How’s he going to feed himself?

I try not to worry about it. My parents are grown people and they can figure out their own problems, but taking care of them has been so deeply drilled into me over the years it’s like part of my psyche at this point.

After an hour, I get out, dry off, and wrap myself in a big, fluffy robe I find hanging on the back of the door. I’m still thinking about my parents and what they’ll do without me around when I step out into the room—

And find Adler sitting at the end of the bed, unbuttoning his shirt.

Chapter 15

Casey

“**W**hat are you doing here?” I say without thinking, grabbing the robe closed.

He doesn’t look back at me. “I planned on undressing, brushing my teeth, and going to bed. What are *you* doing here?”

“I just took a bath.” My heart’s racing as he pushes off his dress shirt with a sigh. My mouth opens as the light reflects off his tan skin, revealing every curve of each defined muscle and the scrollwork of tattoos that are hidden under his clothes. A serpent eats its own tail in the middle of his back, surrounded by stars, pomegranates, and trees.

He stands with a sigh and starts to unbuckle his belt, and that’s when my panic reaches a fever pitch.

This is a mistake. An enormous freaking mistake.

I can’t be in the same room as Adler when he’s undressing.

Not without feeling this flush of desire washing over me mingled with a keen sense of embarrassment.

I’m mortified that I’m alone in this room with this man—this absurdly gorgeous man, so far out of my league that nobody quite believes he’s my husband.

I barely even believe it, and I was at the wedding.

“You’re staring.” He glances back at me as his pants come down.

He’s in nothing but a pair of boxer briefs.

I whirl around, cheeks burning hot. “You’re getting undressed.”

“That’s what most people do in their bedroom.” His pants hit the floor near me. “I get it, you’re not used to seeing a man as handsome at me, but we’d better get over the shy stuff now that we’re living together.”

“First of all, you’re not that handsome.” Which is a total lie, obviously. “Second of all, I’m not being shy, you just started whipping it out right in front of me—”

“*It* is firmly covered. Well, barely. I can’t control how thick boxer briefs are. It’s hard to find them with enough... accommodation.”

“Oh my god,” I groan. “I don’t want to hear how hard it is to find underwear with your massive dick.”

“We’re married now. You’ll need to get used to it.”

“Definitely don’t need to get used to your dick.” Though if I’m honest with myself, I *really* want to turn around and see exactly how big we’re talking here.

But no, no, this is dumb, it doesn’t matter if he’s got the thickest, longest, most perfect cock in the world.

I’m not his real wife and he’s not my real husband.

“Actually, you do,” he says, and I swear he’s closer now. “Remember the whole pregnancy thing?”

Oh, fuck.

I definitely forgot about the whole pregnancy thing.

“Turkey baster,” I say quickly. “You jizz in a cup. I squirt it up there. The end.”

“How romantic.”

“There’s nothing romantic about what we’re doing.”

“Casey. Please stop.”

I jump. His voice is close—like he’s right behind me.

Slowly, I turn around, heart racing, halfway thinking I’m about to find him in all his naked glory, muscles tense and glistening

with sweat, cock hard and getting harder as he strokes himself
—

Instead, he's still shirtless, but now he's got on a pair of gym shorts.

They don't do much to cover the rest of him but at least his massive dick's covered.

Though I think I still see an outline—

“You're staring at my crotch.”

My eyes snap to his face. “I am absolutely *not* staring at your crotch, you just surprised me is all.”

“Surprised you with my dick? Casey, come on. You don't have to act so nervous around me.”

“I'm not nervous!” My voice is way too high right now.

He steps closer and touches my cheek with his fingers. I flinch away, my eyes fluttering. “Yes, you are.” He brushes past me and goes into the bathroom, shutting the door behind him.

I take my chance, run into the closet, and put on clothes. Panties, shorts, crop top, since it's hot in here right now. When I step back out, he's sitting on the end of the bed again.

His eyes stare at my body as I hesitate at the closet door. He sweeps his gaze from my lips to my chest, lingering on my bare midriff, then pauses at my knees.

I feel a sudden rush of self-consciousness. “Now you're the one staring,” I say, harsher than I need to.

But he doesn't look away. “Your scars.”

“Yes, my scars.” I hurry over to the bed, not remotely tired, but unwilling to delay this much longer. I feel like I'm plunging into an icy river—better to get it over with.

“Do they hurt?”

“No, they're scars.” I get under the blankets, fluff my pillow, and lie on my side. “The stuff under the scars hurts.”

“Let me see them again.” He brushes off the blankets.

“What? No, get out of here, you’re not staring at my scars.” I try to wave him away, but he’s not deterred. He gets closer to my knee, touching the ugly white welt with his fingers, tracing the outlines of my injury.

I shiver, sweat beading my back, heart racing. Nobody’s ever touched me like that before. There’s no hesitation in him, no fear; most people get awkward when they see my scars for the first time.

They’re ugly. Hideous, really, but I’m used to them. Some are where the surgeons went in to repair my legs, and some are where the bones protruded after I got hit by the car.

“It’s hard to believe that these don’t hurt.” His touch is so gentle.

“I’m fine.” I grab his hand, wanting this to be over with. Instead of pushing him back, I jab his fingers into the flesh. “See? It’s fine.”

He grunts, frowning deeply. “It must’ve been bad.”

“I don’t remember much of the accident.” I finally brush him away and pull the blankets back over me. “It’s all a blur.”

He lies down next to me and hits a switch behind his nightstand. The room plunges into darkness, and I’m instantly very aware of the big, beautiful man sleeping shirtless beside me.

I wonder if he normally sleeps like this, or if he stays up looking at his phone most nights, or if he does work before passing out, or if he sleeps completely naked when he’s alone. Adler’s still a stranger to me, and his routines are totally foreign.

“What happened?” he asks, his voice soft and low and so close.

I try not to look at him. I can barely breathe. “You want to know the details? Most people don’t ask.”

“Assume I have no tact.”

“Already do.” I close my eyes, taking slow, steady breaths. “I don’t remember much. I was having a bad day, work was

terrible, and I wanted to do something to blow off steam. I went for a run around the city while I waited for my brother to come pick me up..." I trail off, struggling at this point. The doctors said I might regain my memory, but I might not. "I don't remember the car hitting me. All I know is I nearly got out of the way, but it slammed into my legs and knees, and I guess it was going pretty fast. Then I was lying there on my back, staring at the sky, and couldn't move at all. I was all wet, but didn't know why, until I figured out it was blood. Then someone was there." I let out a long, shuddering breath.

"Who was it?" he asks.

"I don't know. I can't remember his face. A lot of what happened next is a total blur. He must've stemmed some of the bleeding and called an ambulance, because the next thing I know, I woke up in a hospital. That's all I can remember."

Except it's not. I remember one other thing, one more detail that I never share with anyone, because it's only for me.

I remember what he said.

Hold my hand. Hold it tighter. I swear I won't let you go. Just keep holding tight.

Then the pressure of his hand gripping mine. I remember squeezing back as hard as I could.

And he kept saying it. *I swear I won't let you go, just keep holding tight.*

That's it, that's everything. The rest remains a blur.

Only his voice and his words.

The stranger, my guardian angel.

"That's terrible," Adler says. "I'm sorry it happened."

"Without the guy that found me, I'd be dead." I reach out on an impulse. Adler seems surprised when I take his hand, but he doesn't resist as I pull it toward my inner thigh. His fingers press against the scar there. "If he hadn't been around to slow the bleeding, I would've died from this wound here."

“You’re lucky,” he says. “I’m glad someone was there to save you.”

I move his fingers to another scar. “This is where the bone protruded.” I let him touch it slowly, shivering with the sensation. “This is where a piece of glass got stuck.” Another scar. “And here’s where the surgeon went in to repair the damage.” And another scar.

I release his hand, but he doesn’t move it. Instead, he slides it up my leg, his fingers still barely brushing against my skin, moving it toward my inner thigh.

I try not to whimper, and it takes all my willpower, but my breathing doubles as my body’s flooded with excitement. I’m not sure what he wants or what’s going to happen, but I know it feels good to be touched like this.

Touched for the first time, just like that stupid song.

“They don’t bother me,” he says, whispering into the dark, closer than I realized. “The scars. They’re almost beautiful.”

“No, they’re not. I hate when people pretend like they are. I don’t mind them anymore, but they’re not beautiful.”

He keeps moving his hand up my leg, fingers sliding along my skin until he reaches my shorts, and he doesn’t stop. He’s so close to my pussy, I swear he must feel how wet I am already.

“You misunderstand,” he says, voice soothing and low. “They aren’t conventionally beautiful. You won’t see them in a magazine. But those scars make you who you are, they define you, and I find that gorgeous.”

“What are you doing?” I ask, barely able to catch my breath.

His hand moves up, over my pussy, sending a tremble of pleasure into my core, up to my belly, up to the hem of my crop top.

Then he pulls me against him.

My ass pressed against his cock.

And I feel it—

Hard as hell, pressed into my ass.

Holy shit, he wasn't joking. This man is enormous, and he's straining right now.

He's as aroused as I am.

And the fact of his arousal only heightens my desire.

"You're too uncomfortable," he whispers, lips near my neck.

"Far too awkward. We need to fix that."

Chapter 16

Casey

This is a very bad mistake.

Except my body's ringing with desire for him and I'm not sure I can make myself stop.

"You think... grabbing me in bed... is going to help make me more comfortable?"

"I think it'll show you that you this can feel good. I think you'll realize that you want my hands on your body."

"No, I absolutely don't." I squeeze my eyes shut, because I'm lying again.

I'm so into this I could scream.

Except I'm also terrified.

I've never done something like this before—never had sex, barely kissed anyone. I have no experience, and I don't know if I can handle a man like Adler.

He'll rip me into pieces.

Worse than that, he won't want me anymore when he realizes that I have no clue what I'm doing.

Which means I can't let this go too far. I need time to get used to him—to figure out if I even *want* to sleep with him.

His hand keeps moving up, under my crop top, over my breast. I can't help myself as a whimper escapes my lips.

He groans and I swear his cock gets harder. "Your nipples are so hard right now," he says, rolling his fingers over them,

teasing me. “God, what perfect little breasts. They fit right into my hand.”

“Adler,” I say, squirming against him, my ass rubbing along his cock. “What happened to getting used to each other?”

“This is how we’ll do it.” His lips find my neck, kissing softly. “I’ll explore you. Each night, a little bit more. Tonight, I’ll start with your nipples.”

I release a low moan, unable to help myself. His other hand comes up around me, palming my other breast, and I’m writhing against him.

“Adler,” I whisper. “You’re just going to... tease me like this?”

“I’m taking things slow.” He bites my earlobe gently. “If you need a release, you’re capable.”

“Excuse me?”

“Put your hand between your legs while I use your breasts.”

“I can’t. I mean—”

“You’ve done it before, haven’t you?”

“Yes, I just—I’ve never done it in front of someone.”

“I’m behind you. I can’t see a thing. Put your hand between your legs, Casey.”

I close my eyes as he continues to play with my nipples, squeezing them, tweaking them, and I can’t help myself. I slip one hand down the front of my shorts and find my own dripping wet pussy.

Fuck, it feels good. I rub my clit as first, little moans escaping my lips.

“Good girl,” he whispers, hands feeling my breasts, lips kissing my neck. “That’s a good girl. How many fingers do you like?”

“Two,” I whimper.

“Slide them in deep. Go on, do it for me.”

I obey him, pushing my fingers in between my legs, pulling them back out, teasing my clit, fucking myself again, over and over as his hands stay on my breasts.

He's so hard I think he's going to rip me in half.

"How does that feel?"

"Good," I moan.

"Do you like touching yourself for me?"

"I want *you* to touch me."

"Not tonight," he says and it sounds like the words kill him.

"We can explore that tomorrow night."

"Adler," I gasp as he pinches a nipple hard. I sink my fingers in deep, fucking myself faster. "You can't do this. You can't get me started."

"I won't stop. I swear I won't. Keep going, Casey, keep fucking yourself for me."

"Adler." I'm panting, moaning now, my mind completely lost to the moment. Dimly I'm aware that this is going way further than I expected, but it feels too incredible to stop.

I've never been this turned on in my life.

And to have a man holding me, his cock so hard it feels like he'll die if he doesn't fuck me, only for him to tease my breasts, it's the most incredible bit of self-control.

Though all I want is for him to spread my legs and take me.

"Keep going," he says, then licks his fingers and rubs my nipples again.

The wetness makes it feel even better. I gasp, back arching. I'm sensitive, but it feels good too, and I slide my fingers in and out faster.

"You're killing me right now," I moan.

"If you think you're struggling, imagine how I feel watching you fuck your own beautiful pussy while all I can do is tease these lovely little tits of yours. I want to watch you ride my cock, watch your face as I rip you in half, watch your ass and

your lovely legs move as you bounce up and down. I want to pin you to the bed and fuck you until your eyes roll back and you can't do anything but say my name. I want to taste you so badly it's killing me, Casey, but you want to get comfortable, and this is how we'll do it. Breasts tonight. Your pussy tomorrow, and I promise you, my beautiful wife, I will have my taste then."

"Fuck," I say, back arching as the orgasm builds in my core. "I'm coming, Adler. Fuck, I'm coming."

"Good girl," he groans, rolling me onto my back, shoving my crop top up, and sucking my nipples.

That sends me into outer space. He bites down, and I come so hard I stop breathing, and the pain of him roughly licking and sucking and biting my nipples mingles with the overwhelming pleasure of my orgasm, sending me twitching and groaning, until it finally passes.

I lie there drooling against the pillow. He kisses my neck, my ear, my cheek, my breasts. I blink at him, willing my brain to clear, but it's fuzzy and content.

"You're incredible," he whispers, tracing a finger down my chest. "If you need a thousand nights like this, I'll give them to you."

"All I need right now is some sleep," I say, smiling like an idiot. "I'm honestly a little surprised that just happened."

"Imagine how you'll feel tomorrow night." He kisses my lips softly—the only time he does it. "Goodnight." Then he rolls over, showing me his back.

I could laugh. I could scream.

I just got myself off while Adler did nothing but play with my nipples.

It's absurd—but it was the best sexual experience I've ever had.

And I expect that to change every night as he keeps making me more and more comfortable.

Chapter 17

Casey

Adler's an early riser. He does his best not to wake me, which I appreciate. Around eight, I shower, get dressed, and head down for my shift starting at nine. Big Dan grunts when I arrive, and I find Square and Tattoo already lingering near the blackjack table I rotate onto.

It's a slow morning. Only some stray tourists and a few hardcore gamblers still riding a high from the night before.

I let my hands do the work as my mind drifts away, lingering on the night before.

It happened so fast. One second, we're talking about my accident, and the next he's fondling my chest.

I should've pulled away, but it felt good.

Despite everything, the man's gorgeous as hell. His voice, his lips, his hands. All he had to do was touch me, and it sent me into a freaking tailspin.

But letting him feel me up while I get myself off is one thing —

It's another to sleep with him for real.

Which is exactly what this whole nightly thing is leading up to.

Tonight he says he'll get a taste and I have a feeling I know what that means. I'm excited to explore more with him—but terrified for what's going to happen when I finally admit that I'm a virgin.

Will he hate me? Turn away in disgust? A guy like Adler Costa, he's plenty experienced, and I bet he expects his partner to match him.

I'm not sure I can.

Worse than anything, it scares me that I want to try.

For the first time in my life, I'm genuinely attracted to someone, enough that I'm willing to put my insecurities aside.

I act like my scars don't bother me. I pretend like my limp isn't a big deal.

But it's all an act.

My body will never be what it was before the accident.

Back then, I was athletic. I ran five miles every day. I played sports in school, worked out in the gym, looked good in everything I wore.

Sure, I never had big boobs, but I've always had a toned stomach and a decent butt.

Now though, no matter how hard I try, I'll never run again. I can barely walk a mile, and forget doing squats in the gym.

My scars will never go away.

I'll never be what I was before the accident, and it hurts knowing that.

So when Adler says I'm beautiful, I don't believe him, because I know what I could be if only I weren't so broken.

My thoughts are a mess when a few of my clients walk away and I'm left with nothing to do. That doesn't help—dealing distracts me, at least a little bit. I'm itching for some action when a new contender pulls out the chair directly across from me and sits.

She's wearing a big hat and dark sunglasses. Her pantsuit is immaculate—light blue with white lace trim. She has on white lace gloves, which she slowly takes off, finger by finger. Her back is perfectly straight, and when she removes the sunglasses and meets my eye, I feel like a little kid sitting in the principal's office.

Mrs. Costa is in her late sixties, but she doesn't look a day over fifty. Blue eyes like her son, the same dark hair, the same pointed chin and straight nose. She's harsher than her son—Adler was softened by his father—but she has a regal bearing.

She doesn't smile.

"I'd like to play," she says, placing a stack of twenties in front of me.

"Uh," I say, hesitating for only a second before taking the cash. I give her back the money in chips. "Sure, uh, I'll deal."

"That's what you're here for, darling." Her lips press together as I play through the first hand.

Mrs. Costa hits on a fifteen, ends with a twenty, and beats my eighteen. I pay her out, she makes another bet, we play again.

I'm sweating. I look around, hoping someone might notice my distress. Square and Tattoo are watching, but both look bored. Roxy's not working yet—her shift starts at three.

"You married my son," Mrs. Costa says after winning five hands in a row.

I nearly choke as I deal the sixth. "Uh, hello, Mrs. Costa, right, my name is Casey Kiernan, and—"

"I know who you are, dear. We've spoken before. Hit me, please."

I give her another card. "Right, right, I know that. I just mean, uh, I should introduce myself, right? Since, uh, you know about the marriage, and—"

"Casey, please speak more confidently. You're an attractive young woman and you're good at what you do. It is demeaning to everyone around you if you act as though you're something you are not."

I stare at her, dumbfounded. It takes a few seconds to realize I won the hand.

I collect the chips and deal another. We play several more in silence as I gather myself. I win a few back, though she's still up.

“I’m sorry that we didn’t speak sooner, Mrs. Costa,” I say. “I should’ve made sure Adler introduced us formally right away.”

She nods at that. “You’re right, but I don’t blame you. I know how my son can be.”

She wins the hand, I deal again.

“Did he go into detail about our relationship?” I ask, not sure how much she knows.

“He mentioned a deal.” Her lips push together again. “I’ll admit, I wasn’t happy about that.”

“Right. If it helps, that was his idea, not mine.”

“I assume he made you a reasonable offer?”

“A very good one, yes.”

“My son is persuasive, Casey.”

She loses the hand. I deal another.

“And persistent,” I say, not sure why. “I doubt he would’ve let me say no.”

She smiles slightly. “That’s a good point. You’re right, I bet he wouldn’t have.”

“It’s a long-term thing. Our marriage, I mean.”

“That’s good, dear.”

“And I hope that we can have a good relationship. I understand we’re not starting out on a good leg, but—”

She holds up a hand. “Hit me.” I give her a card. She sighs, flips them over, busted. Another loss. “Casey, my oldest son has been difficult for a very long time.” She meets my eye with her cold, blue stare. “And you have no idea how happy I am that he found a woman, even in such an unconventional way.”

That surprises me. I mask my uncertainty by dealing another hand, which she wins.

“I’m glad you feel that way, Mrs. Costa.”

“Call me Nessa. Short for Vanessa.”

“Er— I mean, okay, yes, thank you, Nessa.”

She plays one more hand and wins.

“You’ll have to meet his brothers,” she says, gathering her chips. “I suspect that will be more difficult, Conlan especially.”

“Why’s that?” I ask, feeling a little panic swell up.

“They’re protective of the family, and Adler just dragged you straight into its heart. They’ll want to feel you out.”

“Like you are right now?”

She smiles for the first time. “Yes, darling, just like I am right now.”

“I’ll make sure Adler sets it up.”

“Good. Smart. Do it on your own terms.”

“And just so you know, I don’t have any interest in your family. I mean, uh, beyond, you know—”

“I understand what you’re trying to say.” Her smile thins. “Be careful, is all I’ll say. I’ll have Adler set up a lunch for us in the coming week. How does that sound? Since this thing with my eldest son is long-term, we might as well get to know each other.”

“That’d be, uh, great.”

“Wonderful. Talk to you soon.” She breezes away. I watch her go, completely baffled about what the hell just happened, and suddenly terrified that I’m having lunch with Mrs. Costa—I mean, Nessa.

“You look parched.” I flinch and turn around. Square’s standing there with a bottle of water, which I take.

“Are you being nice to me?”

“Part of the job,” he says, grinning. “That Mrs. Costa’s one hell of a lady, right?”

“Sure,” I say, drinking the whole water bottle down in one go.

Tattoo silently laughs at me as Square takes the trash away.

I turn back to my table. An older man in an aloha shirt's sitting there expectantly, and it's time to get to work again.

But I'm still rattled.

Because that is *not* how I imagined I'd meet my mother-in-law.

Chapter 18

Adler

I'm daydreaming about Casey.

I can't stop daydreaming about my wife. Every whimper, every moan, every little movement against my hard cock.

The moment she fell asleep, I took care of myself in the bathroom.

And again in the morning before I left for work.

What the hell is wrong with me? I rub my face, frustrated. It's not supposed to go like this.

I'm not supposed to lose control so quickly.

This marriage is a business deal. It's for both our benefits—in ways she doesn't even realize yet.

But when she started talking about her accident, I knew I couldn't keep my hands to myself.

It was fucking stupid. I should keep my distance. The fewer attachments we form, the better. This is going to end, and Casey's going to want a divorce.

When that happens, I can either be completely ruined, or I can survive.

This nightly exploration of her body thing isn't going to help my sanity.

And yet it's all I can think about.

Until there's a knock at my door. Will breezes in a second later carrying coffee. He plops one cup down on my desk and keeps

the other as he collapses into a chair.

I glance at the clock: barely past seven in the morning.

“I got a call from Tony’s assistant,” Will says, staring at me like he’s afraid my head might explode.

Which is genuinely possible considering I haven’t heard from Tony’s camp in a long time.

“What’d she say?”

“They want a meeting at the Hilton. Third-party, neutral location.”

I sit back in surprise. Tony wants a meeting? I can think of a dozen reasons why, but only one’s sleeping in my bed.

“When?”

“This morning. In an hour. Can we do it?”

“No choice. If Tony wants to talk, we’d be stupid not to hear him out.” I pick up my phone. “Better make some calls first.”

“You sure it’s safe? Might be a trap.”

“The Hilton’s kept on the sidelines for a reason. They’re corporate, they don’t want bloodshed on their property. Tony knows better than anyone that the Hilton people will fuck him if they make their lives difficult. It’s not a trap.”

“Then we can make it a trap.” Will’s eyes gleam. “Take Tony down. Finish this whole ugly story.”

I shake my head. “That’s not our goal.”

“Adler—”

“I know where you stand. You think Tony’s better off dead, but you’re wrong.” I dismiss him with a gesture. “Get things prepared.”

Will’s not happy about it, but he goes.

I don’t blame him for wanting violence. There’s been a low-level war between the Sunrise and the Oceanview for a long time now. Nobody’s died, not yet anyway, but there have been fights, hospitalizations, loss of revenue, threats, fires, and worse.

It's only a matter of time before someone eats a bullet, and it might as well be Tony.

At least that way, all this trash can end.

Except I'm a naive fool who still believes Tony can be saved.

Even if he doesn't want to be.



THE HILTON FRONT DESK STAFF ARE NOT HAPPY TO SEE ME. “Mr. Costa,” the hostess says. I don't recognize her. “Your party is waiting for you in our executive conference room. If you'll follow me?”

“I know where it is.” I gesture at a few of my men to stay in the lobby. I spot Tony's guys doing the same, trying to look inconspicuous. My guys have strict orders not to start any trouble—anyone caught antagonizing Tony's boys will deal with me directly.

Which means they'll obey, even if they don't want to.

I head down the back hall with Will. The conference room is halfway down, the door propped open. I pause on the threshold and stare inside.

Tony's sitting at the head of the table. His assistant is at his elbow—a young woman named Angelina. Short blonde hair cut straight, bangs pushed to the side, startling green eyes. Pretty in an uptight sort of way. I have no clue where Tony found her—she appeared a couple years ago and hasn't left his side since.

“Adler,” he says, not standing to greet me.

“Tony. Been a while.” I enter the room, checking the corners out of habit.

“It's not a fucking ambush,” Tony says, sounding annoyed. “Will, how are you? Looking spry as always.”

“I'm in the best shape of my life,” Will says. “Angelina.”

She nods to him and says nothing.

“Why’d you call this meeting?” I sit at the opposite end of the table. Will shuts the door behind me.

“We’ve got to talk.” Tony stares at me hard for a moment. He looks tired—bags hang under his eyes—but he’s been working out and his hair is freshly dyed. If the guy’s really planning for office, he’s been preparing for a while, at least physically.

“If you’re trying to end our feud, I’m willing.”

He leans forward, palms on the table. “I’m trying to find out what the fuck you’re doing marrying Casey Kiernan.”

I cross my arms, not surprised in the least, but still unhappy that he’s approaching it so directly. I’d hoped that my marriage would’ve remained a secret for longer, or at least it would force him to keep his distance. Clearly, that didn’t happen.

“An opportunity presented itself,” I say, not breaking eye contact.

Tony’s lips pull back into a sneer. “An *opportunity*, huh? You always did want to fuck me, Adler.”

“You’re very wrong about that.”

“You know I’m running for office.” A statement, not a question. He hasn’t formally announced yet, but the rumors are rampant, and now he’s confirming it.

“Might’ve caught wind of something like that.”

“Then you know that girl’s a problem.”

I glance at Angelina. I’m not sure how much she knows, but it would surprise me if she was aware of exactly *why* Tony thinks Casey is a liability.

“There are rumors all over the city,” I tell him. “Rumors that you’ve been taking care of problems from your past.”

“That’s right. Call it a little spring cleaning for all my skeletons.”

“Casey is *not* an issue. She is under my direct protection now.”

“There’s the problem, right there. She’s under *you*, and that doesn’t make me very comfortable.”

“She’s my wife now, Tony. I understand you have an issue with her, but all that’s in the past. Leave the girl alone.”

He drums his fingers against the tabletop. So much has changed about my friend over the years: he wears more expensive clothes, drives flashy cars, put on twenty pounds of muscle, buys lavish dinners and expensive gifts for his mistresses.

The guy I remember was frugal, he was caring. He gave a shit about the people around him.

Until that night.

Something snapped inside Tony, and it hasn’t been right since.

But there are still glimpses of the man he used to be, like his nervous tics.

He catches me watching his fingers and forces himself to stop. He clears his throat and shifts in his chair.

“You really think I’m going to hurt an innocent girl?” he asks, head cocked to the side.

“I think you’re willing to do whatever’s necessary to make sure you win this election coming up. Which includes burying a few bodies in the bay.”

He waves that off. “Nothing so crazy as that. All I want is your word that the girl won’t talk.”

“Great. You have it.”

“Wonderful. Was that so hard?”

I shake my head slowly. “We both know that’s bullshit. If you were capable of being reasonable, we would’ve sat down at a table like this one years ago and buried all our bullshit. Instead, it’s been one long, drawn-out war, and for what? Have either of us profited at all?”

He shows me his teeth again. “All I hear is you admitting weakness.”

“Then you should listen closer. You’ll never get close to Casey. She is under my protection now. You will back off. Understood?”

“We’re already square.” He sits back, arms crossed.
“Angelina, I assume you took notes?”

“Copious,” she says, though she clearly hasn’t.

“And you have it down? I will leave Casey Kiernan alone, so long as our shared history remains history.”

“I have it written here.” She still doesn’t move, only looks at her nails as if she’s bored.

“Great,” I say and stand. “Thank you for this waste of time.”

“I don’t think it was a waste.” Tony watches as I move to the door. Will joins me, looking unhappy. “I haven’t sized you up in a while, Adler. You look tired. You’re getting old, aren’t you?”

“Goodbye, Tony. I wish you luck, since I think you belong in Washington. I suspect you’ll find a lot of people just like you there.”

I can feel Tony’s stare as I leave with Will by my side. We make it to the parking lot before he speaks.

“What was that about?” he asks quietly, looking serious. “You never told me you knew Casey from before.”

“I don’t, and what you heard in there will never be spoken of again, understand?”

“Then why does Tony hold a grudge against her?” Will grabs onto my arm. “Why are you protecting her from him?”

I stare at my second until he lets me go. “Forget you heard it,” I repeat then get into the car.

Chapter 19

Casey

I'm nervous all evening long.

Even though the short interaction with Adler's mother left me questioning just about every decision I've made in my entire life, I still managed to obsess over what he's going to do to me tonight.

I mean, he hasn't been too subtle about his plans.

There has to be a way to escape him.

I could sleep in another room. Run screaming the second he steps into the apartment. Lock myself in the backroom.

He might drag me back by my hair—but maybe I'd be able to avoid whatever he's cooking up for me in that twisted little head of his.

The sick part is, I need to find out what *exactly* he wants from me.

Even though I know obsessing about him like this is only going to complicate our already overly fraught relationship.

I've been looking forward to seeing him all day. When we started, I didn't expect to spend my days thinking about him.

Mostly I figured I'd spend all my time running from him.

Except it's strange; even though we're married now and I can't get him out of my stupid head, I don't feel like we're any closer than we were before.

If anything, he's around less.

Most shifts I'd find him lurking somewhere, watching me like a creep, but today he's notably absent. Like now that he has me, he doesn't need to watch me anymore.

Or maybe I was imagining that whole stalking thing to begin with.

I try to lose myself in my work, but it's hard with Tattoo and Square as my constant shadows.

And the gossip. *So* much gossip, and nobody wants to ask me about it.

There are a dozen rumors about me and Adler, including some extremely wild ones.

It's like everyone has a lot to say, but even people I considered my friend can't look me in the eye and talk to me about what's going on.

Except for Roxie. She's more excited than I am.

"Tell me again when you guys are going to start making babies in earnest?" She flits around me like a horny butterfly.

"You have to stop asking me about sex," I say to her as I head off my shift, knee aching. Groups of guests move around us, some heading toward the tables, others angling into the forest of slot machines. "Seriously, Rox, I think I've given you every detail imaginable." And then some. When she wasn't satisfied with what really happened, I might've spiced things up a teeny-tiny bit.

"Come *on*," she practically begs. "I need more. I'm starving for more. Give me the filthy details. Like I'm asking for girth, length, that sort of thing."

I give her a look. "I am *not* going to describe his penis to you. I already said he's big, okay? And seriously, there's nothing else I can tell you right now. I'm as in the dark as you are."

She grabs my arm, leaning in to whisper. "But isn't he supposed to get you pregnant? That's literally in the contract, right?"

"Yes, but it's just a business thing."

“God, that’s so hot.” She practically melts.

I shake her off. “Why are contracts hot again? Are you turned on by the legalese?”

She groans. “Nothing sexier than law language. The denser the better. Make me really work for that meaning, baby.”

“You’re gross.” I nudge her away, but she doesn’t budge.

“Seriously, he’s supposed to get you pregnant. I mean, that involves, like, sexual intercourse, right?”

I grimace. “Please don’t call it that.”

“Okay, that means he’s going to fuck you senseless. That man, that gorgeous freaking man, is going to take your virginity and come inside your—”

“That’s enough!” I say, sounding shrill. I have enough fantasies already, I don’t need her to infect me with more. “Roxie, *please*, I’m begging you. I don’t know what’s going to happen, okay? Yes, we’re supposed to do all this stuff, but he’s acting like I’m toxic waste. He’s avoiding me, and I don’t know what it means.”

“He’s just saving himself up for one massive baby-making explosion.”

“That’s horrifying.”

“You’ll be covered in him. Just you wait.”

“Is that supposed to be attractive?”

“Some women would give a limb to let that man spray them down.”

“Am I speaking to one of those women right now?”

She groans, but her manager gives her a dirty look, and she’s forced to let me escape up the magic elevator.

The apartment feels so empty and enormous without Adler. He’s got this uncanny ability to suck up the air in any room he enters. He fills a space with the sheer weight of his presence, but when he’s gone, I can’t help noticing how the walls seem tighter.

It's not like he's particularly outgoing. Adler's charming if he wants to be, but mostly he stands around looking grumpy and annoyed.

Still, he somehow manages to be a constant weight, one which dominates anyone near him.

Like everyone's waiting in his shadow.

I have more room service. It's fun calling down and ordering whatever I want, but I'm itching to put some real food in the pantry.

At least the Sunrise is known for its cuisine.

I kill time watching TV, exploring the apartment—there's an actual full-sized home gym, which explains Adler's cut physique—but mostly I daydream about my husband's return.

Which is *not* what I expected or wanted when I agreed to this.

I hoped it would be a marriage on the surface only, but Adler seems intent on making me more than just his bride on paper.

That man's after something, and I don't know what yet.

When it's late, I take another bath, but he's still nowhere to be seen. I'm disappointed when I get into bed and shut out the lights. This whole situation is bizarre—I should be excited that he's not home. I get the entire, beautiful apartment to myself, and I don't have to worry about Adler hassling me.

Except I want nothing more than him in this bed beside me.

Maybe he went on a trip and didn't say anything, or maybe he's avoiding me—that's totally possible—or maybe a dozen other terrible things happened, like a meteor strike or a lava river.

Although I don't think Atlantic City has an active volcano nearby, anything's possible.

The door to the bedroom opens, and I glance over at the clock. It's a little past midnight. The door shuts again.

He comes toward the foot of the bed, trying to be quiet. I sit up on an elbow. "Adler?"

He looks back at me, halfway stuck taking off his shirt. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“It’s fine. I wasn’t tired.” Which isn’t true. I’m exhausted from stressing about this exact moment.

“Go back to sleep. We’ll talk in the morning.” He finishes undressing, but there’s no way in hell I’m going to pass out anytime soon.

My husband gets under the sheets, once again wearing only a pair of shorts and no shirt.

It’s like he does it just to mess with me.

“Did you work late?” I ask quietly, burrowing down into the sheets. Feeling strangely vulnerable.

He glances over. I get a flash of his eyes in the darkness. Beautiful man, but hiding something. “Had a couple high rollers come through. When someone’s willing to gamble millions in my casino, I’m expected to make an appearance personally.”

I let out a little grunt of acknowledgment. “Does that happen often?”

I already know the answer, considering I work there, but I’m making conversation.

“No,” he says, sounding slightly off-kilter. “It’s unusual, actually. Most of our guests stick to the twenty-five-dollar tables.”

“It’s a good thing, right? Someone spending a lot of money? Unless they won.”

“They didn’t.” He shifts closer to me. “You’re interested in the business?”

“I’ve always been interested in the Sunrise. It’s beautiful, you know.”

“What part do you like the best?”

I close my eyes, picturing the gaming floor. “The chandeliers. The carpets. The groups of slot machines with their big, glowing faces. Even the bathrooms are nice.”

“What else?”

“I like how there’s always a flow.” I stop myself, blushing slightly as I glance at him. “Sorry, I’m not used to talking about the Sunrise like this. Most of the people that work there can’t wait to go home when their shift is over.”

“But not you.”

“No,” I agree. “I like to linger.”

“Because the Sunrise is better?”

“Maybe, but it’s more than that. It’s all the people coming and going, like there’s always someone starting their trip, always someone ending it. I don’t know, it’s like the casino is a tiny microcosm of life, like it’s constantly in a state of change.”

He looks curious as he touches a finger to his lips. “That’s an interesting way of looking at it.”

“I know it’s silly, it’s just, I’ve always loved the casinos. All the lights, the color, the action. I don’t even enjoy gambling all that much. The business has just always fascinated me.”

“I can tell you more, if you want. About my high roller.”

I shift closer to him. “Go ahead. I’m listening.”

“He was an oil baron from Texas. Loud guy. Brought with him a dozen cousins and best friends, all of them bankrolled. You know what we do with a crowd like that?”

“Ply them with drinks.”

“Exactly.” I can practically hear his smile. “Get them drunk. Keep them rolling, keep the cards flipping. The casino operates with an edge, and the longer they play, the more likely it is that we’ll take all their money.”

“Tell me more.”

“All those slot machines? They’re set up in clusters for a reason. We want you to forget where you are, to forget there’s a world outside of hitting the buttons and watching the lights spin. The slot forests are deep and dense.”

“Like a trap.”

“Just like a trap.”

“Keep going. I want to hear more.”

“Do you like listening to me talk?” He’s closer now. My heart’s beginning to race, and I’m wondering if this is it, if this is when he makes his move and comes onto me.

“Yes,” I say very softly. “You have a nice voice.”

“What else do you like about me?”

“Nothing,” I say, trying to cover my smile. “You’re way too arrogant. If I start complimenting you, it’ll only make your already-swollen ego that much larger.”

He seems amused. “There’s nothing you can say that will change my opinion of myself, good or bad.”

“Must be nice.”

“You’re not that way?”

“Most people don’t have that insane level of self-confidence. You can absolutely say something that’ll make me feel bad about myself. I bet you can think of a dozen things right now.”

“Never,” he says. “I’m surprised though. You seem so sure of yourself.”

“I’m not,” I say with a laugh. “God, I’m far from it. I’m self-conscious of everything. My limp, my butt, my laugh, my teeth. Everything I say and everything I do. The only time I’m not thinking is when I’m dealing.”

“That’s also part of why you love the Sunrise so much, isn’t it?”

I shift toward him. Adler watches me in the darkness, a look of genuine interest on his face. Does he really care about what I think? He’s listening like he does. I say softly, “It gets me out of my head. That and it feels like home, although lately—”

“The gossip.” He looks sympathetic.

“It’s bad, Adler.”

“There’s nothing I can do about it. They’ll lose interest eventually. It’s always that way.”

“Maybe,” I say, chewing on my lip. “It just sucks, you know? I want to be the one gossiping, not the subject of the rumors and crap. I want to be a part of the team again.”

“You can’t have that anymore,” he says and reaches out to touch my face. He seems melancholy, which surprises me. “What did I say? You’re my wife now. You crossed that line. I’m sorry I took that away from you. I didn’t want to steal something that felt important. I didn’t realize how you felt about this place.”

I sigh, leaning into his touch. Did I really trade one of the few things I truly love in this world for money? I didn’t predict that this would happen, but I should have, and I’m kicking myself for not seeing it.

Adler’s right: no matter what, I’ll always be his wife.

At least until we divorce.

Then I’ll just be his ex—and the mother of his child.

“I guess I can’t ever go back to the other side,” I whisper.

“No,” he says, shifting closer. We’re inches apart now. “But since you’re awake, I’ve been thinking about how to make you more comfortable all day.”

There it is. My heart doubles as he looks at me. I was wondering if he would bring this up. “Have you?” I ask, pretending like it’s not the biggest deal in the world to me.

“I think you’ve been imagining it too. No, don’t try to pull away.” He leans in to kiss my neck.

I want this. God, I want it badly—I need his mouth on my mouth, his hands on my skin, all his obscene talents pushing my every button.

But I’m terrified. The fear comes back, stronger this time.

I’m afraid I won’t be good enough and he’ll regret marrying me.

I’ve already crossed a line and lost something important.

What happens if I cross another?

What's waiting on the other side?

I blurt out the first thing that comes to mind, just to say something. "Your mother sat at my table this morning."

And immediately regret it.

He stops his lovely kissing and pulls back, eyebrows knit. "She did—what?"

"Just sat down and we played some hands." I'm talking fast, rushing it out. "She wasn't happy that you didn't talk to her about our marriage, and she was sort of annoyed, I guess, and she mentioned introducing me to your brothers—"

He retreats to his pillow.

Oh, crap, what the heck am I doing? I want to find out how he was planning to touch me tonight, not talk about his freaking mother.

"What else did she say?" His tone is flat now, all the teasing and flirtation totally gone.

Well, my big mouth just ruined the evening apparently.

I relate to him the full meeting, trying to tell him as much as I can remember. Most of our short interaction is a blur—I can only remember being very sweaty and nervous.

He seems contemplative. "She's right, I should have spoken to her first. Though I think my brothers will be less of a problem."

"Where are they, anyway?"

"Scattered," he says, making a gesture in the air. "LA. London. Vegas. They come and go as they please, the lucky bastards. While I'm at the Sunrise managing the family from a central location, they're traveling all over visiting our various properties."

"The Costa family has more hotels?"

He glances at me. "Several more under multiple different holding companies. Including a few other casinos. We like to keep a healthy distance between our organizations, which is

why they're managed by various other entities, but they all answer to me."

"Oh." I pull the sheets to my chin. I can't forget what they really are, despite the air of legitimacy. They manage hotels and casinos, but they also have other operations, darker jobs. "What are you going to do?"

"Invite my mother to dinner. Present you to my siblings. What else is there?" He closes his eyes and releases a long sigh. "It will be... unpleasant."

"They're your family. How bad could it get?"

He says nothing, and soon I figure out that the exploration isn't happening tonight as I find myself drifting off to sleep.

Chapter 20

Adler

I wake early the next morning. Casey's still asleep beside me, breathing rhythmically, wearing that crop top again.

She's sprawled, twisted toward my side of the bed, and I can see the bottoms of her breasts each time her chest expands.

There are too many complications. Tony, my mother, my siblings, my business, everything conspiring. I want to keep it all together, but it's forcing me to make compromises, and I don't like doing anything halfway.

Casey's a mistake.

She's been a mistake for a long time.

A good mistake, one that feels good—but drawing her into my world like this was an error.

Tony thinks I'm using her against him.

That much was obvious.

Which only paints an enormous target on her back and makes him more desperate.

Fucking hell, what a mess. I went into this thinking it was the best move for everyone, but the more I step back, the more I understand how completely foolish I've been.

Making decisions based on my heart and not on my head.

I get out of bed, brush my teeth, and shower. When I come back out, Casey's awake and half sitting up in bed.

I stand in the doorway staring at her. I'm shirtless, wearing only a pair of thin workout shorts, and her eyes widen at the

sight of me.

She's gorgeous. Her hair's spilling down around her shoulders. Her eyes meet mine as she bites her lip. Her gaze travels down to my chest, to my stacked abs, down to my crotch and back up again, not trying to hide it. Her breasts are pressed together, and one leg's out from under the sheets showing off her lovely, shapely thigh.

My shy little mouse is getting very bold.

And her sleepy confidence is beyond sexy right now.

I step toward her, heart racing. *This is a bad idea.* Getting closer to her right now will only end in disaster. Not until I introduce her to my family. Not until this Tony bullshit is over with.

I need distance to think. I've already taken wrong turns because of my clouded judgment.

Everything is murky when it comes to her.

Except I can't help myself, and that's the problem.

Maybe she thinks it's a good thing that I can't keep my hands off her—but she's wrong.

So very wrong.

"I promised you something," I say, moving closer to the bed.

"What's that?" She doesn't seem surprised when I pull the sheets away. Instead, she lies on her back, looking at me like she wants me to spread her wide.

"I told you I'd make you comfortable around me." I bend over, shivering with need, and kiss her throat. *Fuck.* She makes this little whimper that drives me absolutely insane as her arms wrap around my neck.

"How do you plan on doing that?" she says as my hands explore her body again. "Are you just going to tease me forever?"

"No," I say, voice husky. I push her crop top up, but this time, I hold her hands above her head as I kiss her breasts. "I wouldn't do that to you." I lick and suck, keeping her pinned.

“That feels good,” she whispers, her back arching when I bite down gently. “I think you’d tease me forever if it got you what you wanted.”

“You’d be wrong. I don’t have that kind of self-control.”

“Why control yourself at all?”

“Because there are reasons why I shouldn’t let us get too close.”

“Reasons?” She shakes her head. “You’re licking my nipples. You’re talking about getting me pregnant. You basically forced me into marrying you. Why are you talking about distance now all of a sudden?”

“That’s a good point. I should stop before I’ve gone too far.”

I pull back, but she whimpers, looking outraged.

God damn, that fucking *look*.

My cock’s hard already.

This is dangerous. This is stupid.

“Don’t stop,” she says.

And I’m fucking dead.

I lick her nipples again. I kiss her lips, diving into that mouth. I taste her, tongue against her teeth, tongue against her tongue, silky and sweet. I hold her there before I adjust her, spreading her legs and lowering myself down on top, making her give out this lovely yelp of surprise as my hard cock presses up onto her heat.

I growl when she rolls her hips.

“Now you’re the one teasing,” I whisper, kissing her ear. “You’d better be careful.”

“Or else what? You do realize this whole situation is entirely your fault, right? You forced me into this. You keep talking about making babies. I don’t know what to think about you, Adler.”

I don’t blame her one bit. I’m hot one moment, cold the next, because I’m torn in half between taking what I really want and

protecting her from the repercussions of my own mistakes.

“I didn’t force anything, and I never said I’d get you pregnant right away. There are things you don’t know.”

“Like what?” She stares into my eyes. Her expression is so needy, so vulnerable. *Why the fuck am I such a monster?* I should tell her the truth—make her understand what she means to me.

Instead, I have to keep her at arm’s length.

Because if anyone realizes how important she is then she’ll be in so much danger.

And not only from Tony, but from dozens of people that want to see me fall.

Marrying her like this is already a risk, but a calculated one.

Giving her more of myself? That’ll only ruin everything.

“Like how badly I want to taste you,” I say, deflecting, though it happens to be the truth.

She grumbles like she wants to argue, but I move down her body, kissing her little breasts again, before going lower. The way she reacts to my every movement drives me wild.

This is stupid.

I’m only going to make things harder.

And when she learns the truth—

She’ll only hate me even more.

I should tell her.

Except I know I won’t.

I kiss each hip bone as I slowly pull down her shorts, leaving only a pair of simple black panties.

She’s chewing on her thumbnail as I kiss her inner thighs.

“Second lesson,” I murmur, stroking her pussy over her underwear. “Last time I made you get yourself off. This time, I’ll do the work.”

Her eyes widen. “Who says I’ll let you?”

“Your moans say enough.” I kiss closer, closer, until I push her panties aside.

My god.

Her pussy is perfect. I lick her, my tongue tense, as I stroke bottom to top. I roll around her clit, then dive against her, unable to help myself.

The moans she makes.

It’s fucking heaven.

Her taste is lovely. Clean, sultry. I suck and lick her, gentle at first, before sliding two fingers deep into her.

“Mine are bigger than yours,” I say with a smirk at the look on her face. Pure bliss.

I’m so hard I might break.

“Yes, they are,” she says, shuddering. “It feels really good.”

“Starting to feel good about being my wife?”

“I’m starting to think you like this power trip.”

“Maybe, but does it matter? So long as you come.”

She groans, closing her eyes as I fuck her slowly with my fingers. “You’re insane. This whole thing is insane.”

“Tell me it feels good.”

“God, it feels so fucking good.”

“That’s my girl.” I lean down and lick her clit as I fuck her with my fingers. “It’s okay if you’re nervous. I can tell you’re not confident. But I can take care of you.”

“That’s what you say, but then you keep teasing, and pulling away, and I don’t—” Her back arches as I slide my fingers deep then suck her clit. “*Fuck*, that was good. What the hell are you doing down there?”

“Getting you off,” I say, teasing her again.

She’s breathing fast. I listen to her body, luxuriating in her noises, in her moans, in her taste. I’m a sensual man, and I like to use all my senses. Ass and tits are beautiful, but they’re

better when I can touch them, taste them. A woman is more than just her looks, she's taste and sound and texture and more, and I want it all.

I want everything from my wife.

Her fingers dig into my hair as I go faster. I push her, driving her deeper into her pleasure. "You taste perfect," I murmur, fucking her, curling my fingers. "I want to watch you come. I want to lick you as you orgasm against my mouth. Can you do that for me?"

"I've never—" She arches her back with gasp. "I've never gotten off like this before."

"That doesn't matter. Trust me. Do you trust me, Casey?"

She stares down into my eyes and nods. "I trust you."

"Good girl. Just listen to your body, and I'll listen to your moans. Understand?"

"Okay." She bites her lip and lies back. "Okay. I want to come so fucking bad."

"Good girl." I go back to work. Licking, sucking. Fingers sliding in and out. She's writhing her hips in ecstasy, groaning the whole time, her noises getting louder as she loses control.

This is the moment I live for, the moment she tips into bliss. I go faster, barely keeping myself under control, my brain a dizzy mixture of need and desire, until her back arches and her fingers grip the sheets.

"That's it, come for me," I say, encouraging her, fingers going deep. I bury her pussy with my mouth as she slides over the edge into orgasm, and I taste her, I feel her, and it's incredible, more than I ever imagined, and I've pictured this exact moment a thousand times over the years.

She's so much and more. That athletic body, pear-shaped, her little perky breasts, her thick ass and smooth thighs. Her moans, her noises, her gasps. The sound of her wet pussy as my fingers fuck her. Everything was designed to drive me wild.

“Oh, fuck, Adler,” she says as she comes down. “Oh, my fucking *fuck*.” She laughs, grinning like an idiot, her chest and face flushed red.

“You liked that.” I slide my fingers out. When she looks at me, I make a show of licking them clean.

I can’t tell if it embarrasses her or turns her on. Probably both.

“You seemed to like it too.” She’s staring at my hard cock.

“I did,” I admit. “Maybe too much.”

“Too much? Why do you keep saying stuff like that?” A hint of frustration creeps into her tone.

I don’t want to ruin her orgasm, so I get behind her and wrap my arms around her body, pulling her tight. Her ass wriggles against my cock, and I want nothing more than to bury myself between her legs.

But not yet.

“I’m not trying to be such a pain,” I whisper, kissing her neck. “I want this. I want more of this. It’s only, things are complicated, and our relationship isn’t coming at the best time.”

“You’re the one that made it happen.”

“I know that.” *I did it to protect you.* “But even still.”

“Is this mysterious ‘bad time’ why you keep trying to take things slow?”

“Yes, that, and you’re clearly inexperienced.”

She stiffens. I can tell she didn’t like that. “How do you know?” she asks, her tone sharp. She wriggles away from me, glaring.

“I only meant—” Too late to explain. It’s obvious I fucked this up somehow.

“You don’t know anything about me.” She yanks her crop top down and finds her shorts. “Just because I’m not the kind of girl you’re used to—” She pulls the shorts on as she gets out of bed and nearly topples over.

I lunge over to steady her, but she pushes me away.

“You don’t know what I’m used to,” I say, bewildered by her reaction. Does she really think I care if she’s experienced or not?

“I know you’re the great Adler Costa, and you probably have a million conquests to your name. How many girls have been in this bed before me? Actually, don’t answer.” She stands in the doorway to the bathroom. I don’t understand what I said to make her so upset.

She has no clue what kind of woman I like.

“I never pretended to be a saint before marrying you. There’s nothing wrong with having a few partners.”

“Yeah, sure, how convenient.” She shakes her head and turns away. “Thanks for the morning orgasm, asshole.”

Then slams the door in my face.

I stare at it, not sure what the hell just happened.

She clearly *is* inexperienced.

It’s not a bad thing—it’s just who she is.

I don’t mind teaching her what I like and helping her learn what she likes as well.

Except clearly that was the wrong thing to say.

I lean back with a sigh. It’s just going to be one of those days.

Chapter 21

Casey

I *nexperienced.*

The freaking asshole called me *inexperienced* right after getting me off.

With his mouth. Between my legs.

Something I've never done before.

Because I'm inexperienced.

And it pissed me off. I mean, he's not wrong, but still, he doesn't need to rub it in my face, not a second after we just went further than I've ever gone before.

I'm already embarrassed and self-conscious about being a virgin. What's he going to say when he finds out about that?

I bet he'll laugh at me.

I limp down the beach, sticking to the harder surf. I'm in running shoes, a sweatshirt against the early chill, and a pair of shorts.

My physical therapist has been pushing me to take beach walks for months now, and I've been trying to make them a habit. A half hour out and back is the best I can do, but that sure as hell beats nothing.

My leg's throbbing already.

At least it's nice out. A good breeze, a little sun. I breathe in the smell of the sand and the ocean, trying to forget about Adler Costa and his incredible, stupid mouth.

Except I keep coming back to him.

Back to that orgasm.

By far the best orgasm of my entire life.

Which actually pisses me off even more. Why can't he be bad at anything?

It'd almost be a relief if he fumbled around and failed to make me come.

Instead, the man was masterful.

The bastard.

I'm lost in thoughts, but up ahead I spot another lone walker. It's a man, tall, wearing all black exercise clothes. He's coming toward me, moving in the opposite direction. I glance away toward the water, hoping he just passes by without making any comments. I'm limping, and sometimes people mistake my awkward gait for an injury and want to help. They mean well, but it's uncomfortable.

This guy's slowing as he gets closer. I try to avoid eye contact, but it's impossible. I glance over and he's grinning at me, head tilted, like he knows who I am.

"Casey Kiernan?" he asks.

I stop walking, surprised. I don't recognize him. Dark hair, dark eyebrows. I'd guess around Adler's age, late thirties. Muscular, beefy almost, with a rumbling voice.

"Sorry, do I know you?"

"My name's Tony Vetch." His smile gets bigger at my reaction.

Tony Vetch?

As in, Adler's nemesis?

Panic slams into my chest. This has to be some kind of joke—what's a guy like Tony Vetch doing out for a morning stroll on the freaking beach?

I look around, terror ringing in my ears, and we're almost alone. There's a guy fishing not far away, and I think I spot a

couple figures hurrying in my direction. Tony's guys? I can't be sure.

"Uh, hello," I say. "It's nice to meet you."

His smile slips. He cocks his head, looking confused. "You really don't remember me?"

"No, I—" I clear my throat. "I don't think we've met. Adler's talked about you a little bit."

"That's right, your husband. Congratulations, by the way, that must be really exciting."

"Uh, thank you, it's all very new."

"I'm sure if Adler's told you about me then it's nothing but good things."

I laugh awkwardly as he gives me another charming smile. This is so uncomfortable, all I want is to find a way out of our conversation.

"No, not really, but I bet you don't have nice things to say about him, either. Listen, it's nice to meet you, but I have a shift in a little while—"

"He has his own wife working the floor?" He snorts, good-natured, but there's an edge to his tone. "He always was cheap, but that's pushing it."

"He's not making me. I mean, I like dealing."

"Good for you then. An independent type. That's really good." He moves closer. I take a step back and my knee almost gives out. If he notices, he doesn't move to help me. I'm shaking and something feels very wrong about this.

Why is Tony Vetch out for a morning stroll all alone?

Why is he out at the exact same time I am?

"I don't want to, uh, get involved in your feud with my husband. Whatever bad blood you two have is between you guys. It all happened before I ever met him."

"You think that?" His eyes narrow and his smile slips. "You *really* don't remember, do you?"

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I take a few steps back. “If you’ll excuse me, my leg’s starting to hurt.” Way worse than before. It must be the stress of this meeting triggering my discomfort.

“Be careful, Casey. You have no clue who you married.”

“And you do?”

“Better than anyone in the world.” Tony’s smile is totally gone now. He’s staring at me intensely. “Whatever he’s using you for, don’t do it. Do you hear me, Casey Kiernan? Just leave it alone.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say, feeling confused and desperate.

Another voice breaks out over the wind. “Hey! You!”

Tony gives me one last look before turning around and walking in the opposite direction.

I stand there watching him go, head reeling. Why did he keep talking like he knows me? What does he mean Adler’s using me for something?

“Mrs. Costa. Hey, Mrs. Costa? Casey!”

I look over, startled.

Square’s standing there with Tattoo lingering behind him. They’re both concerned, frowning at me.

They must’ve been the duo I spotted coming toward me. I can barely think straight right now, and I stare at Tony as he continues down the beach, striding along like he owns the place.

Which he might, for all I know.

“I’m okay,” I say, my hand on my chest. My heart’s racing wildly and my knee’s throbbing. This is going to be a difficult walking day. “I’m fine. I’m totally fine, he was just talking to me.”

“You look rattled.”

“Just, I’m fine, okay?”

Square grunts. “Come on, we’ll get you back.” He offers me his arm.

Before I take it, I look at him. And it suddenly occurs to me that these two guys might’ve just saved my life. “What’s your name? I should’ve asked sooner, but I guess I’m too busy worrying about myself.”

He snorts. “Yeah, you should’ve. I’m Berthold and that’s Gianni.”

Tattoo—Gianni—gives me a wave. “Pleasure,” he says.

“Come on.” Berthold holds his arm out and I take it. “Don’t worry about Tony Vetch. I don’t know what he was doing out here, but that man’s trouble. Next time you see him, you turn around and run away.”

“Yeah, I’ll do that,” I murmur, and I let Berthold and Gianni lead me back to the Sunrise, feeling like there’s something I should remember but can’t.

Chapter 22

Adler

Conlan takes the family jet in from Los Angeles and lands midday. I meet him at the airport. “Brother,” he says, giving me a tight hug. “You’re looking suitably stressed as fuck.”

“Con. Glad you’re home.” My youngest brother looks a lot like our father: dark eyes, dark hair, with a muscular physique and a glare that makes average men tremble. He’s a terrifying bastard, though he’ll always be my little bro, no matter how many bodies he racks up.

“That’s a massive lie.” He beams at me as we head to the town car. “How’s Mother? I bet she’s losing her mind. What were you thinking, getting married like that? It’s all I’ve been hearing about the last day or so.”

“I needed a wife.” I gesture as if it’s no big deal.

“That’s my typical big brother, never sentimental about anything.” Con punches my arm as we duck into the car.

“As if you’re the most emotional man I’ve ever met.”

“That’s true. Grow up like we did, and the emotions tend to bury themselves.”

I grunt in agreement, and we both let the subject of our childhood drop. It’s not the best subject in the world and most days I’d rather pretend like none of it happened. There are good memories, but those are drowned by the bad ones.

He talks about the LA properties on the way back to the Sunrise. We own two golf courses, a country club, and three

hotels around town. Business is safe territory, something we can both discuss without tempers flaring. I've always been competitive with my brothers, though we're loyal to each other to death.

Always it's family above all.

"Everything's profitable," Conlan finishes, spreading his hands out as if it's no big deal. "What else can I say? That's the most important thing. We continue to make money despite our best efforts to spend it all."

"Good work," I grunt at him as we're dropped off at the back entrance to the Sunrise.

"Ah, this place," he says with a sigh. "I haven't missed it and it hasn't changed. I'm pretty sure it's timeless."

He's right, even though I've made improvements.

"You grew up here," I remind him. We take the back halls through the kitchens and toward the game floor.

"That's true, but I didn't miss the ruddy red carpets and the cheesy decorations."

"We renovated five years ago," I say, annoyed. Though I admit we did try to keep it looking as similar to the original as possible without making it even more dated. The Sunrise is one of the higher-end casinos in the city and we employ a small army of cleaners to make sure it looks pristine at all times even though it costs a damn fortune.

"And you did a wonderful job." He laughs at me. "Come on, Adler, we both know I didn't fly across the country to talk business. Where is she?"

"Working. You're not going to bother her."

"You have your *wife* working on the fucking *floor*?" He barks an astounded laugh. It makes me want to punch him in the damn throat. "That has to be the craziest thing I've ever heard. Really, I knew the Sunrise didn't earn like it used to, but are things really that bad? Are you going to make Mother serve drinks next?"

“Knock it off. Casey likes dealing.” If I had my way, I’d keep the girl tied to my damn bed at all hours, ready to be used and abused—but I don’t say that out loud.

“Your wife, working the floor.” He shakes his head, wiping a tear from his eye. “That’s the funniest fucking thing I’ve heard in a long time.”

I glare at him, annoyed. How am I supposed to explain that Casey isn’t like the pampered, spoiled little rich girls he prefers? Con’s been fucking his way through every actress, every model, and every heiress in L.A. He probably forgot that most normal women need jobs.

Some even like them.

“It’s her decision,” I say even if that’s not the best argument. The Costa family isn’t exactly known for its progressive gender politics, and nobody would be surprised if I didn’t take Casey’s preferences into account.

“Who gives a damn?” he says, surprising absolutely nobody. “She’s your *wife*. She’s the goddamn Don’s woman, and she’s dealing roulette!”

“Blackjack,” I correct. “Sometimes craps.”

“Even worse. Come on, Adler, we have an image to uphold. What the hell does the staff think about your wife *working* as if we couldn’t afford to let her sit around covered in money for the rest of her life?”

“They think what they think and they’re too smart to say anything where I can hear it.”

“Spoken like a true Costa.” He sighs, his laughter dying down. We step out onto the games floor and he’s quiet for a second, surveying the action. People sit at slots hitting buttons, drinks flow, cards slide across felt. I notice the movement now, the way there’s always someone coming, always someone going. It feels like I’m seeing things through Casey’s eyes for a moment, and it’s strange. I’ve been jaded toward this place for a long time. Con says, “The Sunrise gets older, but this never changes.”

“It’s good, isn’t it? I didn’t notice it for a long time.”

“Good and bad. Fucked us up, that’s for sure.”

“Can’t disagree there.”

“You ever think about him?” Con glances at me.

He doesn’t have to specify who. “I haven’t thought about Dad since the day we buried him.”

“I can’t believe that’s true.”

It’s not. I think about him all the time, but against my wishes. He haunts this place. Every detail, every fixture, every corner’s got my father’s stamp on it. “Dad’s gone. I run the family now. That’s all I care about.”

“Sure thing.” He claps my shoulder, but he’s not unfriendly about it. “Come on, take me to her.”

I steer him into the crowd. For a moment, I feel like a kid all over again, running through the clusters of bodies, weaving my way through the action with my brothers. Con was always the most outgoing of our group—a grumpy bastard most of the time, but charming in a way none of us could ever manage—and he got into the most trouble. But he was also able to talk himself out of it more often than not, though it helped that his last name was Costa. Nothing ever quite stuck to us the way it did to other kids our age.

And the times when life wanted to fuck us, we closed ranks and protected each other.

That’s how my father wanted it. Four brothers looking out for the family. Competing, fighting, bickering, but always united in the end.

I wonder how he could feel about the way things are now, with all four of us separated by so much distance, barely seeing each other a few times a year.

I spot Casey up ahead. Con angles directly toward her, which annoys me; I had no clue he knew what she looked like, but he must’ve done his homework. That, or it’s obvious since she’s the only dealer with two security goons lurking behind her. I’ll have to talk with those two about being more discreet. They aren’t helping with Casey’s gossip problem.

Here I go, worrying about her feelings again.

Before Con has a chance to derail her too badly, I gesture at Big Dan and motion for Casey to get rotated out. Big Dan sends another one of his dealers over and Casey gets pulled off the table. She looks around, confused, before she spots Con coming straight for her.

“You’re my brother’s new wife,” he says, thrusting a palm at her in his easygoing way. “My name’s Conlan Costa, but you can call me Con. Everyone does.”

“Uh,” she says, shaking his hand. She gives me a panicked look. “Hello, Con. My name’s Casey.”

“Oh, I know all about you, Casey Kiernan. Though you’re not too active on social media, which I admit made it difficult to do my normal deep stalk.”

“Should I feel flattered that you’d go to the trouble?”

“Absolutely.” Con beams. “I only research those worthy of my attention.”

“Casey, Con is my youngest brother,” I say before this conversation gets even weirder. “He came in from Los Angeles.”

“What are you doing out there?” she asks.

“Running the family properties.” He slowly walks with Casey by his side. Because the floor’s crowded, I’m forced to trail them. “When Dad died, we split up the empire and each took a corner. Adler here got the Sunrise since he’s the boss and this place is still the heart of the family, while I was shunted out to our overseas holdings. I think my brothers are embarrassed of me.”

“I can’t imagine that’s true,” Casey says, smiling at him. She’s going to make the same mistake everyone makes: she’s going to think Con is normal.

Except he’s not even close.

He makes me look like a normie saint.

“You’d be surprised. We used to run around down here getting into fights and causing total mayhem, and those fights weren’t always against other people. We beat the total shit out of each other, day in and day out. I think big brother here holds a grudge.”

“Father practically demanded it,” I mutter.

Casey gives me a frown. “That seems crazy.”

“He made us tough,” Con says, nudging her with his elbow. “And look at us now? Four kings ruling our little fiefdoms.”

“Still, wouldn’t you have rather gotten along?”

“Like you and your brother?” Con asks, glancing away as if he’s not lobbing a grenade into the middle of the conversation.

Casey’s face goes pale. She stares at him in alarm. “How did you—”

“Research,” he says, waving it away. “Don’t worry. I’ve got my little spies all over the place.”

“Con, don’t be an asshole,” I say through my teeth. He’s freaking her out on purpose. Testing her boundaries. He does this sometimes and it’s annoying.

We pause near the craps tables. “I’m just saying that a happy childhood does not guarantee stability,” Con says.

“You should recheck your *research* if you think my childhood was happy.”

Con’s jaw tics and he gives Casey a crooked smile. “There’s a difference between being poor and getting abused.”

“I never said there wasn’t.” Casey seems annoyed now.

But Con, being Con, does not care. “Is that why you work the floor still? Even with all the money in the world at your disposal, you can’t help but want to work like you could lose everything at any moment?”

Casey reels back toward me. “Am I being psychoanalyzed right now?”

“Con actually does have a psychology degree,” I say, keeping a straight face. “He thinks it makes him qualified to judge people.”

“He’s joking,” Con says. “I dropped out of school.”

“Much to Father’s regret.” I give my youngest a glare. Father had such high hopes for Con, and it was always like Con lived for nothing more than to disappoint the old man.

“At least you got the chance,” Casey shoots back. “I mentioned college once and my mother laughed in my face. That’s the closest I ever got.”

“Okay, we don’t need to play the Pity Olympics,” I say, steering them away and toward a nearby bar. “We all had it rough.”

“Truth is, I liked our upbringing,” Con admits. “Father was difficult and Mother was always detached, but we had a lot of freedom. You remember running around this place, going nuts out on the boardwalk, long days on the beach, swimming and surfing?”

“Easier times,” I agree.

“You surfed?” Casey gapes at me. “I find that hard to believe.”

“I live fifty feet from the ocean. *Every* local surfs when they’re young.”

Con drapes his arm over my shoulder. “Big bro here was the best of the best. I thought he should turn pro.”

“Imagine the look on Father’s face if I had.”

“It would’ve killed him much sooner.”

“Missed opportunities,” I say, a little wistful.

“You people have a very weird relationship,” Casey says. “But I’m happy I got to meet you, Conlan.”

“Con,” he corrects. “And you too, Casey. Even though big brother here dropped the whole marriage thing out of nowhere, you seem okay.”

“I’m so glad you approve,” I say.

“Your mother seemed to think you were going to scare me away.” Casey’s laugh is a little forced. “So far, you don’t seem so bad.”

“Give me time.” Con flags the bartender and asks for a drink. “Now, I have some people to catch up with. That spitfire Trish Wane still work here?”

“Running the hotel side.”

“I miss that gorgeous woman.”

“Good luck. Trish hates you.”

“I know, it’s lovely.” Con winks at Casey. “Wonderful meeting you. We’ll speak more soon.” Then he’s off to terrorize poor Trish, though if I wasn’t sure Con was about to get the worst of it, I’d put a stop to him.

“Your brother seems... interesting.” Casey frowns at me, head tilted.

“That’s one way of putting it. Sorry to run you down like this, but he insisted.”

She tugs at her hair. “Speaking of ambushes, I need to tell you something.”

“What’s wrong?”

I can tell she doesn’t want to tell me whatever’s on her mind, which puts me on high alert. “Earlier today while you were getting Conlan from the airport, I was out for a walk on the beach. And I ran into someone.” She chews her lip, looking confused like there’s something she should remember but can’t reach for it.

An ugly pit opens in my stomach.

“Who?”

“Tony Vetch. He came out of nowhere.”

I tense, looking around as if the bastard might be nearby. “You ran into Tony on the beach?”

“I think he was out there looking for me. Or maybe it was coincidence, I’m not sure.”

Her fucking bodyguards should've told me first thing. But then again, I've been busy chaperoning my brother. "What did he want?"

"Nothing really," she says. "Just made some weird comments about running into each other, and..." She trails off, tapping a finger against her head like she's trying to knock something loose. "Gianni and Berthold rescued me before it got too awkward. He seemed a little off."

"Tony is dangerous." I step closer to her, body humming with a sudden sense of impending doom. How had Tony found her like that? And how did he get so close? "You need to tell me things like this immediately. I'm going to fire your useless fucking guards."

"Don't, it's my fault, I asked them not to say anything until I had to a chance to talk to you first. I knew how you were going to react—"

"And how's that?" I grab her arm, standing closer.

"Like this." She struggles slightly. "Adler, don't read too far into it. I'm fine. It's all fine."

"Tony Vetch is running around this town closing loose ends. You want me to ignore the fact that he approached you?"

"I'm not a loose end," she points out. "I don't even know the guy."

"Doesn't matter. You're *mine*, and that's all he cares about." I pull her from the bar. "You're heading back to the apartment."

"Wait, Adler! I'm not done my shift."

"I don't care. Big Dan will handle it."

"This is stupid, stop it. You're making a scene."

"I don't give a damn." My head's spinning. Tony really walked right up to my wife on the beach? She should be protected at all times, how the hell did my biggest enemy get within spitting distance of her?

I can barely hear what she's saying as I pull her back to the elevator. I gesture angrily at her guards to keep pace, and I can

tell they realize they fucked up. She's trying to pull away and some of the guests are staring, but fuck them and fuck this place.

Tony Vetch got close to my wife.

I failed her. I let her down.

And I won't make that mistake again.

"Get the fuck off me, Adler." She rages at me once we're alone in the elevator heading to the apartment. I release her now that she's safe.

"It's for your own good. You don't know Tony like I do."

"This is crazy. You can't just drag me around in public like that." Her cheeks are red and there are tears in her eyes. She's rubbing her arm like it hurts.

Oh, fuck.

Did I do that?

Did I seriously make her cry right now?

But I have to steel myself, make myself hard, close off my emotions.

Her safety is all that matters.

"You need to stay in the apartment for a little while. Lie low until I find out why Tony approached you."

"Adler, this is too much. I didn't sign up to be a freaking prisoner. You can't just—"

But the doors open and I pull her inside. "Stay," I snarl, hating myself for it.

And despising myself even more for the look she gives me as I walk back to the elevators and leave her there.

Chapter 23

Casey

The only thing I learn from Adler's little tirade is that I need to hide stuff like running into Tony Vetch.

Otherwise, he'll lock me in the stupid apartment.

I spend a solid ten minutes stabbing the elevator call button, but nothing happens. I phone the front desk, but the patient and polite girl explains that she has strict orders not to let anyone up or down until Mr. Costa says so.

I then explain to her, equally politely, that I'm a fucking captive in my own apartment, at which point she hangs up.

It takes a special kind of person to survive a customer service job.

I am not that kind of person, which is why I rage and curse and basically throw a temper tantrum, which I'm aware is super childish and not going to help at all, but I'm so frustrated that I can't stop myself.

It takes a solid hour before I'm calm enough to think.

Adler is overreacting. Tony was creepy and weird—definitely won't deny that—but I didn't get the sense that the man wanted to hurt me.

And yet Adler's acting like I stumbled into a den of starving wolves.

I'm obviously missing something.

Like whatever Tony was talking about when he kept asking if I *remembered*, whatever that's supposed to mean.

Unfortunately, I don't, but there has to be a connection.

Between me and Tony, me and Adler, Tony and Adler, I don't even know anymore. It's this tight little circle, and it feels like everyone knows what's going on except for me.

Eventually, I make dinner out of the meager offerings we have in the apartment. I pour myself some wine and sit on the balcony, staring out at Atlantic City, breathing in the brine-thick air, trying to figure out why Adler's locking me away for the crime of taking a walk on the beach.

He's clearly afraid.

Something's going on with Tony Vetch—something about him running for office, about him closing off loose ends, whatever that means. I've heard rumors about Adler's relationship with Tony, but nothing concrete.

They're rivals. They used to be friends and business associates. Now they're both trying to become the preeminent casino operator in AC, which means a certain level of friction.

Adler runs a crime family. Tony probably does too.

But what does any of that have to do with me?

I'm chasing myself in circles when I hear the elevator doors ding around ten that night. Adler steps into the apartment, spots me, and seems to relax somewhat, like he was expecting to find me missing and he's relieved that I'm still here.

Not like I had anywhere to go.

He comes into the kitchen and pours himself a glass of wine. I watch him from where I'm standing near the balcony doorway. He drinks it down in two gulps, pours a second, and looks at me over the rim.

"How was your night?" he asks.

So casually, like nothing's wrong.

"Well, I came up here, made some dinner, sat outside, drank some wine, and oh, yeah, my husband locked me in the apartment. Not a bad night."

"Good to hear."

“What’s going on, Adler?”

His face gives me nothing. “I had to be sure you were safe. This was my best solution.”

“Why would I be in any danger? Just because I ran into Tony Vetch and he said a bunch of cryptic stuff?”

Adler’s jaw tightens. “Yes.”

“You know that makes no sense, right?”

“It doesn’t need to so long as you stay here.” He turns and walks back toward the stairs.

I follow him, feeling heated again. “You can’t keep me locked up forever,” I say.

“I can and I will.”

“Adler, stop it.” He continues up into the bedroom. I stay on his heels. “Why are you so worried about Tony? Why do you think he’s going to hurt me? I get it, you two are rivals, but it makes no sense. He’s running for office. Why the hell would he do something so stupid like hurt a random woman?”

“Tony Vetch is dangerous.” Adler stands at the foot of the bed glaring at the pillows like he wants to rip them to pieces. “And you are important to me. He’ll do whatever it takes to win, including going through you.”

I laugh at the absurdity. “That’s really all there is? You’re afraid he’ll hurt me because you two are in some stupid rivalry?”

“It’s more than a rivalry.” His eyes go distant. “We’re in a war, Casey, one which isn’t going to end anytime soon.”

“I still would love to understand why it makes sense that he’d come for me.”

“You don’t have to understand.” He turns on me, his face twisted with emotion: anger, sorrow, even a hint of fear, and something else.

A yearning. A desire.

I take a step back in surprise. “You can’t keep me locked up because you’re worried,” I say, trying to find my footing again. “That goes against our deal.”

“I’m not sure I care.”

“You’d better.” He starts walking toward me. I back up and bump into the doorframe. “We got married so you can inherit all your money, right? You need a baby to make that happen? Well, good luck getting me pregnant.”

“You really think I give a shit about that?” His voice is strained as he stops a couple feet away from me.

My heart’s racing up into my throat. “What do you care about then?”

“You.” His head tilts. “Your safety.”

“Again, we’re in a business relationship.”

“Con said something to me earlier. You’re the wife of the Don. Even if you don’t care about that, I do. You’re too important to risk.”

“We didn’t discuss this. How can you ask me to hide out all of a sudden? I’m supposed to be allowed to work the floor.”

“That’s out of the question now.”

“Then good luck getting me pregnant and you can kiss your stupid inheritance goodbye.”

He stares at me. I stare back. I’m sick of letting him drag me around without so much as an explanation, like I’m not even worth talking to. There’s clearly something more going on that he’s not saying, and if he refuses to give me what I want, then I can do the same thing.

The tension is so heavy I feel like my knees might collapse. But I stay there, meeting his gaze. Chin out, forcing myself to stay strong.

Otherwise, he’ll roll over me, and he’ll never stop taking everything he wants regardless of what I think about it.

After a long moment, he seems to relax. Some of the tension in his shoulders calm. He moves closer to me, but not in a

threatening way.

“You’d really do that, wouldn’t you?” His voice is soft. Most of the rage seems to have gone from him. “You’d screw me out of spite.”

“I’d screw you because you went out of your way to make my life miserable.”

He sighs and runs a hand through his hair. I glance at his bicep and try not to stare. The bastard, it’s as if he knows what I like and what I can’t resist. And that stupid, muscular arm drives me crazy.

“I really am trying to do what’s best for you, Casey.”

“Then why not talk to me about it before you start making enormous decisions?”

“I’m not used to this.”

“To what? Talking to another human being?”

He nods slowly. “All my life, I’ve done what I want, when I want. I’ve been encouraged by my father to be strong, by my soldiers to be a good leader. Now, with you, I need to take what you want into account.”

“Welcome to being a normal person.”

“That’s the thing. I am *not* a normal person, and never have been.” He reaches out. I want to flinch away, but there’s nowhere to go. His fingers brush my cheek gently. “That’s what I like about you.”

“Yeah? You like that I’m normal?”

“No. I like that you stand up to me. Even if it also pisses me off.”

“I’m really not trying to make your life harder.”

“I understand that. I wish I could make you see things from my perspective.”

“Then try explaining.”

He takes a deep breath. We’re inches apart and I’m aware of every little twitch of his muscles, of the steady intake of breath

running through his throat and into his muscular chest, of the tension in his back and shoulders. He's carrying something heavy and has been since I met him. Only I'm just noticing it now.

How it weighs him down. Shoves him to the ground.

I don't know what it is or why he hasn't let it go yet, but there's a voice in my head, a tiny voice that thinks whatever I'm missing, whatever I've forgotten, that's what he's trying to run away from.

"Tony is desperate," he says quietly. "I know things about him that could ruin his political career. He thinks that's exactly what I plan on doing, and he believes my marrying you is proof."

"How?" I ask at a total loss.

"If I'm ready to inherit, that means I'm ready to take the next steps into power. He sees that as a direct threat."

"Must be nice living in Tony's world where everything's about him."

He smiles tightly. "It's probably not so great."

"So you're convinced that he intends to hurt me."

"That's why I brought you up here. If he thinks our marriage is a threat, he'll do everything he can to destroy it, including hurting you. When you told me that he managed to walk right up to you on the beach, I just..." He trails off for a moment, glancing down at my lips, his eyes a pained mixture of rage and need. "I lost my mind. I couldn't believe I failed to protect you so spectacularly."

"It's not your fault. I tried to ditch my security guards, but they found me anyway."

He doesn't seem to hear me though. "I have to do more. I have to do better. All this time, all this effort, only to lose you to him like this. I just can't allow it."

"What time and effort?" I screw up my face, trying to understand. "Adler? What do you mean?"

He blinks at me as if remembering that I'm in the room. His thumb grazes my jaw. "I mean that I will do whatever it takes to make sure Tony can't get anywhere near you. That's a promise."

"I'm not going to stay locked up in this room."

"We'll see about that."

"I mean it," I say, putting my hands on his chest. Which is a very stupid mistake. He's so muscular, so warm. Most of my anger dissipates in an instant, vaporized by the sudden pulse between my legs. "I'm not going to be your pretty little bird sitting in a gilded cage."

He smiles at that. "I like that metaphor."

My fingers dig in tighter. "Don't get any ideas."

"We'll come to a solution." He leans closer. His breath is warm on my neck. "Now, my wife, you made a threat earlier."

"I did?" I can barely think. Barely breathe. He's so close, so handsome. I'm still pissed, but that's totally overwhelmed by his proximity. "I don't know what you mean."

"You threatened to withhold sex from me."

"I didn't know we were having sex to begin with."

His mouth finds my ear. "How did you think I'd get you pregnant?"

I want to tell him a thousand ways, most of them involving a turkey baster, but don't get a chance as he kisses my earlobe, nibbling it gently.

"Uh," I manage, which isn't very eloquent, but in my defense the man is very good at what he does. "Well, uh, I don't know."

"I'm not blind to the way you react to me." His hands are on my hips. They move up my body, toward my breasts, back down again. Exploring me slowly. "You don't mind when I do this."

"I think you're mistaking fear for excitement."

“Oh, my beautiful wife, I’m very familiar with those emotions, and you are definitely feeling both.”

“Isn’t that bad? You shouldn’t want me to be afraid of you.”

“I don’t mind.”

“That’s a little weird.”

“I already told you. I’m not a normal person.” His mouth moves down my chin. “Tell me you really don’t want to fuck me, Casey.”

“I don’t know what I want,” I whisper, which is the truest thing I’ve ever said in my life.

“Then let me show you some options.” He pins me tighter against the wall as his fingers unbutton my work slacks. “Or are you going to fight me on this, too?”

“Would you like it if I did?” I don’t know why I’m playing his game. I don’t know why I’m not running away screaming.

Except it feels good when he’s this close. Despite everything, despite feeling so trapped and lost, when Adler touches me, it’s like all that doubt’s washed away.

That’s a problem.

I should be more objective. I should hold him at a distance, keep myself rational, and there’s nothing rational about this animal reaction I’m having.

This pure heat in my core.

No, this is only a very bad distraction, one that feels so good it doesn’t matter that I know it’s a problem.

I want it anyway.

His mouth finds my ear again. “Go ahead and struggle. I don’t mind one bit.”

Then he kisses me hard.

Chapter 24

Casey

I want to fight him. I want to thrash, kick, scream, call him terrible names.

But the moment his mouth touches mine, I'm all his. Body, mind, soul, whatever, everything, from my toes to the tip of my nose, all his.

I melt into that kiss. I return it with a frenzy, with a hunger. I bite his lip, try to push him back, but we both know I'm playing the game. It's half-hearted at best, a little show. He grabs my wrists and pins them above my head with a surprising ferocity. The man's big, he's strong, and he could tear me to pieces.

I want him to try.

"You're not really fighting me," he says, kissing my neck, making me shiver. "You want this to happen, don't you?"

"I want you to let me go back to work."

"Negotiating while I kiss you? That's cold-hearted."

"I'm hoping you're vulnerable right now."

He pulls back, his expression amused. "You're the vulnerable one, my little wife."

I chew on my lip. He's very right about that. "You want to fuck me? I want something in return." I can't believe I'm saying this right now, but based on the look on his face, he likes it.

"I'm impressed. I didn't think you had it in you."

“I just don’t want things to change.”

He kisses me, gently this time. “They already have,” he says, then pulls my arms down and drags me to the bed.

I put up a struggle, which doesn’t do much. I end up on my belly. He yanks down my slacks and panties, exposing my ass. I try to roll over, try to wriggle away, but his grip is like iron and he’s twice my size.

“You can’t just—take whatever you want—” I try to twist but it’s useless. “You need to start listening to me.”

“And you need to start obeying my rules.” His palm comes down on my ass, spanking me so hard I can only gasp then release a low, painful moan. “There you go, lovely girl.” He spanks me again, and again. “I know you want to fight me. You think I’m doing this because I’m selfish, but you’re so wrong about that. If I had my way, none of this would be happening.”

“Then why?” I manage to gasp, not sure what the hell he’s talking about. “Why marry *me*? Why lock me up? What are you so afraid of?”

“I’m afraid *for* you.” He spanks me, pulls my hair, and reaches between my legs to tease my slit.

My god, I’m so wet. I don’t even realize it until he touches me. I wiggle my hips, humping his hand. It feels so fucking good, like my brain’s on fire. The pathways between pain and pleasure are crossed, mixed-up, and I think my skull might explode.

He spanks me again, teases me some more, then buries his fingers inside my pussy. I whimper, biting down on the blanket, my hands up above my head and gripping the sheets tightly. He fucks me like that, big fingers sliding in and out before he spanks me again, grabs my hips, and rolls me over.

I stare at him in shock as he shoves his wet fingers in my mouth.

“Suck,” he commands.

And I obey. I lick myself from his fingers, moaning as I do it, my right hand down between my legs, touching myself.

He likes that. And shit, I can't stop.

"Don't get yourself off yet," he growls. "That's my job."

"Stop me then," I say, panting, and he grabs my wrist, shoving it above my head.

He kisses me, burying my mouth with his, and I feel his weight between my legs. He's hard, rock hard, straining against his dress slacks. I grind against him, not giving a damn if I ruin his stupid suit with my excitement.

He doesn't seem to mind either.

"Fuck," he whispers, forehead against mine. "You fucking kill me, Casey. You wanted to throw me off the roof ten minutes ago. Now you're rubbing yourself against my cock."

"Are you complaining right now?" I struggle slightly. "Let me go if you don't want this."

"I want this." I bite my lower lip. "And I want you to say it too."

"I want this." Why pretend otherwise? "But you're going to work for it."

He laughs as I kick away from him and scramble to the head of the bed. He takes off his shirt, doing it slowly, making me watch. I lean against the padded headboard, legs spread again, hand teasing myself. What is wrong with me? Where did I get this sort of sexual confidence?

He finishes undressing down to his boxer briefs then crawls to me. There's something about a big man like him stalking toward me like a hungry jungle cat. His mouth buries between my legs, shoving my hand aside, and he begins to lick me like he can't stop himself, growling the whole time.

I reach up, grabbing the top of the headboard as he eats me, devours me, ruins me.

"Fuck, you realize you're not going to get me pregnant like that?" I groan, hips rocking back and forth, dancing right on

the edge of coming.

“You want me to fuck you so badly, don’t you?” His fingers slide deep inside me. “You want me to fuck you right now?”

I whimper, too afraid to answer.

He moves up to kiss me. “Say you want me to fuck you and I will.”

“What happened to making me comfortable first?”

“I think you’re comfortable enough.”

I moan as his fingers tease me again. “What if I need more time?”

“Now you’re stalling.”

“I’m not stalling, it’s just—” How am I supposed to tell him? “I’m afraid of what you’ll think.”

“Think of what? You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever tasted, Casey.”

“That can’t be true. My scars—”

“Are perfect. Your scars are perfect because they are *you*. Why do you think I care about them?”

“Because.” I look away. “Other people do.”

“Then fuck the other people. Why are you stopping now?”

I close my eyes. I take a deep breath. “Because you should know something about me before we have sex.”

“What’s that?”

“I’ve never done it before.” I look at him, trembling with fear. “I’m a virgin.”

He goes still. I wait for the embarrassment to wash over me. I’m trying not to cry, but it’s so pathetic. This man, this experienced and handsome man, he doesn’t want or need some loser girl that’s never gone past second base. Hell, any woman that thinks in *bases* is probably not in his league.

But he only leans forward and kisses me.

It's a surprise. I expected him to say something. Instead, the kiss is deep, passionate. He pulls me against him, drinking me in, and I feel myself softening toward him. The burn between my legs is still there, that perfect glow, the pulse for him. Slowly, he pulls back.

“Why would a woman that looks like you be a virgin?”

I try not to laugh. “Most men don't want a cripple.”

“You're not crippled.”

“I was for a while. I had to work on walking the way I do now, and by the time I started feeling like myself again... everyone had moved on. It was too late.”

“It's not too late.” He kisses me again. “This is why you've been so nervous.”

“This isn't the only reason.”

“Ah, you're simply intimidated by my charm and good looks.”

“I wouldn't go that far either.”

“Casey.” His thumb parts my lips. “You are beautiful and I want to teach you everything.”

I blink at him. “Really?”

“Really.”

“Even though I'm an inexperienced virgin?”

“Especially because of that. You think I care?”

I glance away. “I figured—”

“I don't.” He kisses me. Fingers unbutton my blouse. He removes my bra, licks my nipples. “I don't at all.” His mouth drops down again, drags me onto my back, licks my inner thigh before licking my clit. I groan, eyes squeezed shut, trying to make sense of this turn.

But there's no thinking. Not right now. Not when he takes off his boxer briefs and I'm stroking his big cock, shocked at how hard he is, how he's pulsing just like I am, like he's as excited for this as I feel. I'm dripping wet, soaking through, but all I

feel is a deep satisfaction that yes, finally, I'm going to sleep with a man—and not just any man, but my husband.

He holds me down, my legs spread, his tip against my entrance. “Relax,” he whispers as he goes slowly. “Just relax.”

“Trying my best here.” I close my eyes, take deep breaths.

He fills me. Inch by inch, he fills me. It hurts, I can't pretend like it doesn't, but as he pulls back and goes deeper and deeper, that hurt is mixed with something else.

A deep satisfaction.

A pleasure, primal and wicked.

Like getting spanked. My wires are crossed again. He fills me, and fills me, and soon he's fucking me as I soak his massive shaft. His lips find mine, my fingers dig into his back, and I'm moaning, my god, I'm moaning, because it feels so fucking good. He moves faster, pulling my hair, whispering lovely things into my ear, telling me how good I feel, but I can barely hear any of it. I'm so deep into the moment that I feel every thrust, I feel every inch of him, spreading me apart and filling me to the brim.

I grind my hips. I kiss him, buck into him as we fuck faster. “Don't stop,” I gasp, my entire body flushed, a sheen of sweat on my skin. My mind's gone, there's only my body and the floating sensation of pleasure as it rolls down my spine. He keeps moving with me, and the intensity begins to peak, begins to crest, and I feel the orgasm ride deep into my core.

He whispers in my ear. All he says is my name, again and again, as I come against him. I come hard, nearly blacking out, my mouth wide open. He doesn't last much longer—he fills me, warm and slick, and we collapse together on the bed. I'm breathing hard, a dull ache where his cock had been, and that's the end of it.

I stare at my hands. At the sheets. I'm not a virgin anymore.

“Good girl,” he says, kissing me gently. “You're okay. You're okay. Good girl.”

I realize I'm shivering. I let him wrap his arms around me and pull me against his warm chest. I snuggle in close, trying to come to grips with what just happened, trying to connect the dots between hating him earlier to sleeping with him now, to giving my virginity to him.

It's stupid. I planned on doing this with him eventually. But now that it's done—

"You're crying," he says.

"I'm sorry." I wipe my eyes. "It's not you. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry." He holds me tighter. "Is there anything I can do?"

"No, I'm just overwhelmed and emotional. Can you just stay here for a little while?"

He settles in closer. "As long as you need."

I calm down after a few minutes. I'm not sure what set me off, but I guess it's a mixture of things. The shock of losing my virginity, the strange way that had defined me for so long, and the truth of my situation—married to Adler, the wife of the Don.

And the fear that nothing is going to change.

That I'll stay locked up in this apartment forever.

I don't have long to think about it. We shower together. He's surprisingly gentle with me, attentive, tender. He asks what I need, and when I don't know, he doesn't push. Only gets me clean, dry, in comfortable clothes, and into bed again.

"This is the part where you ask me for something," he whispers in the darkness, his arms around me.

"Why? Are you feeling a little weak?"

"Something like that."

"I want to work tomorrow."

He lets out a grumble in the back of his throat. "Only in the mornings."

"At least a half day."

“Only on the blackjack tables in the high-roller room. Only where you can be protected.”

“Fine. I can handle that.”

“Then we have a deal.”

I try not to smile. “That’s all it takes then? I give you my virginity and you let me have whatever I want?”

He laughs softly, brushing my cheek. “My sweet wife, if you think it takes that much to get concessions out of me, then you don’t know me very well yet.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Chapter 25

Casey

Adler's gone early the next morning. I wake, shower, dress, and get ready to hit the tables. The night before is a blur of emotion and sensation, though it's like I can still feel him between my legs. There's a gentle, almost nice stinging ache every time I walk, reminding me of what happened.

We had sex.

I had sex for the very first time.

And it was... really good.

Simple, straightforward, and really good. Like he was easing me into it.

Like he was trying to be kind.

Adler makes no sense. One second, he's dragging me up the elevator and locking me in the apartment, and the next he's holding me, fucking me gently, cleaning me in the shower, basically treating me like he actually cares.

Except this relationship isn't supposed to be like that.

I get off the magic elevator and head toward the high-roller tables. But before I get far, a shadow disengages from the big potted plants near the main entrance, and I stop dead in my tracks.

"Hey, big sis." Shane grins at me, rubbing the back of his head. "I was hoping I'd find you."

“*Shane?*” I hiss at him, shocked that he’s standing right there in the flesh. He’s wearing a big hooded sweatshirt, the hood pulled up, and a pair of baggy jeans I got him for Christmas five years ago. His shoes are dirty, and he looks like he hasn’t slept or shaved in about a month, but it’s my brother. Alive, and grinning sheepishly.

“Can we talk for a second?”

I grab his arm and pull him away from the lobby. I take him out the front doors, away from the valet guys, and stop in the shadow of a Roman-style statue, the woman naked and pale white. “Where the hell have you been?”

“Lying low, staying with some friends that aren’t really in the business.” He leans back against the wall, takes out a cigarette, and lights up. “Been a really weird few weeks.”

“You’re safe, you know. You can thank me later for that.”

“I heard.” His eyes narrow. “Did you really do it?”

I nod once. “I made a deal to save your life.”

He wilts slightly. “I never would’ve asked you to do something like that. I mean, god, Casey, you married Adler Costa.”

“I’m aware.” I glance back toward the entrance. Adler has to know Shane’s here by now. There are about a billion cameras all over the casino floor. “Look, we don’t have long to talk. Why are you here? You’re safe, Adler’s not going to kill you, but this is pushing it.”

“I know.” He glances over his shoulder and takes a drag. “I had to come warn you though.”

“Warn me about what?” I rub my arms, feeling chilly in the early morning ocean breeze.

“Tony Vetch.”

I go very still. Tony Vetch. That name keeps coming back. That man keeps haunting me. “What is it with that guy?” I say more to myself. In all the years I’ve been working in this town, I’ve never interacted with him, not a single time. Now suddenly he’s everywhere.

“I’m not proud of this, okay? I was in a really shitty place a few months back, and one of Vetch’s guys approached me with a deal.” Another long drag. I hate the smell of the smoke. Shane always stinks of the stuff, and it always reminds me that he’s an addict, like it’s a cloud that hovers over his head.

“What sort of deal?”

“They wanted me to spy on the Sunrise.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “Seriously? Why would they think you could do that?”

He shrugs. “I guess because you work here. They said I could follow you, see what you’re doing, and maybe use that—”

“Hold on,” I say, interrupting. “Tony Vetch hired you to watch me?”

“No, it wasn’t like that. He just said I could use you at first, you know what I mean? I could just—” He stops and stares at his cigarette as if he’s just realizing for the first time what he really was hired to do. “I didn’t think it was like that.”

I lean up against the wall next to him. My knees ache, my hips burn. I feel like I might teeter over. Tony Vetch hired my own brother to spy on me, and the idiot did it without realizing.

“Why the chips?” I ask suddenly.

He flicks his cigarette away and lights another. “It was stupid. I was jonesing but had no cash, and the chips were right there, and since the Oceanview would cash them—” He rubs his face with one hand. “Stupid.”

“So it was opportunity. You weren’t sent there to steal from the Sunrise.”

“Nah, that was never part of it. Look, seriously, Casey, I’m so sorry. I just wanted to tell you what I was doing here, and let you know that there’s some serious crap happening with Vetch and Costa. You shouldn’t get involved.”

I close my eyes for a second then open them again. The sunlight burns down through thin clouds, making the exterior of the Sunrise glow. Taxis pull up, drop off passengers, take on

new people, drive off again. Even this early, the flow never stops. The beating heart of Atlantic City.

“I think it’s too late for that,” I say and look toward the door. Berthold and Gianni stand there watching me. Neither of them look happy. “You’d better go.”

Shane follows my gaze. “Who are the goons?”

“My security detail, and I suspect they’re about to throw you out.”

“Shit.” He flicks away another cigarette. “I’m sorry, Case, I really, really am. Are you okay? I mean, is Adler, like, treating you good?”

“He’s fine,” I say and soften a bit. “What would you do if I said otherwise?”

“Beat him up.” Shane gives me a lopsided grin. “Anyway. Thanks. And good luck.”

“Just keep your head down, okay? I love you, kid. Even if you’re a huge pain in my ass. Just stay out of trouble for a while.”

“You know me.” He lights another cigarette and pulls up his hood. “I’m a walking billboard for sobriety.”

He heads off. I watch him as he disappears around a corner into a crowd of tourists.

“All good?” Gianni stands a few feet away.

“I’m fine.” I stand up straight. “Gonna tell my husband?”

“Already did.”

“Asshole.”

“You think I’m gonna get fired over this shit?” Gianni snorts. “Fuck that.”

“Whatever. Come on, let’s go deal some cards.”

“You deal the cards. I’m just the muscle.” Gianni beams at me as I head into the casino. Berthold says nothing, only gives me a surly frown.

Chapter 26

Adler

Jayson arrives next. Only two years younger than me, he was my closest friend and biggest adversary when we were growing up, though our rivalry has cooled in the years since. He strides into the place fresh off the plane from London with a sunny tan and a wide, white smile.

“There’s my Don,” he says, pretending like he wants to kiss my ring.

“Fuck off,” I say, slapping him back, and he laughs before giving me a big, rough hug.

“I want to say I’ve missed you, but we promised we’d never lie to each other.”

“No, we didn’t. I’ve missed you.”

Another big laugh. “That’s the big brother I remember.”

Jayson’s my height, same eyes, same build, but with an angular face, high cheekbones, and a sharper nose. He prefers more of a surfer-meets-business-bro look with tousled hair that looks like he just woke up and hands callused from hard work. I’ve said a lot of things about my brothers, but I never once accused any of them of being lazy—especially not Jayson. He’s a woodworker, plays guitar, surfs in Portugal at least once a month, and still manages multiple casinos, hotels, and other various businesses he’s invested in over the years scattered across Europe. I don’t keep a close eye on him, not anymore. Despite everything, we trust each other.

“Where’s Erick?” I ask him, our final brother, the third oldest. “I thought you two were coming together.” He runs the Vegas resort, arguably our most profitable and important property.

“Had to make a little pit stop.” He rolls his eyes. “He’s got a little business going on.”

“Did he tell you what it is?”

“Of course not. I bet he’s playing some blackjack.”

“Wouldn’t put it past him.” Erick’s the most reserved of the four brothers, though I think he hides a dangerous, clever mind behind his silence.

“Well, where’s the girl?” Jayson leads me through the crowds toward the bar right outside our sports book. The bartender brings two drinks without having to be asked, which I appreciate. “I hear she’s working the floor.”

“Only the high rollers and only in the mornings.”

“I’m honestly shocked.” Jayson raises his whiskey, sloshing it around slightly before taking a sip. “You’ve always been the most conservative of us. I can’t imagine you ever letting your wife *work*.”

“It’s not my decision,” I mutter, not happy that he’s already going into this. “Did you talk to Con?”

“Might’ve.”

“Don’t listen to him. Whatever he said.”

“Con’s got a good eye for people, you know that.”

I hesitate, unable to help myself. “And what’s he think about Casey?”

Jayson leans up against the bar beside me, his voice pitched low. “He likes her. Thinks she’s got a good head. But he also says something’s weird between the two of you.”

I stare at my drink. Fucking Con. He’s too perceptive for his own damn good. “Everything’s fine.”

“What’s your angle here?” Jayson’s head tilts. “You don’t do anything without a reason. Why’d you get married out of

nowhere?”

“I’m guessing you wouldn’t believe me if I said I married for love.”

“No. I wouldn’t.”

“Try to believe it anyway.” I glance to the side. A woman and her husband are sitting in front of video blackjack machines, tapping away at the screen. Donating their money to the casino. The whole place is filled with scenes like that: people hoping beyond hope to beat the odds while knowing they never will.

Sometimes I wonder if that’s me.

“There you two are.” A low voice rumbles over the chatter and the music. I look over as Erick approaches, his blue eyes sparkling. He’s got a thick dirty-blond beard, hair pulled back into a small pony tail, slacks and a button-down. I don’t know where the whole Viking look comes from, since he’s supposed to be Italian, but that’s Erick. Our father gave him a Viking name and my brother has embraced the persona ever since.

We hug, Erick shoves Jayson, and the bartender returns with another drink. “Did you grill him on the girl yet?” Erick asks.

“He’s being shady,” Jayson says.

“I am not.” I sip my drink, trying not to lose my patience already. “You haven’t met her yet. You’ll like her.”

“Con does,” Erick agrees.

“Have you three been talking about me behind my back?”

“Of course,” Jayson says, looking at me like I’m an idiot. “You’re the oldest brother and the Don. We’re *constantly* talking shit.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about that.”

“Feel fine about it,” Erick says, elbowing my arm. “It means you’re worth our time.”

“He won’t tell me why he married her though,” Jayson says. “He’s pretending like it’s *love*.”

Erick snorts. “Unlikely.”

“That’s what I said. Big brother here doesn’t take a piss without having an ulterior motive.”

“I piss for blissfully simple reasons all the time.” I lift my chin up, annoyed that they’ve already dragged me to their level.

Whenever we’re together, this is what happens—we bicker, fight with each other, compete, push buttons, talk shit. It’s inevitable. We can’t help it. Except underneath everything, the four of us understand that we’re in this together, that we aren’t enemies. The world might want to destroy us, but we won’t help the bastards drag us down.

Even if sometimes it feels like that’s all my brothers want to do. Drag me down and stomp on my bones.

“You’re really going to pretend like you’re with Casey because you magically found a heart?” Erick asks, leaning in between me and Jayson.

“You can believe whatever you want.”

“That’s a problem.” Erick looks serious as he glances at Jayson.

And Jayson seems uncomfortable. “He’s right.”

“How’s that a problem? Who I marry is not your concern.”

Erick’s stare is pointed. Jayson clears his throat.

“Actually,” Jayson starts, “you’re wrong about that.”

I take a deep breath, keeping myself calm and buying a moment. “Explain.”

“You’re the head of our family,” Jayson says. Erick keeps right on giving me that annoying, pointed glare. “When you bring someone new into the family, it affects everything, from the top to the bottom. I don’t know this Casey girl, and from what I understand, *nobody* does. Not Con, not Erick, not Mom. Not even fucking Will.”

“Will knows her,” I say.

“Barely,” Erick replies and takes a big sip.

“The point is, your new wife is on the inside now.” Jayson leans closer, pitching his voice lower, even though there’s nobody around to overhear. The couple to my right is too drunk to notice much more than the digital cards six inches from their nose. “Our business is much more than fleecing tourists of their lunch money.”

“I’m aware of that.”

“Are you?” He frowns slightly, head tilted. “Because you brought a stranger into our life. If she begins to poke around, she might notice there are certain—” He hesitates.

Erick speaks up. “Illicit activities.”

“Exactly.” Jayson snaps his finger. “How sure are you that we can trust her?”

“I’m sure.” I speak through my teeth, frustrated by this entire conversation. I understand where my brothers are coming from, but they don’t know Casey like I do.

How could they? I’ve been around her for years. Watching her from afar, following her around the casino, looking into her home life, making sure nothing’s amiss. Casey has been a part of my world for a very long time now, and though it seems like this is entirely random and impulsive, it’s anything but that.

Only I can’t explain any of this to them.

Jayson won’t understand. Despite his California-infected demeanor, he’s still practical at heart. And Erick would attempt to have me usurped the moment I suggested that I’ve been secretly stalking one of my dealers.

No, they won’t understand, because my brothers are like me.

Or at least the way I used to be.

Back before my life changed. Before the fallout from my fight with Tony. Before I met Casey and understood that there’s more to life than running casinos and managing a mafia family.

Does that make this love? In some ways, yes.

In others, it's more like an obsession.

Which is equally dangerous for a man in my position.

"You might be sure, but we aren't." Erick stares at the enormous, wall-sized televisions playing Korean baseball, the only thing on at this odd hour. "That's the problem."

"Then meet her and decide for yourselves. Con likes her, you two will also."

"Maybe." Erick doesn't look sure.

"I don't want to be the one to say this, but maybe you made a mistake." Jayson takes over as Erick turns his back to the bar, looking out over the casino floor toward the slot forest. Flashing lights, confusing noise. "It's okay, don't get pissed, but maybe you rushed into this marriage. Maybe you could take a step back."

I breathe in through my nose. "Are you asking me to leave my wife?"

"I'm asking you to reconsider your decision," Jayson says, speaking carefully.

Anger rocks through my spine. I keep trying to tell myself that he's only doing what he thinks is best for the family—

But fuck him.

And fuck the family.

Casey is my *wife*. She's mine. They don't know about the deal I cut with her—for good reason.

The deal's fucking bullshit and always was.

That's why I can't tell them the reason I married her.

Because she doesn't even know.

"I want you both to hear me." I speak slowly. Cautiously. Enunciating. Because I'm worried that if I go too fast, I'll say something I'll regret later. "I am not leaving Casey. She is my wife and will remain my wife for the foreseeable future."

"Foreseeable future doesn't inspire confidence," Jayson murmurs. "We're concerned. You have to understand why."

“That’s the only reason I haven’t thrown a punch yet.”

Erick snorts. “Two against one. You’d get wrecked.”

“Never stopped me before.” I stare at him hard. “We’re not kids anymore.”

“No, we aren’t, which is why you should run this sort of fucking things past us.” Jayson rubs his face. “I didn’t want to have this conversation like this. Can we just take a step back? Think about what we said.”

“I’m not interested.” I finish my drink and slam it down on the bar. “Casey is my wife. End of discussion. If you want to meet her, you will be on your best behavior.”

Erick shakes his head. “Stubborn.”

“Fuck you.” I walk a few feet away and turn back. Jayson looks exhausted. Erick’s only looking at me, that frustrating, passive expression watching my every move. “I’m the Don of this family, which means neither of you needs to understand my motives.”

“Did you marry her for yourself? Or for the family?” Erick tilts his head ever so slightly.

“I married her for both.”

“I’m not sure I believe you.”

“And I’m not sure it matters.” I walk away from my brothers. Let them talk behind my back. I’m sure they’ll find Con and fill him in on what I said.

I’m in a dark mood. This isn’t how I wanted their visit to go, not at all. I didn’t expect them to fawn all over my new wife, but I hoped they’d at least give her a chance.

All my life, I’ve done what’s best for the Costa Family.

When Dad passed, I stepped into leadership. I sacrificed to take control, turned to violence when necessary, greased palms, debased myself. I did what was necessary to make sure everything didn’t crumble the moment Dad was out of the picture.

The family’s still going because of me.

Our casinos, our properties and golf courses, even our street operations.

It's all running because I did the hard work.

And since then, in the years after, I've consolidated my power while making sure the business remained my priority.

Even with Casey right here in the casino under my nose.

I never gave in to temptation.

Because I knew it would start problems. I knew Erick and Jayson and even Con would have issues with me marrying a random girl like Casey with no connections to the underworld.

Except for her scumbag brother.

Her brother who visited my casino this morning and spoke with my wife.

And she still hasn't said a word to me about it.

I have a million reasons to feel stressed and angry, and I don't need Jayson and Erick making shit harder.

Except that's what they do.

I find myself standing outside of the high-roller area. It's a slow day and Casey doesn't have anyone at her table. I lock eyes with her for a moment and she gives me a little wave before coming over. I fight against my frustration.

"I just heard that your brothers are here," she says, looking nervous. "Jayson and Erick, right?"

"Rumors spread fast."

"They're here to meet me, aren't they?"

I nod once. "They are."

"Well, it's dead in there, maybe—"

"No," I say, cutting her off. "Not right now."

"I just figured we should get it out of the way, like with Con. That went well, right?"

"I said no." I turn away from her. "My brothers need some time to acclimate. They're jet-lagged."

“Oh.” The confusion in her voice almost kills me, but I don’t look back. “Okay, well, let me know when, I guess.”

“Soon. You should get back to work, since that’s what you really want to do.”

“What’s your problem, Adler?”

My jaw tightens. What is my problem? I have brothers that don’t trust me and a wife that keeps things from me. First her meeting with Tony, now her run-in with her brother.

She knows I know—so why not say something?

“I have work to do.” I walk away, ignoring the voice in my head screaming at me to turn around and make things right.

This is what my brothers wanted. They think I’ll fuck things up.

Sometimes I think all I’m good at is meeting the world’s expectations of me.

Chapter 27

Casey

I have no clue what's happening with my grumpy asshole husband. He basically brushes me off when I try to talk to him about his brothers and doesn't even give me a chance to mention Shane.

But fine, whatever—he can be surly if he wants. At least I'm working.

Sort of.

“Does anyone ever come in here?” I ask the girl working the roulette table. I glance down at the sign stating the table minimum: five hundred per spin. Fucking hell.

“Sometimes,” she says, looking a little nervous. “But mostly it's quiet, especially early. The high rollers don't come out until later.”

“I guess that makes sense.” I sigh and stretch my leg. My knee's killing me already. “I'm just a little bored.”

“I can head out onto the floor and see if I can get someone in here.” She's talking quickly, like she's scared of something.

“Uh, I mean, that's not really your job.”

“I know, but—”

Then I realize. She's not talking to a fellow dealer.

She's talking to Adler's wife.

I give her a smile. “It's fine. Really. I'm just chatting, that's all.”

“Right.” She relaxes slightly. “Sure. Sounds good.”

I let the poor girl off the hook. I’m pretty sure if I keep talking then her head will explode.

And fortunately, I’m saved when Roxie comes storming into the room carrying her tray. “Since when did you work the high rollers?” she says, one hand on her hip, a nice little collection of tips already gathered near the napkins. “Wow, did someone get murdered in here?” She looks around pointedly.

I roll my eyes and head around the table, waving at the floor manager. He doesn’t even bother acknowledging me as I lead Roxie away from our little room and over toward the closest bar. My security goons lurk nearby, but they give us some space at least.

“I’m having such a crappy day,” I say, sitting down. I order a club soda. “Want something? On the house?”

Her eyebrows shoot up. “You can do that now?”

“Married the owner. Came with perks.”

She laughs. “I’m good. What’s wrong? You and Adler fighting already?”

“Something like that?” I chew on my lip, looking around as if his brothers might materialize nearby. Instead, it’s only the normal motion of tourists hurrying past. “He doesn’t want me to meet his brothers. Also, I saw Shane an hour ago.”

“Shane?” She seems surprised. “Okay, that’s a lot of info all at once. Let’s start with your troubled sibling.”

“He seems... fine? Using probably, but fine? I told him to lie low. But he said something that’s really bothering me.” I lean closer to her, tone pitching softer. “He said that he’s been working for Tony Vetch.”

“As in, Adler’s rival?”

“Right, and he was assigned to follow me around... in order to find info on Adler? I don’t know, it didn’t make sense, but you know how Shane is.”

“Drugs,” she agrees.

“It’s weird though. Like, why would Tony Vetch want Shane? A notoriously flaky addict? And why would he care about me?”

“Maybe he knew you were going to marry Adler.”

“Yeah. Maybe.” I smile at her, feeling unmoored. I’ve been obsessing about this all morning. How does Tony fit with Adler? And how do I fit with them both?

There’s something I’m missing.

Like a little hole in my head.

If I can find the piece then I can make sense of everything that’s happening—my marriage, Adler’s rivalry, everything.

Instead, it’s like each time I get close enough to work it all out, more pieces tumble from my skull.

“It could be a coincidence. Like, Shane’s always looking for ways to make cash, right? So he takes a job from people that work for Tony, but Tony himself might not have known about it.”

“That’s actually kind of reasonable.” I shift slightly on my stool. “I don’t know. It’s all such a mess.”

“Well, what about the brothers?”

“God, that’s even worse. Adler just blew me off. I said we should go meet them and he just basically told me to get back to work.”

Roxie’s lip press together. “That seems like an asshole move.”

“No kidding. I have no clue what the hell that guy wants. One second, he’s all over me, and the next he’s shoving me away.”

“What do *you* want then? If Adler can’t make up his mind, maybe you can.”

I pause, sipping my club soda. I should have an answer for that, but strangely, I don’t. “If you had asked me a few days ago, I’d tell you I’m in this for money and to save Shane’s life.”

“Now?”

“I’m in it for money and to save Shane’s life. But also... weird stuff’s happening. With Adler.”

She gives me a sly look. “Weird stuff, huh? I know you’re a little sexually repressed—”

“*Please* don’t start grilling me about sex.”

“—But come on, the man’s gorgeous and we both know you have a massive, throbbing lady boner for him.”

“I *hate* that phrase, lady boner. So ugly.”

“Sure, whatever, but his boner isn’t ugly. I bet it’s nice and long with pretty little veins.”

“Stop now, please.”

“Come on, Case. Admit you like the guy. It’s kind of fine, right?”

“I don’t know what I feel.” I look away toward the slot farm. Lights flash, money’s lost, sucked into the casino’s vortex. “Sometimes I want to be around him more than anything in the world. Sometimes I can’t stand him at all.”

“How romantic.”

“More like a huge pain in my ass.”

“What are you gonna do? About the brothers, I mean.”

“I’ll meet them eventually. He’s in a shitty mood right now, but he can’t put it off forever.”

“And then what?” Roxie’s tone gets softer as she leans in close. “You meet the mother, you meet the brothers. He gets you pregnant. You live together, sleep together, work together... then you get divorced in a few years? You get rich, everything works out? I know you, Casey Kiernan, and I know you are utterly incapable of staying *detached*. Everything about you screams *attachment*.”

“That’s not the most flattering thing in the world, you know.”

“I mean it,” she presses. “You’re falling for this guy already. And you know what? Good for freaking you. It’s about time.”

You've been using that stupid leg of yours as an excuse for a while and honestly, I was getting pretty sick of it."

I gape at her. "Hey! It's not an excuse!"

"Oh, sure." She rolls her eyes. "Woe is me. I limp. I'm so ugly."

"You're crossing a line."

"And you're drop-dead gorgeous but you're so obsessed with your injury that you can't see it. I'm happy someone's finally breaking through that wall."

I rub my knee, glaring at Roxie. She's saying something sort of nice, but also sort of really mean, and I am *not* at all sure how to react.

She's right that my injury's kept me from dating. Heck, I was a virgin up until last night because of it. But I haven't been using it as a wall or a shield—I'm not actively trying to avoid intimacy.

The injury has made my life fifty times harder.

Although maybe, if I'm honest with myself, I could look back at certain moments—dates I've gone on, men I've met, stuff like that—and maybe, if I squint a whole lot and I get drunk enough that I can admit my faults, maybe I can see how Roxie could possibly... be right.

How I've pushed the world away.

All because of what happened to me that night.

"Adler's not breaking through anything," I say at last. "It's still just a business deal."

"Sure, hon, keep on telling yourself that. Whatever you do, I'm here to say that it's *fine* if you like the guy. It's totally fine if you like being with him."

"I'm not sure it is."

"And there's the problem." She nudges me. "Anyway, I should go back to work. I'm pretty sure I can get away with anything so long as you're around, but I shouldn't push it."

“That other dealer girl in the high roller’s room practically wanted to barf when I started talking to her.”

“Perks of being the owner’s wife.”

I groan. “Life’s so unfair.”

“Says the rich girl getting free drinks. That’s an eight-dollar club soda, you do realize that, right?”

“Go back to work, asshole.”

“Later.” Roxie strides away and I watch her go.

Is it really okay if I like Adler?

I’ve been asking myself that question for the past few nights.

Not in those words, but in a million other ways.

Wondering if I should kiss him. If I should feel excited when he comes into a room. If I should want his hands on my body.

If I should need to sleep in his bed.

But Roxie’s always been good at getting straight to the point.

Is it okay if I’m into my husband?

“You’re scaring the bartenders, you know.”

I jump a little, surprised from my thoughts. Will’s standing nearby, giving me a knowing smirk.

“Sorry, what?”

“The bartenders.” He nods at the girl that served me.

“Anytime you’re around, people get all jumpy.”

“Yeah, what’s with that? I married Adler but it’s not like I changed.”

“Comes with the territory.” He leans against the bar next to me. “You really should stay in the high-rollers’ room, by the way.”

“Is that what you came over to say?”

He shrugs. “Adler told me to keep an eye on you.” He points up at the ceiling. “I’ve been keeping more than one.”

I finish up my drink. “Glad to know you’ve been spying on me.”

“I’m spying on every single inch of this place.”

“That doesn’t help.” I move to stand up, but Will holds up a hand.

“Just a second. Another thing. Your visit with your brother.”

“Did Adler send you to talk to me about it?”

“No. He didn’t.”

“Then what do you want?”

“I want to know what he said.” His face is serious. His eyes hard. I have to remember that Will runs this place—that the Sunrise is everything to him.

And a guy like Shane could be a serious problem.

“Nothing you need to know.”

“Let me decide that.”

I open my mouth to tell him off, but pause.

Will could be a solid ally, and I could use more of those. Right now, I’m isolated with only Adler on my side—and just barely.

But maybe I could score some points with his top lieutenant.

“How about I tell you everything my brother said, and you promise to do me a favor.”

“I’m not really in the mood to make a deal.”

“Come on. We can work together on this.”

His jaw tics, clearly not happy. “What do you want?”

“I want you to find Shane. That’s all. Find my brother and make sure he’s safe.”

Will doesn’t speak for a few seconds. “That will take time and manpower.”

“I’m the boss’s wife, remember?”

A small smile cracks the tension. “I guess that’s true.”

“Come on. Say you’ll do it and I’ll tell you everything he said.”

“All right, Mrs. Costa. You have a deal.”

I grin at him, delighted. “Great. Never call me that again. Let’s shake on it.” I thrust a hand out.

He takes it firmly. “Now spill it.”

Chapter 28

Casey

I'm left alone for most of the morning. Will wasn't too impressed by my conversation with Shane—though he was curious why my brother was working for Tony Vetch. I assume he'll hold up his end of the bargain, but I have no real power if he doesn't.

That's me right now. No real power. Especially not when I'm back in the apartment after the slow morning shift behind locked doors once again.

Fortunately, I have a lot to think about.

Like Adler's brothers and Adler's reaction when I wanted to meet them. Like Shane, and Tony Vetch.

But most of all, what Roxie said.

It's okay to like him.

I'm not sure she understands what that really means. Adler Costa's the head of a crime family—he hides it well, but there are bodies buried under the floor of the Sunrise, and more getting shoved down there every day.

His family is into more than just casinos, hotels, and resorts.

They have a dark side.

He keeps it from me, but I can feel it all around. There are hints of it when I scratch hard enough and squint. Adler wants to save me from it—or he wants to hide it—but either way, if I let myself get involved with Adler, seriously involved with him, then I'll start tumbling deeper into their darkness.

I don't know what I'll find once I start or how far I'll drop.

That should be enough to deter me. Adler's business should scare the crap out of me. Yes, my parents are assholes and borderline abusive, and yes, my life's been hard, but I'm not a criminal. I don't break the law. I don't take risks.

Adler's dangerous.

Though not dangerous enough to stop me from pouring him a glass of wine when he comes into the apartment.

It's earlier than usual, only a little after eight. Like always, he seems tired, though he accepts the drink without a word and drains it down. I fill the glass again.

"We should talk," I say.

His face suggests he does not agree. "Go ahead. Talk."

"You practically bit my head off earlier when I mentioned your brothers. Something going on?"

"My brothers are difficult." He moves away from me, wine gripped in one hand.

I take my glass and follow, but give him some space. "In what way? You and Con seemed to get along."

"Con's easy," he says, shaking his head. "He's the youngest. He got the least attention from Dad back when we were kids."

"And that's a good thing?"

"If coming out of our childhood mildly well-adjusted is a good thing, then yes, it was very good."

"Huh, okay." I'm not surprised by that, but it does put some things into perspective. "You have a complicated relationship with your family."

"I'm aware." He rubs the bridge of his nose.

"I want to meet your brothers. That's why they're here, isn't it? Your mother warned me about this."

"You will."

"Tomorrow morning."

“No. You will meet them when I say you’re ready.”

“Adler—”

“Casey,” he says, turning around to glare at me. “For once, will you trust that I have your best interests in mind?”

“It’s strange how you keep saying that, and yet you keep doing the opposite of what I want.”

“Maybe you’re particularly good at making bad decisions.”

“Don’t be an asshole,” I say, glaring at him hard. “You think you’re such a saint?”

“I’m aware of my deficiencies,” he growls but seems to realize he’s getting too worked up and stops himself.

I take some deep breaths, trying to calm down too. “We’re married. For better or worse, we’re married, and we have to figure out a way to make this thing work, right? I have to get pregnant, and you need a baby, and we have to get your stupid inheritance. We’ve barely begun this and it’s like you’re already trying to push me away. That’s not going to help.”

He shakes his head. “That isn’t my intent.”

“I don’t care what you intend, I’m telling you how it feels. Why are you hiding me from your brothers?”

“Because they don’t approve of you.”

My eyebrows raise. For a second, I’m stunned into silence. But why am I surprised? It’s so simple and obvious.

Of course they don’t approve of me.

“Why?” I ask.

“You’re a stranger to them. They’re worried you’ll get deep into the family and cause trouble.”

“Huh.” I raise my glass to my lips. “Could I do that?”

He gives me a look. “That’s not funny.”

“I don’t know, it might be funny.”

“Go ahead. Make that joke to my brothers. See how far you get.”

“You realize everyone in the casino’s on eggshells when I’m around. Could I start making demands? Change the decorations? Order new rugs?”

“Casey.”

“What kind of trouble do your brothers think I can cause? Seriously?”

“It isn’t the Sunrise they’re worried about. It’s the other business. The one we don’t talk about.”

I chew on my lip. “Right. That stuff. I guess they’d want to keep me far from the illegal bits.”

“I understand where they’re coming from. We don’t bring strangers into the family and the business for a reason. Everyone that works for me outside of the official properties is known and trusted. You’re neither of those things. At least to my brothers.”

“But I am to you?”

He doesn’t speak for a long while. I’m not sure how I feel about this conversation—on the one hand, I understand where his brothers are coming from, but on the other, I want them to accept me.

Which is bizarre. I have no real plans to stay in this family long-term, so why does it matter to me if Adler’s brothers think I’m out to get them?

I’m here to get paid and save Shane. That’s everything. I need to keep reminding myself that it’s nothing more than business, because I’m starting to get dragged deeper into Adler’s tightly woven web.

I start to feel anxious, but finally, at nearly a whisper, Adler says, “Yes, Casey. To me, you’re known and trusted.”

Which surprises the hell out of me.

“Why?” A simple question. An obvious one too. Adler doesn’t seem like the kind of guy to trust anyone, much less someone like me.

Basically, a stranger.

With a junkie asshole brother.

His stare tells me nothing. “You know why.”

I shiver slightly. “You’ve been watching me.” The tables. He was always lurking around the tables back before this all happened. “But that was just at work.”

His head tilts to the side. “You think so?”

“I don’t—” What’s he saying right now? That he’s been watching me *outside* of work?

I go very still, a sudden sense of dread creeping down my spine.

It’s one thing to accept that Adler Costa’s been coming by my tables while we were both in the casino. Maybe he’s curious about me, or maybe he finds me attractive for some reason. It’s not like he was going out of his way.

But it’s another issue entirely to imagine he’s been trying to find me outside of this place.

“I married *you* for a reason.” His voice is firm. “Not someone else, but you.”

“You had leverage on me,” I say, feeling suddenly exhausted. My knee aches like crazy. I limp to a high chair near the kitchen island and climb onto it.

“Yes, conveniently, I did. But that’s not really why.”

“You need a wife. A baby. The deal.” I shake my head. Confusion and fear trickle into my toes. “Are you trying to tell me that you’ve been, what, following me around?”

“In a way.”

“How? Why? Adler, this is freaking me out.”

He comes closer. Finishes his second glass of wine. Puts it down on a side table. “I didn’t want to tell you like this, but maybe it’s better if you know.”

“Know *what*?”

Something passes across his face. For a moment, I’m not sure what that expression means, until it hits me like a slap.

It's relief.

He looks like he's about to shed a weight that's been holding him down for years.

"I've been helping you for a very long time, Casey."

I stare at him, trying to process, but it makes no sense. "Helping me how? I mean, I know the Sunrise has been really accommodating about my disability, but—"

"Do you remember when you left the hospital after your accident?" He's staring at me hard now. "Do you remember what happened with your bill?"

I could scream. I reach for my glass of wine, but it's empty. "I got a grant," I whispers. "That's what the billing department told me. There was a grant."

"That's true," he says, cocking his head. "At least, that's what I told them to say. I paid your medical bills. Every dime of them. And I hid it by saying it was a grant to the hospital."

"That doesn't make any sense. That was—it was way before I worked at the Sunrise."

"Do you remember how you got the job here?"

I rub my forehead. My skull's pounding. "Someone called me."

"A recruiter named Mary," he supplies.

I nearly gag. "That's right. Her name was Mary."

"With a nice Southern accent. That was my old assistant. Real name Fiona. I fired her after you started to make sure you never put it together."

"This is insane," I say, shaking my head rapidly. It feels like the base of my skull's on fire.

"There are other things. The bonuses you were paid. The big tips that always seemed to appear every few weeks. Did you know your mother has a regular she loves?"

Tears stream down my face. "She calls him Mr. Grey."

“I bet she does.” His smile is tight. “He works for me. I send him to your mother’s diner when she’s working and I make sure he leaves a big tip.”

“That money’s been paying for her heart medication.”

“I told you, Casey, I’ve been taking care of you for years. You and everyone in your social circle, everyone you care about. Even your friend, Roxie. Another beneficiary of random huge tips.”

“Stop it.” I shove back and try to get to my feet, but the pain in my legs flares. It’s so intense, I nearly fall and have to grab onto the island for support.

He’s there. Faster than I expected, supporting me with his strong arms. I shove him but he doesn’t move, only steers me to the couch. Before he can sit me down, I struggle back, stumble, bump into a chair, and flail before he can grab at me again.

“Casey,” he says. “Let me help you. It’s not a burden. *You’re* not a burden. I’ve been taking care of you for so long now that it’s like second nature to me.”

“I can’t process this,” I say, rubbing at my eyes, trying to focus. Everything’s blurry. “This doesn’t make sense. We didn’t know each other before I started working at the Sunrise. Why would you care about me? I’m a nobody, just some random table dealer.”

“When you stand in a museum and you stare at a beautiful work of art, do you question why you enjoy looking at it? Or do you simply keep on staring?”

“I’m not a painting,” I snap at him, backing down the hall. He follows but keeps his distance. “I’m a person. I swear, you keep forgetting that. *Why*, Adler? Why me? Why did you help me back then? How do we know each other?”

Something hits me. A fragment of a memory. It’s dark, shaky, unclear, and it makes my skull pound with a sudden intense agony so sharp I have to lean up against the wall to keep from collapsing.

In the memory, I'm lying on my back. I'm staring at the sky. Everything hurts. It hurts so badly. And I hear his voice. Whispering to me in the darkness. *Hold my hand. Hold it tighter. I swear I won't let you go. Just keep holding tight.* I feel the pressure of him squeezing, but like it's happening to someone else. Sirens blare in the distance, coming closer. He keeps saying it, over and over.

Adler's standing over me. I'm curled up on the floor, head in my hands. He crouches down, back in the present, and touches my shoulders. His voice is low, gentle, soothing, and horrifying. "Hold my hand," he says. "Hold it tighter. I swear I won't let you go. Just keeping holding tight."

I nearly throw up. A scream sticks in my throat. I slowly raise my chin to stare into his eyes.

Nobody knows those words.

I've never told anyone. Never, not a single person in all the years since the accident.

What he said to me is mine alone. The man that saved my life—the angel that kept me from dying that night—I saved those words, made them precious, turned them into a sort of prayer.

"Hold my hands," Adler whispers, here and now. He's not smiling. "Hold it tighter. I swear I won't let you go. Just keep holding tight."

"No." I scramble away from him. Everything hurts. My knees, my hips. He watches me go. "No, no, no, this can't be happening. This can't be happening."

"I should have told you sooner."

"Adler, how do you know that? How do you know what he said to me?"

"Think, Casey."

"Why did you pay my hospital bills? How did we know each other?"

"Just keep holding tight. Isn't that what I said to you? Right up until the paramedics arrived."

My mouth falls open and the agony in my skull reaches a fever pitch.

Chapter 29

Casey

The lights are too bright so he turns them off. He puts me down in the bed, gets me under the sheets, and pulls them up to my chin. I watch him undress in the darkness, only his silhouette as my eyes adjust. Then he gets in behind me and pulls me against him, his big, strong arms wrapped around my body.

My headache's still pounding, but it's dulled now. The reality of my situation's slowly unfolding like a creeping vine reaching for a new victim.

It was Adler.

All this time, my guardian angel was right here in the Sunrise.

Watching me from a distance. Making sure I was safe, making sure I was taken care of.

Those tips kept me going. My mother's extra income saved her life. If he hadn't paid my hospital bills, I'd still be in debt.

It's been him this whole time.

"I don't understand why you never told me." I can't turn to look at him right now. Instead, I touch his arm, the one wrapped around my middle. He reacts by pulling me tighter against him.

"You weren't ready. You're still not, but the longer I wait, the worse it gets."

"You should've said something." I close my eyes, willing myself to keep breathing. "I wanted... I wanted to meet you so many times. I even asked the hospital."

“I know. I told them not to say anything. I bribed the EMTs, the doctors, anyone that knew I had anything to do with your accident.”

“Why?” I ask, and it’s like that one word defines my relationship with this man.

He lets out a pained, heavy sigh. “A lot was happening in my life back then. My relationship with Tony was dissolving. I was consolidating my power and making sure I had absolute control over the family. I knew that if I let myself get involved with you, I’d either end up hurting you, or I’d end up fucking something else up. I couldn’t risk it either way.”

“So you stalked me instead?”

“I wouldn’t call it stalking.”

“What would you call it then?”

“I saw myself as your benefactor.”

I try not to laugh. “Like from a Dickenson novel or whatever?”

“Exactly like that. I was helping you from a distance. A silent partner in your life.”

“It would’ve been nice knowing I had you on my side. Do you have any clue how much I’ve stressed about money over the years?”

“I’m sorry,” he says and sounds like he means it. “I debated telling you a thousand times, but decided that you were better off not knowing.”

I twist, turning to face him. His cheek is covered in stubble when I brush the backs of my fingers along his face.

Emotions swirl through me. Fear of this powerful man watching me for the last seven years. Confusion over why he didn’t tell me sooner. But also, something else—

A strange excitement in my core.

And gratitude.

“Thank you,” I say.

He seems surprised. “Why?”

“For saving my life. Thank you. I’ve been wanting to say that to you for a long time. Well, not you, but the person who saved me, and I guess that *is* you and—” I curse, shaking my head. “This is confusing.”

“I don’t want gratitude.” His face twists as he says it. “Please, that’s the last thing I want.”

“But you deserve it, don’t you? I’d be dead if you hadn’t found me.” A million questions storm through my mind. There’s so much I want to know. That night’s a total blur to me still—all I remember is leaving work, going out for a run, then lying on the ground on my back, listening to my savior whisper in my ear—no, listening to *Adler*.

“I only did what was right.”

“But *how* did you find me? And what happened? I still don’t know, and I’ve been wondering for so long, and you can tell me, can’t you?”

“Casey—”

“Like what was I doing? I remember going for a run, and I think I must’ve been crossing the road, and it was really dark out, but how did that car hit me? The doctors said I might remember one day, but I still haven’t and I doubt I ever will. But you know, don’t you?”

“Casey.”

I stare at him, blinking back tears. “All this time, I’ve been trying to find you.”

He pulls me against him, hugging tight. I sink into his embrace, fighting back the tears, but I can’t stop them from flowing again.

But this time, I’m not crying from fear. I’m not crying from sadness.

I’m crying because he’s here. He’s really here.

The voice in my head.

Adler’s voice.

When I'm scared, when I can't sleep, that's the voice I hear saying those words, comforting me in my darkest hour. When I hate people, when I'm sure everyone's the absolute worst, I remember that voice. I remember what he did for me.

That voice keeps me going.

And it's him, it's Adler.

My husband.

I pull back to study his face. He looks profoundly sad, though I don't know why. All of a sudden, the last few nights rush into me, all the desire, all the pain and the pleasure. "I gave my virginity to you."

He grimaces. "I know. I should have said something sooner. It's just—"

"No," I say and kiss him gently. "No, I'm so happy it was you. I'm happy you're him. I'm just—I can't believe it's you."

I kiss him again, and again, and soon the kiss turns into something more. I push him onto his back, take off my shirt, and his hands are on my body, exploring, teasing. He sits up, kisses my neck, licks my nipples. My back arches, and I need this, I need it more than I've ever needed in my life.

It's *him*, the voice, my angel, my savior.

My Adler, my husband, it's *him*. He saved my life, not once, but over and over again. I don't know why, maybe he felt some sort of responsibility for me after that night, or maybe he saw something in me, it doesn't matter.

I have him now.

We undress together. I explore his body, kissing him, lavishing him with my attention. He's so hard it makes me dizzy as I shimmy my way down to take him into my mouth. His groans drive me wild as I lick him, sucking him slowly, not really sure what I'm doing but not really caring, but it's *him*, and he feels good, and that's all I need.

"Casey," he moans in *the* voice. "Fuck, you feel so good. This is fucked, and here you are, still sucking my cock."

I go deeper, wanting to take every inch of him. Needing every inch of him. Spit rolls down his shaft and I stroke him as I suck him, not carrying about anything but that moan. I want him to feel good, to feel some small measure of the pleasure he's given me over the years.

"Casey." His fingers tangle into my hair as he pulls me up. I gasp, stroking him, desperate to make him feel good. "Come here. Kiss me."

I move up, straddling him again. My pussy's so wet, I'm so slick as his shaft presses against my slit. I grind down his length, kissing him deep, tasting his tongue, a glow in my core.

"I need you in me," I whisper, arching my back, reaching down to adjust his tip. "Adler, I want this."

"God damn," he whispers. "I've been dreaming about fucking you for so long. I've been holding myself back. And now you're saying these things, but I don't think you know what they mean."

"All I know is I want you inside of me, right freaking now." I feel him enter with a rush of pain and pleasure. I'm still sore from the first time, but as I move down his thick length, he fits me like I was made to take him.

I whimper as I move up and down. Adler lets me go slow. He praises me as I do it, he tells me how tight I am, how good I feel, how wet my pussy is and how much he loves it. He licks my nipples, sucks them hard, palms my breasts, pulls my hair. I move faster, riding him, my hands against his muscular chest, down his stacked abs. Every bit of him turns me on, every inch of his skin drives me wild, and it's like bliss nails itself deep into my skull as I go faster.

"Adler, fuck me," I moan, losing all sense of time and space, so sunk deep into this moment.

"I need you," he says as we grind faster. "I need this, Casey, my wife, my lovely fucking wife. You feel so good I could stay here for the rest of my life, buried between your legs, feasting on you. Keep going."

I do as he says, working my back, my hips, faster and faster. I feel it building, the climax, and the more he talks to me the more I can hear *the voice*, the more the voice in my head begins to match the voice that leaves his perfect lips. I stare at his throat, at his Adam's apple as he speaks, and every sound sends a shiver down my spine.

This is him, the man that saved my life. I grind myself harder, gasping for air, whimpering like I'm losing my mind. He grips my ass and slaps it hard, and I can't take it anymore, I can't handle it. He leans forward, mouth near my ear. "Come for me," he says. "Just keep going. Don't stop. I swear I won't stop."

"*Fuck*," I gasp as the orgasm hits me. That voice knocks me over the edge. I can't stand it anymore—I come like a train wreck, shivering, back arching.

When I'm finished, he kisses me gently. I pull back from him, sliding off. He adjusts himself, but I push him back down—and take his cock in my mouth.

"Casey," he says as I lick myself from his shaft.

I suck him hard and fast. I want to taste him, need to taste him. His fingers grip my hair and he thrusts once, twice into my mouth, before releasing on my tongue. I grunt with surprise, but it's him, it's him, and I swallow every drop, every greedy little drop.

I collapse onto his chest, breathing hard. He kisses me, staring into my eyes.

"This isn't how I expected you to react," he admits.

I kiss his chest above his racing heart. "This isn't what I expected either. Are you complaining?"

"Not even a little bit."

"Good." I grin and kiss him again. "You seemed to enjoy that."

"More than you know."

I lean my cheek against him and close my eyes. I could stay here for a long time—drifting with him, with the man that

saved my life.

There are warning signs. I'm not blind to this bizarre situation. I know he should have told me sooner, he should have done a dozen things differently.

But none of it matters. Not now, not with his arms wrapped around my body, the sweat cooling on our skin.

Chapter 30

Casey

I make myself a very fancy coffee as morning sunlight steams in through the windows. I have to admit, the apartment is beautiful during sunrise—maybe that’s why they named this place after it.

Adler comes in as I finish. “Want an espresso?” I offer.

But he shakes his head and sets up the drip machine. “I’m a simple man.”

“I doubt that very much.” I drift to the island and sit on the high chairs. “God, I feel like I slept for hours.”

“You passed out.”

“Can you blame me? I had a long day.”

He smiles slightly. “And a hard night.”

I roll my eyes. “Just because you saved my life does *not* give you the right to make bad jokes.”

“My jokes are inherently good.”

“If that were true, I’d be laughing.” I give him a deadpan.

“Maybe you have a bad sense of humor.”

“That is just about the most insulting thing you can say to me. I’d rather be dead than not funny.”

Which makes him laugh.

He joins me once his coffee is done. We drink in a companionable silence as he scrolls news on his phone and I

browse Instagram. After a few minutes though, I feel like I need to chip away at some of the tension between us.

“I talked to Will about Shane.”

He looks over, eyebrows raised. “Did you?”

“I asked Will to find him.”

“And what did he say?”

“He said he’d help me.”

“Interesting.” His lips push together. “Will didn’t mention this to me.”

“That’s why I’m telling you. I just—I don’t want more secrets between us.”

His face relaxes as he looks down at his coffee. “And what will you do if you find your brother?”

“I don’t know,” I admit. “I just want to keep an eye on him. Make sure he’s safe.”

“You should have come to me then.”

“Do you really blame me for going around you?”

He grunts, not looking happy. “In the future, please don’t assume I’m a complete piece of shit.”

I lean toward him with a sly smile. “Then don’t act like one.”

“You really do think you’re funny.”

“Absolutely hilarious.”

He grins, shaking his head despite himself. “I’ll tell Will he has my blessing.”

“Does that mean the full might of the Costa family is behind this search?”

“Not even close.”

“How about a little bit of the might?”

“You can have a very small fraction.”

“That works for me, so long as Shane’s safe.”

Adler grunts, finishes his coffee, and stands. “I’ve never been tasked with saving someone that stole from me before. I’m not even sure who I’m protecting him *from*.”

“Tony Vetch,” I say like it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

Adler’s expression darkens. “Yes. Him.”

“Right.” I cock my head. I hadn’t thought about Tony in a little while, but now something’s bothering me. Something about what he said when we ran into each other on the beach.

Something about *remembering* him.

Like we’d met before.

My only connection to Tony is through Adler—and until last night, I assumed that connection only started when Adler and I got married.

Except I was wrong.

My connection to Adler began much sooner than that.

Years ago, back during my accident and beyond.

What did Adler say? His relationship with Tony was ending right around that time?

And I’m supposedly one of Tony’s loose ends.

What if I’m not a loose end because of this marriage—but because of something else? Something that happened back then.

My head starts to hurt again. I turn to ask Adler if I ever met Tony back during the accident days, but he’s already gone, heading back to the bedroom to get ready for work.

I stew over my espresso but decide to let it go.

We ride down to the floor together. His hand finds mine in the elevator and I shuffle closer, leaning against his shoulder. There are a thousand reasons to put some space between us, but I can’t help myself. The dull ache between my legs, the sound of his voice, knowing that he’s been looking out for me for years now—it makes me want to get closer to him.

To finally drop the walls.

Because he knows. He was there when it happened. Adler understands what happened to me in a way nobody else ever will, and that's intoxicating.

Roxie's right. I've put up walls. I've pushed people away because of my injuries.

I don't need to do that with Adler.

"Be careful," he says as we step into the lobby together.

"I won't stray from the high-roller room."

"Good girl." He gives my hand a squeeze then walks away.

I watch him go, feeling a confused mixture of fear and a dull, throbbing need.

There's more to his story. I know he didn't tell me everything.

I'm pretty sure I'm ignoring every single red flag and warning sign imaginable.

But right now, this warmth in my belly, I want to hold onto this feeling at least for a little while.

The morning's slow. I get one guest, but he only sits for a little while, tips the waitress a dollar, and leaves after losing a few hundred dollars. After that, I hang around, ignoring the looks and the whispers. It's strange how quickly I got used to it.

My day seems pretty dull, at least until Con walks into the room followed by two men. The first looks like a giant Viking, though he has the Costa look about him, those narrow cheekbones and straight nose. The other is without a doubt one of Adler's brothers considering he looks so much like his mother.

"Good morning, sister-in-law," Con says, flopping down at the table. My floor manager gives him a look, but Con ignores it. "How are we on this lovely day?"

"I'm doing good." I glance at the other men. The Viking lingers for a moment before sitting at my table. The third man stays standing, arms crossed. "Are you gentlemen playing?"

“Sure,” Con says and tosses a few hundred dollars down on the table. “Give that to me in fifties, please.”

“Same,” the other man says, tossing down an equally fat stack.

The third remains standing. “Seems silly to play at my own casino.”

“Cheaper this way,” Con says. “Even when we lose, we’re at least winning a little bit.”

I count the money, dole out their chips, and ignore how awkward this feels as I deal the cards. Con doesn’t even look at them. “This is Erick,” he says, gesturing at the Viking. “My other brother. And the surly one’s Jayson.”

“I’m not surly. Just seems like a bad idea, gambling in your own casino, that’s all.”

I flip over my card and they both lose. Both shove more chips out. “My brothers here wanted to meet you,” Con says. “Except your husband’s trying to keep you far away from us.”

“Don’t know why,” Jayson says. “We’re a delight.”

“No, you’re not,” Erick grunts.

“What my very joyous brother here means is Adler thinks we’re going to ruin things for him somehow.” Con arches his eyebrows at me. “I think that’s not possible, but who knows.”

“Uh,” I say, feeling lost, and deal the cards. Con gets a thirteen. Erick gets blackjack. “Well, it’s good to meet you both. Your mother talked a lot about you.” Which is a total lie, I only spoke with her that one time, but still.

“Doubt that,” Jayson says. “Mom’s never had a nice thing to say about us.”

“She said Mom talked, not that she said good things,” Con points out, nudging Erick. “You’re her favorite. Think Mom told Casey here to run away screaming?”

“Probably,” Erick grunts. Not much of a talker, I guess.

Jayson leans forward over Con, ignoring his protest. “We’re not here to talk about our mother,” he says, staring into my eyes. My hands hover over the deck, about to deal more cards.

I feel frozen by that stare like there's something serious he's trying to communicate without speaking. A long moment passes where nobody speaks, including Con, which is a big surprise.

But at length, I manage to ask, "Then what did you want to talk to me about?"

"Adler," Erick grunts.

"These two are here to *warn* you," Con says, rolling his eyes. "Seriously, I told them already, you know Adler's an absolute psychopath and you don't seem to care. I don't get what they possibly think is going to change."

Jayson nudges Con. "Stop it. Let me talk."

And Con just shrugs, gestures for another card, which makes him bust. He doesn't seem to mind when I win again and sweep the chips away. Both him and Erick both make another bet.

"I'm aware that Adler's... imperfect." I glance between Erick and Jayson. "I know you two might have some... questions about my motives. He mentioned that to me last night. And I just wanted to say that I have no interest in your, uh, organization. I love the Sunrise, I love dealing cards, I love being out here feeling useful for a little while, and that's pretty much it. There's nothing else happening."

Jayson tilts his head like he's considering that as I deal another hand. Erick gets blackjack again. Con gets a sixteen, which he immediately gestures for another card.

"Here's the thing about that," Jayson says once Con busts and loses again. "It's not that we're worried for our other business. Or to be more specific, that's not the main concern. I'm sure you have the broad strokes of what our family is and what it does, and that's fine. Adler's smart enough to keep you away from the things you shouldn't know about. What concerns me is Adler."

I pause, not sure how to react. "What do you mean?"

"Our brother is not what he seems," Erick says, the most he's spoken since sitting down.

My hands are shaking as I deal the cards. Erick gets blackjack again. Con gets a six. “He told me a little about it last night.” My voice is soft. I feel like I’m disassociating—like my mind’s floating on the ceiling while my hands do the work of dealing. Con manages to win a hand.

“What did he say?” Jayson asks.

I give him the rough outline: my accident, Adler’s involvement, the subsequent oversight. “He’s been helping me for years.”

“Sounds that way,” Erick says, glaring down at the cards.

“But *why* is he helping you?” Jayson asks. “Yes, I understand, he was there during your accident and maybe that created some sort of bond between you two, but a lot was happening in those days. I’ve always wondered why he gave a damn about some random girl he found bleeding in the street.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “You knew?”

“We all knew,” Con mutters. “He wouldn’t shut the fuck up about it at first.”

“He talked about you a lot,” Erick confirms.

“Constantly,” Jayson says. “Obsessively. Until he realized we were starting to worry about him and he stopped. But until then, I swear he mentioned you nearly every day, something about what you were doing, how your recovery was going, little things he shouldn’t have possibly known unless he was directly in your life. Do you know what I’m saying?”

I stare at my hands. At the way they move, dealing the cards. Another blackjack for Erick. Con curses when he gets a sixteen.

“He was following me,” I say quietly, glancing over to where my floor manager’s struggling to pretend like three of the most important people in this company aren’t sitting at my table. Well, two of them are sitting, one’s still standing and glaring. “I already told you, I know about that.”

“It’s more than he said.” Jayson’s tone is firm, but not hurtful. “He was *obsessed*, but he refused to ever cross the line and

speak to you. I'll admit, it worried the hell out of me, the way he couldn't seem to get you out of this head, and I was relieved when he stopped mentioning it. Now you're back, and I'm worried for him. I'm also worried about you. I'm worried you're not as safe as you think you are."

I stop dealing. I can't handle this. "Are you warning me right now?"

"I'm telling you that Adler is not what he seems," Jayson confirms. "I don't know how much he's telling you or how he's acting when you're around, but my brother's moods run deep and dark. His obsessions are impossible to break, and I'm afraid you've been his darkest secret for a very long time."

"But he said... he's doing this to keep me safe." My head starts to hurt. I rub my temples, not even bothering to pretend like we're playing anymore.

"Keep you safe from what?" Con asks, now sounding concerned.

"I'm not sure. I mean, Tony Vetch, I think. But I don't know why."

Erick and Con look at each other. "Sounds odd," Erick says.

"Tony's not the issue here," Jayson says, rapping his knuckles on the table. "Adler's the issue. You're the issue. Look, we don't know you, and that's fine. Only I remember the way he was over you, and I'm concerned that you don't know what you got yourself involved with."

"You need to be careful," Erick says.

I shake my head, trying to imagine how bad it must've been to make these men come to my table like this to warn me about their own brother. "Do you think I should be afraid?" I ask Con, staring at him like he's my only hope.

His face is grim. "I think my brothers wouldn't fly all the way out to Atlantic City just to speak with you if their concerns weren't legitimate." Which isn't the same thing as agreeing, but might as well be.

I rub my face with both palms. "I need to talk to him."

“Be careful,” Jayson says. “I’d avoid telling him we spoke with you. Not because I give a damn if he’s angry with us, but because I’d be afraid he might take it the wrong way.”

“You think he’d hurt me?”

“My brother is capable of a lot of things.” Jayson moves away from the table. “There, I said what I came to say. You seem like a nice girl, Casey, a nice girl that got involved with something way over her head. You should think carefully about what you do next.”

“Think hard,” Erick says, pushing back from the table. He swoops his chips up and shoves them into his pockets before turning away. Jayson and Erick walk out of the high-rollers room together, leaving Con alone at the table. He fiddles with his chips, stacking and unstacking them.

“They just made Adler sound like a serial killer,” I say, trying to keep the tremble from my voice.

“Does that surprise you?” he asks, glancing up. His fingers pause. “You know our business.”

“But—” I stop myself. The suits, the work. They all seems like businessmen, but they aren’t.

Not really.

These are violent men. Mafia men. Adler’s alluded to that a few times, how they came up in the casino, running around and getting into fights.

They earned their positions through violent means.

“Jayson and Erick might be exaggerating,” he says though he doesn’t look like he means it. “They have their own reasons for having this conversation with you. I’m not sure I totally agree with them, but I also think it’s smart to be wary. Adler can be difficult.”

“He cares about me.” But that sounds hollow, even to me. “At least, I don’t think he’d hurt me.”

“Probably not.” Con shoves the chips at me. “Color out?” I consolidate his money without thinking and return the same

amount in the fewest number of chips possible. He pushes a fifty-dollar tip across the felt. “Not that you need it.”

“Wait,” I say as he stands. “What am I supposed to do now?”

Con doesn't look at me. “If I were you, I'd think very carefully about your relationship with Adler. I'd think about everything he told you, and I'd ask him questions. I'd pay attention to the answers. I'd keep asking until he tells you everything you need to know. Then I'd get the hell out of town.”

I stare at Con's back as he walks off, my body ringing as if struck by a tuning fork.

Chapter 31

Casey

I can't stop thinking about my conversation with Adler's brothers.

For the rest of the morning, I obsess over everything they said. Jayson's facial expressions, Erick's silent weight, Con's slouchy attitude. The three men all seemed worried about me in different ways, and all because of Adler.

But it doesn't make any sense. I feel *safe* when Adler's around, not like he's some psycho killer.

Yes, he's been stalking me, maybe a little closer than I realized, but he's been helping me too.

Without his patronage, I don't know where I'd be right now.

My parents might not have a house. I might not have a job.

Because of him, I can take care of my family. He's done nothing but accommodate my needs, and I should be grateful.

Except Jayson's warning still echoes through my mind.

And slowly, the holes in Adler's story become clear.

I'm shaking when I get off work. I head up into the apartment, pour myself a glass of wine, sit out on the balcony, and think. I go over what he told me, again and again, trying to fit all the pieces together.

But there are gaps.

Huge gaps, ones I've been purposefully not thinking about too hard.

Like, why did Tony Vetch act like we'd met before? Why would Tony Vetch care about me at all?

How did Adler find me the night of the accident? Looking back, he never said.

And what even *happened*? Again, he didn't tell me exactly how I was hit, only that he found me and tried to help me.

There are too many things that don't make sense and the more I try to square them, the more they stand out.

I have another glass. And a third. I'm feeling light-headed and tipsy when Adler finally comes back to the apartment that night. He breezes in and pours himself a glass as I linger near the couch, trying to find a way to broach the subject without coming at him too hard, but there's no easy way to do this.

"What were you doing the night of my accident?"

I blurt it out. I just say it, straight up like that, out of nowhere. He stops what he's doing, mid-pour, and stares at me with surprise. Slowly, he lowers the wine bottle. "Why are you asking that?"

"I've been thinking," I say and for a second I think I'll chicken out. I'm afraid of him, especially after Jayson's warning. If Adler's own brothers are nervous for me, maybe I should start being nervous for myself. "You never told me. Actually, you didn't tell me a lot of stuff."

"It's not important." He sips his wine. His face shows nothing.

Infuriating. "It's important to me. What were you doing?"

"You don't want to get into this. You've had a long day."

"No," I say sharply. "What happened that night? You must've seen it."

"You were out running. The driver didn't see you when you crossed the street. It's that simple."

"But how fast was the car going? Was I in a crosswalk or in the middle of the street? Was I wearing all black, is that why they didn't see me?"

Adler takes a long sip. "It's not important."

“Tell me.” Panic rises in my throat. “Why aren’t you telling me?”

“Casey—”

“I need to know. Ever since it happened I’ve had these gaps in my memory. The doctors said I got a bad concussion and lost a lot of time, and it’s been killing me, Adler. All that lost time. I need to know how it happened, what I did wrong, what I can do to fix it, if there’s anything I could’ve done differently.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“That’s not enough. I need to know everything. Please, Adler, you’re the only person in the world that knows. I’m begging you now, please. Tell me what happened.”

He takes a slow breath and finishes his glass of wine. “I dreaded this,” he says. “When I told you last night, I knew we’d have this conversation, but I hoped I’d have more time. I hoped—well, I don’t know what I was thinking. It’s stupid now. Thinking maybe I could convince you that I’m not such a bad person after all, despite the evidence.”

“What did you do?” I ask, feeling like I might choke.

“We were arguing.” Adler stares at me, his expression blank. My body goes cold, my toes numb, my fingers tingling. “Another argument. It feels like that’s all we did back then. Argued over business stuff, argued over personal stuff, over girls and drugs and friends. Tony had a fucking temper, and I guess I do too, and we clashed. Getting our businesses mixed up was a very bad idea, but we thought we could take on the world together. It was a mistake.”

He pours more wine and drinks half of it down. I lean back against the couch, unable to stay upright any longer. I’m afraid I might pass out, my heart’s beating so fast.

“I don’t even remember what the fight was about. I think over who would take control of the Oceanview. Did you know we started that place together? It’s Tony’s now, he got most of the funding, but still. It was meant to be ours, and we just couldn’t agree on anything. So we were fighting, and he was driving way too fast.”

I can feel it all over. The tires screaming on pavement. The smell of burning rubber and brake pads as the car tried to stop. The thump of my body slamming against the hood. The pavement like an iron bar slapped across my face.

“It was dark and it was late, and Tony was never all that attentive. I don’t know what you were thinking, but you decided to cross one of those really dark streets, one of the alleys without any lights. Which is lucky, actually, because if Tony had been on a main road, you’d be dead. When you crossed, he was going slow enough that he had an instant to slam on the brakes before he hit you.”

My body in the air. The way the pain hit, but on a delay, and from a distance.

“You were in the car,” I whisper.

“That’s how I got to you so fast. Tony stopped the car and we sat there for a beat. You were lying in the road in the headlights. Nobody else was around. Tony kept saying fuck, over and over again. I took off my seatbelt. He followed when I got out of the car and walked over. Your eyes were open, but you looked dead, just staring at us with this blank gaze. I moved to help, but Tony grabbed my arm and he held me hard. I’ll never forget what he said. I think that’s the moment our relationship finally ended.”

“Tell me,” I croak. I don’t want to hear it, but I have to.

“He said, ‘Leave her. We gotta get out of here.’ That’s all. Just, *Leave her*. I sat there for another second before I pulled myself away and went over to help. I didn’t know what I was doing, but I tried anyway. That’s when he drove off.”

The horror settles on my shoulders like a blanket. I slowly sink down to the floor, the pain in my knee agonizing. I lean forward, feeling sick, sweat beading down my back. “He drove off,” I repeat, the terrible truth of it jabbing me in the guts. “He left me for dead.”

“I stayed,” Adler says. “I stopped the bleeding the best I could. I called 911 and held your hand. I told them I was out for a walk, that I was in the area when the hit-and-run happened,

and nobody pressed me hard. Why would they? I'm Adler Costa. I lied for Tony, I covered for him, and I hated him."

Tears stream down my face. That's why Tony Costa knows me. He's the one that hit me with his car. And that's why I'm a loose end.

He never finished the job.

"Why?" I ask. "Why did you help him? Why didn't you report him, get him arrested? He almost killed me. He ruined my life. And you helped him."

"He was my friend," Adler says, sounding sad. "It was the wrong decision, but at the time it felt like the only one I could make. I stayed with you that night because it was the right thing to do, and I covered for Tony because I *felt* like it was the right thing to do, but I shouldn't have. Looking back on it now, I should've told the truth. Only I didn't."

"That's why you married me, isn't it? Tony's running for office and he's afraid I'll remember him."

"Yes. That's right."

"I'm a loose end."

"Unfortunately, you are."

"And you were there. You were *in the car*."

"I should have told you sooner." He takes a step toward me, but I flinch and scramble to my feet. I limp badly as I struggle through the pain, heading toward the elevator. He doesn't come closer. "I'm sorry, Casey. I knew that when I told you, you'd hate me. You'd look at me like you're looking at me now. Like you're afraid."

He's right. I *am* afraid.

What kind of monster runs over a girl and leaves her for dead?

And what kind of psychopath covers up for that monster?

"Don't follow me," I say, jamming the call button.

Adler stands in the hallway, watching me. His face twitches like he's struggling to keep himself composed.

“There’s a reason I took care of you all these years. You could call it guilt if you wanted. I prefer to call it something else.”

“Stop it,” I say, surprised by my hard tone. I didn’t know I had anything left in me. I feel drained, wrung dry, squeezed to within an ounce of my life. “I don’t want to hear anymore. Just stop.”

“I’ve been paying for my mistake for seven years, and I’ll keep on paying for the rest of my life. You matter to me, Casey.”

“And you protected the man that nearly killed me.” The elevator arrives and I slowly get on. He doesn’t come closer, and I’m overwhelmed by the sudden, visceral need to get away. “Don’t follow. Don’t send your goons to keep me. I’ll scream if they do. I’ll make a scene in your precious casino.”

“Casey—”

“Just don’t. Okay? Just don’t. I need to think.”

His face finally breaks. It twists into a mask of pain, and the hurt’s so clear in his expression that it nearly shatters my resolve. Instead, I jab the lobby button so hard it chips my nail.

The doors slide shut and I glide down and down, away from Adler, away from my husband and my home, down into the guts of the Sunrise.

Chapter 32

Casey

“**N**o. No! He did *not*.” Roxie paces back and forth across her apartment. “He’s the freaking guardian angel? Adler Costa? He saves your freaking life then stalks you and pays for everything and—” She raises her wine glass to her lips, considering. “Sorry, what’s the problem again?”

“Roxie,” I say and throw a pillow at her.

“I know, I know, I’m kidding.” Although I don’t think she is. “Seriously, what was he thinking? I don’t think I’ve heard anything so—” She waves a hand in the air trying to conjure the word.

“Creepy? Bizarre? Freakish? Insane?”

“I was going to say romantic—”

I throw another pillow at her. “Would you stop it?”

She grins at me and flops down onto the couch. “Sorry, I’m done. I agree, it’s beyond bizarre. I mean, he’s been doing this for how long?”

“Seven years. He’s been steering my life for seven years.”

She takes another long drink and whistles. “That’s impressive.”

“It’s insane.”

“There’s some serious dedication going on here. I mean, most men would’ve given up after a week of no sex, let alone seven years.”

“Roxie.”

“There is something obviously wrong with this guy, but still, you have to admit it’s impressive.”

I rub my temples. “I thought you were going to be more supportive.”

“Sweetie, supportive is letting you crash at my apartment for as long as you want. Supportive is going up to bat for you against the big bad Costa family. Supportive is being ride or die no matter what, and you know me, I’m as ride or die as they come. But I won’t lie to you.”

“You know who did lie to me?” I give her a look. “Adler. Repeatedly.”

“Lies of omission.”

“Arguably worse. He manipulated me into marrying him and neglected to mention that he’s one of the most central figures in my entire life. Even more central than I knew.”

“Fair point.”

“He steered me into his casino. He kept me close, always hovering around, always watching. Now do you believe me that the guy used to purposefully walk past my table whenever I was working?”

“I absolutely believe you,” Roxie says, looking chagrined.

“This whole time, he knew what happened to me. Not just the stories, but he was *there*. He’s the voice in my freaking head.” I lean forward and hug my knees to my chest, staring at Roxie’s beige carpet. She lives in an apartment complex where all the rooms have the most boring decoration imaginable. She spiced her space up with colorful wall hangings, lots of silk and pillows and such, but the carpet remains atrocious.

She puts her arm over my shoulder and hugs me close. “He should’ve told you,” she says, squeezing. “Right from the start. That should’ve been part of the negotiations.”

“The thing is, I don’t know what I would’ve done if he had. I’m not sure I would’ve walked away.”

“Why now though?” she muses. “Why tell you all this now after so long? Why break his silence?”

“Tony Vetch.” I hug myself tighter. “Tony wants to hurt me. I’m a loose end.”

“You think Adler married you to keep you away from Tony? Didn’t seem to work.”

She has a point there. If anything, it drew more attention to me than before. “I don’t know what that man’s thinking because he doesn’t tell me.” Which is beyond frustrating. I want to believe Adler’s doing this because he cares, but I can’t quite bring myself to take that leap yet.

From my perspective, he’s done nothing but lie, manipulate, and take advantage of me. Instead of being honest from the start, he concocted this whole web of lies, this convoluted scenario to get me into this life.

I don’t even know what’s true anymore.

“What are you going to do?” Roxie asks when I stand and start pacing. I feel like my body’s going to explode if I don’t keep moving and burning off some of this nervous energy.

“I don’t know. I’m still married to him and I sort of doubt he’s going to let me get an easy divorce.”

“Is that what you want? To divorce him?”

I give her a look. “What else would I want?”

She holds up her hands. “I’m just saying, maybe think about it. I mean, you seemed pretty...”

“Stressed? Terrified?”

“Happy, actually.” She laughs a little. “Seriously, not to be a dick or whatever—”

“Too late for that,” I mutter.

“But you haven’t exactly been a little ball of sunshine these past few years what with your dad out of work and your mom taking on constant double shifts.”

She's right about that. My home life has been pretty miserable for a while now. Add Shane's addiction issues into the equation and I've been barely holding on.

"But I have other problems with Adler. Like, for example, his lying."

Roxie raises her drink. "Nothing's perfect."

"Easy for you to say. You're not the guy's wife." I stop and glare at her. "Are you trying to convince me to give him another chance?"

"I'm trying to convince you to step back and think objectively about the situation, which I'll admit isn't really a reasonable thing to request, but still. I want what's best for you—"

"You think Adler's best?"

"—and I don't know what that is yet," she says quickly. "And I don't think you do either."

I groan, slumping back against the wall. "Why did this have to get so complicated?"

"Sweetie, it was already complicated as fuck. I mean, you were going to let him impregnate you." She hesitates, frowning. "You didn't, did you? Let him knock you up?"

"No," I say quickly, but pause. "I mean, we had sex—"

"You did *what*?" She leaps to her feet. "You had sex? With Adler? For your first time and you didn't immediately tell me?"

"Uh," I say, not sure how to respond to that. "Well, I mean—"

"What was it like?" she presses. "What was he like? Gentle, rough? Does he bite? I bet he bites."

"He spansks," I say, turning red. "Which is like biting with your hand."

"Oh my god." She collapses back onto the couch. "He spanked you."

"Can we focus here?"

“You lost your virginity to your hunky stalker husband, the man that saved your life.”

“He also nearly ended it! He was in the car that night!”

“So what?” She sighs, pretending to swoon. “I bet he’s gorgeous without his clothes. You already told me he’s huge.”

“Stop,” I say, getting annoyed. “For once, would you be normal?”

“All right, fine.” She sits up straight, deadpanning. “You want my real opinion? I think you should talk to him. Yes, he should’ve told you the truth about your relationship and about his involvement in your accident. He’s a real piece of shit for keeping that to himself. But I’ve also never seen you so happy before, and the guy clearly worships you even if he did it the creepiest way imaginable. He’s gorgeous, fucks like a stud, and wants to get you pregnant. Seems like a win to me. At least hear him out.”

I rub my face. Silence falls over the apartment. I can’t seem to keep my thoughts straight. Roxie’s messing me up with her cavalier attitude, but that’s just Rox—she can’t take anything too seriously, because the second she does that is the second she lets the world in through her walls. I’ve never met anyone with defenses like her before, and humor’s her main weapon.

But she has a point. Adler cares about me. I *did* like being his wife. And the sex was—

Well, the sex was fantastic. Way better than I ever imagined.

So why not hear him out?

That’s the question I ask myself all that night while lying on Roxie’s couch. I want to sleep, but it seems impossible as my brain works overtime, spinning like a windmill in a hurricane. Every time I come up with ten reasons why I should never, ever see Adler again, I realize there are ten more reasons why I should crawl back into his bed and beg him to let me stay his wife.

It’s maddening. The next morning, Roxie makes coffee and bagels, and we’re talking when there’s a knock at her door.

“Expecting someone?” she asks, eyebrows raised. She cinches her robe tighter, though I don’t know why she bothers. Roxie’s got a great body—there’s a reason she’s a popular waitress.

“No,” I say honestly. “I didn’t think anyone knew I was here, except for maybe Adler, since he stalks me apparently.”

Roxie heads to the door, peers through the hole, and stops. She looks pale as she turns back to look at me. “It’s for you,” she says.

“Who is it?” I ask, not sure what the hell is happening.

She only shakes her head and steps aside.

I walk to the door, feeling like I’m floating. The bolt slams open and the knob turns, and standing on the threshold is Dustin Guinan.

He’s tall, broad. Long, dirty-blond hair. Dressed like a surfer with a deep, golden tan. He grins at me with perfectly straight, white teeth.

“Hey, Casey,” he says, holding up a hand. “Been a while.”

“Dustin? Why are you here?”

“My boss wants to speak with you.”

I can’t move. I can’t think.

I know Dustin through Shane. Hell, everyone in Atlantic City knows Dustin.

He’s Tony Vetch’s right-hand man.

“When?” I ask. How did Tony know I was here? How did he find me? Although it could’ve have been hard—tons of people saw me storm out of the Sunrise, and there aren’t many places I’d go.

“Right now,” Dustin says. “If you’re up for it.”

“I don’t think—”

“Don’t worry. He’s not here to hurt you.” Another disarming smile, but this one tinged with a strange, creepy implication.

“I’m not ready. I mean—”

What I want to say is, *I can't meet with the man that nearly killed me than ran away from the scene like a coward.* Instead, I stutter, barely able to form a coherent sentence.

Dustin interrupts before I can get my thoughts in order. "Don't worry about that. He's coming up the hall right now."

Chapter 33

Casey

Tony Vetch sits on Roxie's couch like it's the most normal thing in the world. "You sure you're okay?" Roxie whispers in my ear. Dustin remains near the front door, waiting for her.

"It's fine," I say, giving her a hollow smile, because I'm afraid of what Tony might do if I make a scene. He only watches, not smiling.

Roxie heads into the hall with Dustin, pausing to squeeze my arm on the way out, leaving me alone.

Tony crosses his legs. He leans back, looking at ease. "Take a seat. I'm not here to hurt you."

I don't move. I can't bring myself to get anywhere near him. "I'm fine here, thanks."

He tilts his head. "You really weren't faking it, were you? Back there on the beach."

"I don't—" Then I remember. "No, I wasn't faking it. I really didn't know who you were."

"But you do now."

What should I say? Pretend like Adler never told me the truth? That I don't know he's the man that was driving the night I got hit by that car? Anger swells in me, a deep, black anger. This man ruined my life—he nearly killed me.

I'm in constant pain before of him and I will be until the day I die.

“Yes, I know what you did.”

He nods to himself. “I should’ve left it alone. If I hadn’t gotten involved—well, can’t change things now.”

“What do you want from me? I don’t want to be some game piece you and Adler move around a board.”

“It must feel that way to you. Adler’s very good at it, isn’t he? I never had that talent.”

“If you want me to feel sorry for you, that won’t happen. You almost killed me. You ran from the scene.”

His eyebrows raise. “Is that what Adler said?”

For a moment I doubt myself. “Enough with the lies. Don’t sit here and tell me actually it was Adler driving and you’re the one that saved me.”

“That’s not what I was going to say.” He watches me for a long moment. My heart’s racing and my knees are killing me. I steady myself against the kitchen island, barely able to catch my breath. Why am I putting myself through this? Why in the hell am I standing here when all I want to do is run?

But morbid fascination keeps me pegged to where I’m standing. I want to know what Tony’s about to say—because that accident is like a black spot in the middle of my life.

There’s before I got hit by a car and the after. The in-between’s a mess of blurry, half-formed images and lots and lots of pain.

I want to know what happened so badly I’m willing to put myself through this.

Those weeks in the hospital were a nightmare. The months after were arguably worse. And here is the man responsible for all that, casually sitting on my best friend’s couch about to explain to me how I’ve got it all wrong.

I should run screaming. I should try to hurt him.

Instead, I can’t move.

“I told Adler to help you,” Tony says, staring into my face. “He stayed at the scene because we both knew he could get himself out of trouble. Which is exactly what happened. He

told a story and the cops believed it because he's Adler Costa, they get *paid* to believe his stories. But if that were me on the pavement with you? There's no way I would've remained a free man."

"How?" I croak. I barely recognize my own voice. "How did it happen?"

Tony looks away. Is that shame in his expression? No, that can't be right, a man like Tony Vetch doesn't feel a petty little emotion like shame.

"It was dark. We were having an argument about the hotel. We'd purchased this old place down the boardwalk and were going to renovate—"

"The Oceanview," I say with a ping of recognition.

He nods. "We were going to be equal partners. I was the legitimate face of the business while he was the shady backing. Everything was all worked out, except we couldn't seem to agree on fucking anything. He was being a stubborn cocksucker, all because his last name is Costa and he thinks he knows best. Meanwhile, I put up all the collateral, everything I'd earned. I got the investors, found the construction team, purchased the land, I did everything in my own fucking name and Adler just had to sit there like a fucking—"

"I don't care what you two were fighting about," I say, cutting him off because I can't listen to another second of his ancient grievances. "How did it happen?"

"You were running." He stares at me. "Wearing all fucking black. We were fighting, and I admit I was driving too fast down one of those streets without any goddamn lights. You crossed outside of a walk and I just didn't see you in time. I slammed on the brakes, which saved your life, thank god, but —" He stops there.

I hear it all again. Just like when Adler described it. "You hit me."

"I told Adler to get out there and help you. I told him I had to go—the cops would throw me in jail. It was all some stupid mistake, and it's been haunting me all these years."

I try to take it in. His story matches Adler's except for the part where Tony claims to have made Adler stay. I don't know which version is true, and I don't know if it even matters.

"Why are you here?"

"To make you understand," he says, leaning forward. "That mistake is in the past. You're alive and you seem to be doing okay. I need you—"

"I am *not* doing okay," I say, practically snarling at him. All my pent-up rage and frustration swells and rolls out from my throat. "I've been in pain since that night. I could barely walk for the longest time, and I still struggle with it. My life has been forever changed by what happened, and you can sit there and tell me I'm fine all you want, but I'm not. I'm so fucking far from fine it's unreal."

Tony's face doesn't change, and I realize something.

He doesn't care. He truly doesn't give a damn—this isn't about finding absolution or making apologies or even explaining his side of the story.

It's about tying up loose ends.

I turn and run. Something in me finally breaks as I scramble for the door, my knee screaming in pain, both my hips burning like they're on fire. Tony curses behind me and I hear him come charging at my back, but I reach the door and throw it open. I slam myself out into the hallway, ramming into the wall, and tumble down to the floor.

Right at Roxie's feet.

She stares at me, her mouth open. Dustin's at her shoulder and looks equally surprised.

"What's happening?" she asks, stooping down to help me.

Right as Tony comes barreling out after me.

"Grab them," he snarls.

Dustin moves, reaching for Roxie, but she twists out of his grip and kicks him in the crotch so hard I swear the blood vessels in his eyes burst. He groans, grabs at his balls, and

topples back against the wall as Roxie takes my weight on her shoulder and starts running with me down the hall.

“You fucking idiot,” Tony says and comes after us.

“I’m sorry,” I say over and over. “I’m so sorry.”

“Quit apologizing and run,” she hisses, but it’s no use. I’m in too much pain and I stumble halfway down the hall.

Tony catches up. He grabs me by the hair and yanks back, dragging me down to the floor. I hit hard, gasping as bright lights flash into my eyes. I blink rapidly and watch as Tony slams Roxie against the wall. She tries to hit him, but he bloodies her mouth with his fist, and she crumples.

“Roxie,” I say, trying to get up. “You fucking asshole. You piece of shit. You mother—”

Tony kneels down on my chest and draws a gun. “I wanted to do this quietly,” he says, staring at my face. “You then your friend. No witnesses, right? Instead, you made a commotion, which means this is going to cost me *a lot* of money to clean up.”

“You’re sick,” I whisper. “Everything you said back there was a lie, wasn’t it?”

He shrugs. “I didn’t give a shit about some roadkill bitch. I never understood why Adler did. He ended our friendship because of you and I’ll never get over that shit. My best friend tossed me aside because of some girl we nearly squashed in the road. Pathetic.”

My heart’s in my throat. I’m the reason he’s in a feud with Tony? That makes no sense, but it doesn’t matter. I’m going to die, and Roxie’s going to die, and who knows how many more Tony will kill to make sure this story never gets out.

I barely lived. High school, car accident, the Sunrise. Adler and Roxie. The best nights of my life were in that apartment with my husband, my fake husband, and even though it was founded on a bunch of bullshit, I understand it now.

He really was trying to protect me.

“Vetch, put it the fuck down!” a voice shouts from the elevators. The gun, still cold, remains pressed against my head.

“Motherfucker,” Tony snarls.

“Drop it, Vetch! Do it now!”

“You got lucky,” he whispers. “Next time maybe.” Then the gun’s gone and Tony’s weight pulls away. Footsteps like someone’s running. More footsteps, chasing. I roll onto my side and stare at Gianni as he goes after Tony but gives up halfway down the hall. Instead, he shoves his gun back into his belt and comes over to me, kneeling down.

“You okay?” he asks. “Anything hurt?”

“I’m fine. My friend.”

He nods and goes to Roxie. She wipes her bloody face with her robe. “Thanks, big guy,” she says. “So you’re the cute bodyguard, huh?”

Gianni smirks at her. “I think you’re okay.”

“Better than okay now that you’re here.”

“Come on.” He helps Roxie up then pulls me to my feet. “Berthold’s waiting outside in the car.”

“Where are we going?” Roxie asks.

“The Sunrise,” Gianni says, giving me a look. “Back home.”

Chapter 34

Casey

The doctor looks over me and Roxie, proclaims us both lucky, and leaves with a big envelope stuffed to overflowing. Roxie's given a suite downstairs and Gianni's assigned to keep an eye on her, which she doesn't seem to mind.

Adler paces the bedroom as I rub my knee.

"I'm fine," I say for the hundredth time. "Really. I'm okay. He barely even hurt me."

Adler stares at me. "He had a gun to your head."

"Yes, but—"

"You'd be dead if I hadn't sent my men to check in on you."

"True, but—"

"You're my wife, Casey, even if you want to act like that means nothing. To me, it means *everything*. Tony hurt my wife, and that will not stand."

I spread my hands. "Adler. What are you going to do, burn the Oceanview down?"

He cocks his head. "That's not a bad idea."

"Stop it, please. Would you just stop?"

He releases a frustrated snarl but quits moving. His big arms cross over his chest as he stares at me. I stare back, taking him in: the tension in his face, the bags under his eyes. Clearly, he hasn't slept since we last spoke. His dress shirt is rumpled and his pants lost their crease.

“This is my nightmare,” he says, his voice a twisted mess of emotion. “I understand you hate me, but that doesn’t change anything. For so long, I watched over you, made sure Tony never got close—and I married you because I sensed he was coming. I married you to keep you safe. And now this.”

“Adler.”

“I let you down. All my hard work, and I nearly lost you.”

“Adler, will you just listen for one second?”

His jaw clicks shut. I can tell he’s not happy about that, but at least he’s not lamenting his bad luck anymore.

I take a deep, steadying breath.

“I believe you,” I say softly, staring into his eyes.

His lips tug down. “You... what?”

“I believe you,” I repeat. “I believe that you did all this for good reasons. I believe that you’ve been protecting me and watching over me because you wanted to do the right thing. I believe that you really do care.”

He seems surprised. Some of his tension burns away. “What changed your mind? Last time we spoke, you were looking at me like I was a monster.”

“Tony said something to me. Aside from the obvious stuff. He said that you stopped being his friend because of what happened to me.”

Adler looks away. “That’s true,” he says quietly. “We’d been fighting a lot before then, but I kept thinking we’d get past it. Then the accident happened and he showed me what kind of person he really is, and I just... I couldn’t accept it. I hated him for driving off like a goddamn coward. I despised him for acting as though you never existed, because to me, you were everything.”

I close my eyes. Deep, steadying breaths. My heart’s racing wildly. “I believe you.”

“He wasn’t always like this. When we were younger, he cared about people. He gave a shit about more than his own bank

account, but that all changed as I took him deeper into my world. This life is hard, and it changes people sometimes. It corrupts them... and it happened to him.”

I lean back against the pillows, closing my eyes. I take deep, steadying breaths, and try not to think about the feeling of the cold gun barrel pressed against my head. The sensation of my own life about to end.

“This is a lot to process.”

“I know.” The bed shifts as he sits at the end. “For now, will you stay here? I can sleep in the guest room if that’d help.”

The thought of being alone suddenly terrifies me. I shake my head rapidly. “No,” I say. His expression tenses. “I mean, yes, I’ll stay here, but no, please don’t sleep somewhere else.”

Some calm returns. He stares at me and there’s more pain in his eyes than I’ve ever imagined. I didn’t think Adler was capable of this kind of depth, but now I see that he’d been holding everyone at bay all this time, keeping his true feelings from the world.

“You’re my one indulgence,” he whispers. “And I won’t risk you. Maybe making you my wife was a mistake, but I did it to protect you.”

“I want the truth now.” I shift myself, sitting up again. “The board. The buyout, the money, what’s true?”

He shakes his head. “None of it.”

“The baby?”

“The money’s mine. It has been mine since my father passed.”

I blow out a breath. I knew the answer before I asked but hearing him say it—

“This is hard to process. Why did you add that stuff about getting me pregnant?”

“Call it a moment of weakness.”

“Seriously, Adler.”

“I’m not kidding. I thought, well, I thought that if we became intimate, if I could have you the way I really wanted to have you, then we wouldn’t get divorced at the end of this. I know it’s absurd and manipulative, and I’m sorry I wasn’t honest from the start, but I didn’t know how else to get you to marry me. I didn’t know how else to keep you safe.”

I rub my face. God, this man. “I can think of a thousand ways that don’t involve you getting me pregnant.”

“Maybe, but what’s the fun in that?”

I give him a hard look. “Not the time.”

“I meant well. Can you believe that? In my own way, at least.”

“This is too much,” I mutter, leaning back against the pillows again.

“I was being selfish. I openly admit that. Wanting you and having you are two different things, and it was selfish for me to drag you into my world. I knew it, and I resisted it for so long.”

“Until now.”

He nods slowly. “Until now.”

“What changed? And don’t tell me it’s because of Tony Vetch.”

His face tightens and he looks away. He stares at the far wall, and I can see the conflict play out on his face. Part of me wants to crawl over and comfort him—but that’s absurd. This man misled me from the start and I should hate him for it.

Instead, I might be as emotionally twisted as he is.

“I’m not a young man anymore,” he says, still not looking at me. The line of his shoulder slopes down to his muscular arms, and why the hell am I thinking about his shoulders and his arms right now when I should still be pissed? “I won’t pretend like the thought of having a wife, settling down, and establishing a family didn’t occur to me. That was never my primary motivation—keeping you safe from Tony was—but once I had you in my office and we were making a deal—” He takes a deep breath. “Yes, I’m a selfish man.”

I move away from the headboard. Adler's stiff, almost rigid, like a man carved from granite. I go to him, heart racing. Fear tingles into my fingers and toes. A strange desire underpins it all. Why do I want this when I know it's wrong? When I know he lied to me, misled me, kept the truth from me? All along, Adler could've told me everything I've wanted to know about the accident that changed my life, but he kept his distance instead.

It's the emotion in his tone that draws me back to him. It's that despite everything, he really did save my life, he really did keep me safe, at least until I ran away from him and put myself in danger. And even then, he made sure his men were watching me.

It's that he did this for the right reason. "You say you're selfish, but you gave me so much over the years. And you wanted more back then, didn't you?"

"Yes," he says.

I stop inches from him. I should turn away, keep my distance. Instead, I touch his skin. It's the wrong decision, it's only going to make this more complicated, but it's a choice I can't seem to stop.

He's wrong. He's a mistake. And I want him despite it.

"You didn't act on it until I was in trouble. You stayed away. Why?"

"Because I knew I was bad for you. I knew I'd only end up hurting you, and I couldn't go through all this trouble giving you a decent life, only to ruin it."

"And that's why I'm going to stay."

He shivers. I feel him release a soft grunt from the back of his throat as he glances over his shoulder. "Not that you had a choice," he says, the hint of a smile on his lips.

I let out a little laugh. "I could get away if I wanted."

"What makes you think that?"

"You wouldn't hurt me."

“If it came down to hurting you a little to save your life, I’d make that hard choice.”

“Are you flirting with me?”

His smile broadens. “Yes. Always.”

I run my fingers down his arm as he shifts to face me. I don’t go closer—I want to dive into him, to press my lips to his, but I can’t. Not yet. “I want the truth. All of it. Everything.”

“Whatever you need, I’ll give you.”

“Was Tony really driving? Did he tell you to stay behind?”

“Yes, he was driving, and no, he didn’t.”

A strange relief floods me. I knew Tony’s story was bullshit, but I needed to hear that confirmed by Adler. He could be lying again, but I don’t think so.

“Then you really stayed behind to save my life. And you ruined a friendship because of me.”

“Yes, because of you, but also because of the man that Tony turned into. Back when I first met him, he was loud and obnoxious, but he would’ve done anything to help a friend. That person changed as he gained wealth and power in my family’s employ. The Oceanview was the end for him and the beginning of a new phase. He turned into a man I didn’t recognize any longer.”

“I’m sorry. That must’ve been hard.”

“It was like losing a brother. Actually, I would’ve rather have lost Con than Tony back then.”

“I can see how Con might not be the easiest person to have in your life.”

“My brothers mean well. They’re good men. Unlike Tony.” Adler’s fingers brush against my cheek. I shiver, nearly groan. I’m so pent-up I could scream. All my fear, all my rage, all the adrenaline, it’s swirling in my guts and pushing me toward this man. For better or worse. Probably much worse.

“How are we going to get out of this?” I whisper. “Tony’s not going to stop, and I can’t stay hidden in this apartment

forever.”

“We’ll think of a way. There’s always a solution. A deal we can cut.”

“Then what? That contract we made isn’t real, right? You can’t really enforce it.”

“No, I can’t.”

“So I could leave you whenever.”

“If you wanted.”

“If I wanted,” I echo. The silence is heavy. It’s thick, and I stay inches from him, shaking with anticipation. “But what am I supposed to do with all this information? Keep working in your casino?”

“You’ll always have a place at the Sunrise, no matter what.”

“I doubt that. You don’t want your ex-wife running around.”

“I want *you* running around. I don’t care if you’re my ex-anything, so long as you’re still here.”

I touch his face. “You really mean that, don’t you?”

“Yes. I do.”

“You’re kind of crazy.”

“I’m aware.”

“It should freak me out.”

“Probably.”

“But it doesn’t. I mean, it does, but not that bad.”

“Good. I don’t want you to be scared.”

“What do you want? I mean really, what do you want?”

He doesn’t hesitate. “You.”

I lean forward. I kiss him, very softly on the lips. Tentative, not sure how I’ll react to his taste. Not sure if I should even be doing this.

But that soft kiss turns into another. And another. Until his hands are in my hair and my mouth is open and his tongue’s in

my mouth, and I'm making a mistake, an obvious, stupid mistake, one I can't stop making.

Chapter 35

Casey

He buries his mouth between my legs.

I can't see what he's doing but it's absolutely incredible. His tongue, lips, hell, even his teeth drive me crazy, licking and sucking my clit. He slips his fingers deep inside of me, curling them, fucking me deep as he keeps licking me faster, lapping me up, making these beautiful and obscene sounds.

Moans tear up from my throat.

This is not what I expected. Not even remotely. But the moment I kissed him, I knew it had to happen—I knew there wasn't any other way.

I needed this so badly it was a stone in my guts.

And now that stone's eased into a pleasant glow, into a back-arching bliss. My fingers grip the sheets, then his hair, and he keeps licking and sucking me, wearing only a pair of boxer briefs, his muscular body on full display.

What a beautiful man. A freaking specimen. I can't get enough of his chest, his stacked abs, even his body hair. Everything about him drives me wild, and it isn't fair, I should hate him, but none of this makes sense and I'm sick of trying to force things to line up the way I think they should.

My life stopped being simple the day I was hit by that car.

The day I met Adler.

"I want to admit something," he whispers, his fingers sliding in and out of my dripping pussy. God, I'm running down into his palm, I'm so soaked. "I used to think about you after work.

I'd sit down, close my eyes, and picture you dealing cards at the table. Picture your hands working. And I'd get hard, nice and fucking hard, thinking about you. Then I'd think about kissing you. Undressing you. Tasting you, just like this, right on my casino floor. Does that make me a bad man?"

"Yes," I moan as he licks me top to bottom. "Very bad."

"I think you're right. In my fantasy though, you were a very bad girl. I think you liked that it was wrong, undressing for me, letting me touch you, letting me get you off. Making you suck my cock."

I draw in a sharp breath. "You did that?"

"You loved it in my fantasy. My cock's big and you had to work at it, but you enjoyed licking and sucking me as I teased your pussy. Once I made you come with my shaft in your throat."

"Oh, god," I groan. "I want that."

"You want to come while sucking my cock?"

"Yes," I whisper. "Please."

"I don't know. I'm not sure you're ready."

"I'm ready." I shift back, panting. "I'm very ready."

He pulls off his boxer briefs. His cock's rock hard, twitching in time to his heartbeat as he pulls me on top of him. I yelp in surprise as I straddle his face, then lean forward on my hand, the tip of his cock right at my lips.

It feels so fucking good, him sucking and licking me while I'm sitting on his face. I take his tip into my mouth, lick the precum from the slit, and suck him hard, not caring about anything but feeling good, this exact moment. My spit rolls down his shaft as I moan with his cock in my mouth, and I suck him faster as he teases me, fingers fucking me, tongue licking me. I grind my hips, shimmying against his lovely mouth, and god, I don't know how much longer I can take it. I go deep, taking him as far as I can, as the pleasure peaks.

"Adler," I gasp, pulling back, stroking his cock fast. "Fuck, I'm coming." I take him into my mouth again, pushing down

deep as the orgasm hits me hard, throws me over the edge, and sends me into total ecstasy.

I don't know how long it lasts. Seconds, forever, there's no difference. Then I pull back, gasping for air, his cock shining with my spit, and I'm on my back again. He's hovering over me, kissing me, licking my naked breasts, sucking my nipples.

"I need to fuck you," he says, spreading my legs.

"I'm still sensitive," I say, blinking rapidly. "I don't know—"

"I *need* to fuck you," he repeats, pressing his cock against my entrance, and with one slick thrust, he slides deep inside.

"Oh, shit," I gasp, back arching. It's the third time he's been inside of me, but the first time it didn't hurt. No, it feels good, so fucking good, as he slowly grinds himself deeper and deeper, growling like a rabid beast.

He takes me then. Fucks me slow, looking into my eyes, kissing my neck, my breasts, before he goes faster. His arm muscles bulge and I stare at his bulging shoulders as he tears into me, over and over again, the lines between us blurred to nothing. He whispers my name in my ear, his cock gliding into me over and over, and pleasure bursts into my core all over again.

I've never come twice before, but Adler takes me over the edge. He gets me off a second time, his cock burying itself into me again and again, harder, rougher, and I can barely think as he groans in my ear. I feel him come too, filling me to the brim, warm and lovely.

I curl against him when we're done. I kiss his skin, breathe his smell. I'm filled with conflicted feelings, but all of them are drowned by the certainty that this is good, that this is right.

Whatever this might mean.

"I don't want you to get the wrong idea." I look up at him. "I'm not forgiving you."

"I wouldn't dream of it."

"I mean it, I'm still upset about... about everything."

“I understand.”

“You should’ve told me the truth from the start. You should’ve —” I have to stop myself because I can feel the outside world pressing in against what feels good, and I don’t want to lose this moment.

“I’m not asking you to forget what I did. I’m only asking that you weigh it against my intentions, and that you allow me the chance to make things right.”

I take a slow, deep breath. “You asshole.”

“What?”

“That was the right thing to say.”

I can feel him smiling against my neck. “Good.”

“So what? Does this mean I’m staying your wife?”

“That’s up to you.”

“Would you really want that? I mean, you really want to stay married even though there’s no real reason for it?”

“Yes,” he says, and I’m surprised by the conviction in his voice. “I really do.”

“Why?”

He’s quiet a moment. Then he takes a long breath. “You don’t know my parents.”

“I’ve met your mother.”

“Yes, you have, but the woman you know is not the woman I grew up with. My mother now is much more... free than she was, now that my father’s gone.”

I shift around so I can face him. I’m surprisingly not self-conscious about being naked around him, still sticky with sweat. “Really? What was he like?”

“Difficult.” He flinches as if another word occurs to him. Something much worse. “My brothers and I used to be close, but my father made sure we didn’t stay that way. He thought conflict would forge us into a stronger unit, but all that fighting, that trauma—it only made us want to forget. I think

that's why my brothers all left for different parts of our empire."

"How did your mother fit into this?"

"She didn't. My mother wasn't a part of his plans. She was always his trophy, the mother of his children, but never his partner. I hated that about them, how she was always so quiet when he was around, because I caught glimpses of the woman she could've been. Big and bold and funny. You see that now, although I think even that's only a fraction of her potential. My father dimmed her light."

I chew on my lip. It's a compelling image: a candle in a dark room beneath a glass case starved of oxygen until the flame is barely a flicker.

"Is that what you want to avoid with me?"

"Yes, exactly. I don't want that for us, and I'm afraid I've already started. I'm afraid all the terrible lessons my father shoved into me through force took root in my soul and I won't be able to shake them."

"We aren't our parents." I think of my own father sitting on the couch demanding more and more of me. Of my mother, struggling to keep afloat. What would our lives have been like if I hadn't gotten hurt?

"No, we aren't. Maybe that's part of why I want this with you."

"What, you think your father wouldn't have approved?"

He touches my cheek tenderly. "No way in hell."

"Why not? I'm delightful."

"Yes, you are, but you're also a table dealer. He wanted me to marry a senator's daughter or an heiress."

"Instead, you fell in love with a car crash victim." The words leave my mouth before I can stop them, but once they're in the air, I can't make them go away. That word *love* lingers between us, and I wish I hadn't said it. "I mean, uh, you know what I mean, right? I don't mean love. You don't, I mean—"

“I know how I feel about you, Casey.” He brushes hair from my face. “I’m not afraid of it.”

“Must be nice,” I murmur.

“I want you to stay my wife because you’re good for me in a way that my parents were never good for each other. I want you to stay my wife because I want a real partnership, a real woman. Not a piece of furniture. Not only a womb.”

“Ah, what a lovely compliment. I’m better than a couch.”

“Much better. In this case, I want you to sit on *my* face, as opposed to the opposite.”

“That is a very gross and weird image, thanks.”

“Except you enjoyed it when you were doing it barely twenty minutes ago.”

“Fair point.” My cheeks flush red as I burrow against him.

“Can we just forget about being married for a little while? Just for a few hours?”

“If that’s what you want.”

“I have to figure things out. I mean, between me and you. I’m still not sure how I feel about everything and I just—” I stop, shaking my head. “I just need time.”

“Then you have it. As much of it as you need.”

“Except I’m also stuck here until you resolve the Tony stuff.”

“Correct.”

“I guess it could be worse.”

“It can always be worse.” He kisses me gently. “Now, why don’t we pretend like this is a completely normal night and take a shower together?”

“You’re going to try something on me, aren’t you?”

“Yes. Most likely.”

“Are you getting hard again already?”

“No. A little.”

“Adler Costa. What is the matter with you?”

“Nothing. I’m a healthy man that finds the thought of you all soapy and wet sexually arousing.”

“When you put it that way—” I kiss his chin. “Let’s get in there.”

He laughs, pulling me from the bed, and I follow him into the bathroom, fully aware that I’m doing a whole lot of cognitive dissonance right about now in order to make this feel remotely normal—but as soon as his lips press against mine and the water’s running down his beautiful, cut body, things get very easy.

Chapter 36

Adler

“**D**ouble her security.” I cross my arms, leaning back in my chair. Will and Zach sit across from me, both of them looking annoyed. “I don’t care what it costs.”

“Consider it done. I’m only pissed that anyone got near her. I feel like I didn’t do my job.” Zach’s jaw works and he glances to the side.

“Your job is to keep my casino safe, a difficult task which you perform very well. You couldn’t have done anything about what happened with Casey. Just make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

Zach nods and leaves the office. I watch him go, pleased that he’s taking this seriously.

“I’ve got other news,” Will says, stretching. “Took me a while, but I know where Shane Kiernan’s hiding.”

I steeple my fingers, letting that sink in. Casey’s brother is a part of this mess, mixed up deeper than I realized. I’m not sure if he understood what Tony really wanted from him when he started to work for the Oceanview, but it doesn’t matter anymore.

My only goal is to find a way to make Tony go away.

I can’t kill him. That would be too obvious. He’s running for office now, and a suspicious death would draw all sorts of difficult heat onto my family. Heat which we can’t afford.

No, Tony can’t disappear. There are too many national political figures watching his rise now. And there are his

backers to consider: the dark money involved with his new hotel.

But the idea of cutting a deal with him is beyond distasteful. He pressed a gun against Casey's head. My wife's head. The woman I've obsessed over for a long time.

He would've killed her if Gianni hadn't intervened.

There's got to be another way to take care of Tony, but the solution hasn't presented itself. Not yet at least.

"Bring him in," I say.

"Are you sure about that? Will your wife be happy?"

"I don't care. Give her brother a decent room. Keep it locked and guarded. Assign a doctor to help him through withdrawal."

Will's eyebrows raise. "We're a detox facility now?"

"We're a fucking casino hotel. We're whatever the hell we need to be." I lean back with a sigh. "Shane might have useful information about Tony's operations, only he doesn't know it at the moment. I need him sober. I need him nice and lucid."

"Understood." Will strokes his face. "I have to admit, I'm almost enjoying this."

"I bet you are, you prick."

"You're stumbling all over yourself trying to make this girl happy. It's almost cute."

"It's horrible. Get to work."

He laughs as he leaves my office.

I get ten minutes of peace. I close my eyes and spend it thinking of Casey back in my apartment, back in my bed, still naked from the night before. Her body damp with sweat, her lips parted, her plump ass, her hard nipples. I crave her in a way I've never experienced before, an out-of-control need that won't go the fuck away. I need to think—not daydream about fucking my wife.

Unfortunately, my secretary buzzes and rips me from my fantasy. “Your mother is here to see you.”

Nothing kills my mood faster. “Send her in.”

Mother enters. She’s in a gray pantsuit, her hair styled, looking like she’s on her way to a high-powered business lunch. “Morning, darling,” she says, sitting down in the chair Will just vacated. “You’ve been hiding from us, haven’t you?”

I give her a look. Mother smiles back thinly.

“I haven’t been hiding. I’ve been tactically avoiding you and my brothers.”

“Same thing.” She waves me away. “Why?”

“For one, you all meddle in my life far too much. One of these days you’re going to overstep.”

“Then what? I don’t suppose you’ll kick me out?”

I sigh, rubbing my face. “Of course not. The Sunrise is your home.”

“Then I guess I have no reason to stop.” She clucks her tongue as my sour glare. “Don’t pout, my eldest boy. We have your best interests at heart.”

“Even Conlan?”

“Well, maybe not him.” She purses her lips. “That one enjoys the smell of chaos far too much.”

“That’s one way of putting it.” I lean back with an exhausted sigh. “Why did you come up here this morning, Mother?”

“I want to have dinner with you and your wife.”

My eyebrows raise. “Really? I thought you didn’t approve.”

“I don’t, but she hasn’t gone away yet, and I’m starting to think I’m stuck with her for a while.”

“That’s lovely.”

“It’s the truth. I might as well get to know her since we’re living in the same casino. Though honestly, it’s a big place.”

“I’ll set something up. Should I bring the others as well?”

“Might as well.”

“Consider it done. Even if I think it’s a terrible idea.”

Mother pauses. She tilts her head, eyes narrowed, as if she’s considering what to say next. Slowly, she stands, but doesn’t leave. “You’re different.”

“Different how?” I ask, exhausted by the thought of another lecture on how to act as a proper Costa patriarch.

“You seem lighter.” She doesn’t look happy about. “Happy, almost. It’s the girl, isn’t it?”

“I can’t imagine why I might feel that way.”

“I felt that way about your father once.” I stare at her. She never speaks about Dad—not since he passed. “We were young and stupid. I thought he was forever, and then he was, except forever didn’t last forever, it only felt that way.”

“Casey is not like Dad.”

“No, she isn’t, and that’s the point, isn’t it? Oh, don’t look at me like that, I’m not approving of the girl, I’m only saying you seem happy.” She rolls her eyes. “I’m sure your brothers will ruin it for you tonight.”

“I’m sure they’ll try.”

“It was lovely speaking with you, eldest son.”

“You as well, Mother. Always a pleasure.”

She walks to the door but hesitates before leaving. She looks back at me, one perfectly manicured nail tapping against the door frame. “You know I don’t mind if you’re happy, right?”

“I know.”

“Your father would have hated it.” She smiles slightly. “That makes me at least somewhat partial to the girl.”

“How wonderful.”

She taps the frame again then disappears. I watch the space she occupied for a moment, trying to decide if this is a good thing or a bad thing—and decide it’s probably a disaster.



“HERE’S TO THE HAPPY COUPLE,” CON SAYS, RAISING HIS whiskey glass in the air. “To Adler and Casey. May the road rise to meet you—”

“That’s Irish,” Jayson says, interrupting him.

Con looks confused. “What are we then?”

“Italian.” Jayson shoots me a look, rolling his eyes. I grin back at him.

“Ah, yes. Well, in that case, drink up, I guess.” Con throws his whiskey back.

“Here, here,” I say, nudging Casey’s foot under the table. She’s grinning like her face might fall off and I’m beginning to worry she’s going to give herself a stroke.

The Coastline Restaurant is packed. We have the best table up near the water feature—an obscenely expensive, gaudy bit of entertainment my father dreamed up—and we’re surrounded by tables packed by guards and loyal capos.

The Coastline is our high-end offering, one of the best in all of Atlantic City, and it’s just intimate enough to feel like this is a real family meal, but public enough to ensure nobody makes too much of a scene.

“Right then, Casey, when are you going to divorce my son here and take half his money?” Mother asks.

Just public enough.

“Uh, never,” Casey says, looking around at the table. “I mean, I don’t plan on taking anything, uh—”

“She’s teasing,” Jayson says, but hesitates. “You are joking, aren’t you?”

Mother shrugs, rolling her wine glass. “Mostly.”

“We’re fine,” I say, glaring at her.

“Just asking.” Mom pretends to be affronted. “Can’t a mother worry about her children?”

“Casey, tell me again, where did you go to school?” Con leans toward her, practically in Erick’s plate. Meanwhile, Erick’s jabbing at him with a butter knife, which Con ignores.

“I just did high school,” she says. “The accident made sure I wasn’t going further.”

“Ah, right, the famous accident.” Con glances at me. “The one you’re super obsessed over, is that correct?”

“Yes,” I say, not rising to his provocation. My brothers aren’t aware of my direct involvement—only that I’ve been watching Casey from a distance for years.

Eric finally manages to stab Con hard enough to get him back in his seat. He looks at Casey. “You seem nice. Didn’t listen to our warning though.”

“I’m not very sensible,” she says, laughing. Mother doesn’t like that, but at least Erick grunts his approval.

I steer the conversation away from her and onto family business. We stick to the legal stuff—the other side of the Costa empire gets discussed only in specific areas and situations—and I can tell it’s boring the hell out of Mother. Which is good, maybe we’ll get lucky and she’ll fall asleep. But more likely—

“Casey,” Mother says the moment there’s the slightest pause. “What is it about my son that drew you to him?”

She looks bewildered by the sudden question. I’m about to rescue her, but she answers. “He seemed to really care,” she says.

Mother’s eyes narrow. “Come again?”

Casey’s cheeks flush. “My accident made walking and standing for long periods of time really difficult, and Adler’s been extremely accommodating. If it weren’t for him, I wouldn’t be able to work a table job at the casino. I don’t know where I’d be, honestly.”

“And you *want* to work a table job?” she asks, sounding skeptical.

“I know it sounds silly to you, but to me, it’s freedom.” I can tell this is hard for her, so I move to bail her out, but she keeps going anyway. “I didn’t think I’d ever work again after the accident, much less at a position that helped me take care of my family. We didn’t have much and it’s been a struggle since my dad went on disability and—” She hesitates, staring at my family.

Con’s listening with rapt attention. Jayson’s leaning back, drink to his lips, but seems surprised. Even Erick’s watching her.

Then there’s Mother. Most of her skepticism’s gone, replaced by a small smile.

“Go ahead, dear,” Mother says.

“And I guess dealing lets me meet more people and see more things than I’d otherwise be able to. It’s not ideal, I know that, but it’s something, right?”

“Right,” I say and put a hand on her wrist.

She seems embarrassed and shimmies slightly lower, sinking into her seat.

“Well then, here’s to fucking freedom,” Con says, raising another glass which mysteriously appeared in the last few minutes. “And here’s to marriages that work out. Isn’t that right, Mother?”

“Don’t be fresh, Conlan, or I will yank off your ear.”

“Good luck sleeping with all those movie starlets with a disfigured face,” Jayson says, grinning.

“I have no trouble sleeping with starlets, scarred or otherwise.” Con winks as Mother rolls her eyes and we all drink.

The night continues. I’m surprised by how pleasant everyone’s acting—relatively speaking anyway. Con makes his jokes, Jayson remains skeptical, and Mother’s nice remains very much up in the air, but Casey’s holding her own. I don’t have

to step in and reprimand my brothers for being assholes, and she never once seems put off or embarrassed.

By the time we finish after-dinner drinks, I'd almost believe everyone at the table are best friends. With the exception of Mother. She excuses herself and leaves, pausing only to say it was nice meeting Casey, before disappearing back into the casino.

"Off to lose more money to the slots," Con says with a drawl. "That women does love to gamble."

"Fortunately, it's a circle. She gambles in our casino, our casino pays her bills. The cycle continues." I lean back in my seat, feeling good for the first time in a while. I can't recall when the boys were all together, and it's actually nice.

The conversation continues. Casey tells some very funny stories about her years dealing—most of which involve overly drunk high-rollers and very ill-advised bets. She gets even Jayson laughing, which I have to admit is kind of impressive. Eventually, Con bids everyone good night, and Jayson heads out with him, leaving only me, Casey, and Erick at the table.

"I've been thinking." Erick swirls his whiskey. His sleeves are pulled up, showing off his tattoos. "About your problem."

I lean in slightly. Erick's the quiet one in the group. Not because he's not assertive or dominant, but because he thinks deeply before deciding to let words spill out of his mouth. He's the total opposite of Con in that way. Jayson's probably in the middle, and I lean more toward Erick's end of the spectrum.

Which is why I always pay attention when my youngest brother decides he has something to say.

"Which problem is that?" I ask.

"Tony." He glances at me, searching to see if I'm going to get upset. Instead, I only nod for him to continue. "You can't kill him, but you also can't sit back and ignore what happened."

Casey shimmies in her seat, obvious uncomfortable.

“That’s what I’ve been thinking,” I agree. “There is no forgiveness.”

“There has to be another way to make him suffer.” Erick’s grip on his glass tightens. “You know how I feel about that man.”

Of everyone in my family, Erick despises Tony the most—and always has. I should’ve listened to my brother a long time ago. Erick saw through Tony’s charm from the start and sniffed out a rat long before anyone else suspected a thing.

“I have some ideas,” I admit, glancing at Casey.

“I wish we didn’t have to do this,” she blurts out.

Erick seems surprised. “Why? He hurt you.”

“I know that.” She stares at her hands. “But to him, it was self-preservation, right? Can’t we just make him understand that I have no interest in punishing him for what happened?”

“Don’t you?” I ask.

She considers. I want to make her think—I want to force her to really confront what she feels. There won’t be many chances to truly get revenge in this life, and if I can offer her some measure of comfort by making Tony bleed, I’ll do it.

It just so happens to be exactly what I want too.

“No, I really don’t. The accident was so long ago, and he’s obviously been sweating it for years. All I’ve ever wanted was to know the truth, and now I do.” She looks at me and I believe her, which makes this so much fucking harder.

“I’m sorry,” I say softly. “But Tony has to pay for what he did.”

“He’s going to be in Congress,” Erick says. Casey looks away from me, and I can tell she’s not happy. “That’s useful.”

“True, but it won’t help us. If anything, he’ll use his power to hurt the family.”

“Unless you change the dynamic.” Erick pushes back from the table. “Give it some thought anyway. Good night, Casey. It was nice to meet you.”

“You too,” she says, sounding distant.

Once I’m alone with her, I shift closer, putting my hand on her arm. She doesn’t flinch, but she doesn’t look at me, either.

“You’re going to start trouble,” she says.

“Probably.”

“This is such a mess.”

“Yes, it is.”

“All I want is to live. I don’t need revenge. I don’t need forgiveness either. I just want to live.”

I tighten my grip, not too hard, but enough that she knows I’m touching her. “In my business, that isn’t enough. Tony’s been a problem for a very long time, and now I think we have the leverage we’ve always needed.”

“You mean me?”

“I mean the threat of you. I won’t ask you to do anything you don’t want to do, but Erick’s given me an idea of how I can move forward.”

She shuts her eyes and takes a deep breath. “I won’t stop you. Whatever you feel is right, but it’s not what I want.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I release my grip and stand. “Come on. I should get my new wife back home. It’s late.”

“How about we swing by the casino first.” She gives me a sly smile. “Now that the gambling is on the house, I feel like playing.”

I bark a laugh. “You and my mother are going to get along well one of these days.”

“Try telling her that.” Casey slips her hand through my arm and holds onto my bicep. I love the way she leans into me, the smell of her hair, the way she shuffles in sync with my steps.

“Okay then, my wife. What are we playing tonight?”

She shrugs, leaning her head on my arm. “Whatever you want.”

“My three favorite words.”

Chapter 37

Casey

Roxie stretches out on the couch with a yawn. Her face is still puffy from where Tony punched her, but she looks otherwise very well-rested. “There’s nothing like staying in a free room in a luxury casino with all expenses handled.”

“Adler’s very generous to people that get punched in the face for him.”

She snorts. “I didn’t get punched for *him*. I got punched for you. Now tell me about this dinner with his family.”

I give her the quick rundown. “It was honestly pretty good. I mean, I wouldn’t say they welcomed me with open arms, but the boys were at least willing to tolerate me. His mother was tougher, but—” I make a helpless gesture.

“She’ll come around.”

“I figured his brothers were going to give me hell since they basically told me to stay far away from Adler.”

“How much do they know? About him and the accident?”

“Only that he’s been watching me for a while. I think that’s what they were trying to warn me about—Adler’s whole stalking thing. I can tell they don’t approve, but Adler’s also the head of the family, which I guess makes it more complicated.”

Roxie whistles. “You’re mobbed up now, huh?”

“I am not mobbed up!”

“You actually are, hon.” She pats my knee. “Deeply mobbed up.”

“Adler’s family is just—” I pause, searching for the word. “They’re just a business, that’s all.”

“Right, they’re a business, and their main product is crime.”

“You’re pleased with that one, aren’t you?”

She beams at me. “Obviously, it was a killer line. Speaking of killers—did you like his brothers?”

I swat at her, which only makes her laugh harder. “They were—I don’t know if *nice* is the word, but they were funny at least. Conlan’s really outgoing and ridiculous. Jayson’s more serious, a little more reserved. Erick’s quiet. Adler’s sort of a mix of all four in a weird way. I can tell they get along, but there’s also a strain between them. I think they had a really hard upbringing.”

“God, don’t make me pity the rich boys.”

“Their father was abusive. Like, psychopath-style abusive, made the boys fight against each other while also preaching this weird family loyalty thing. I think it messed them up or at least made it really hard to remain friends.”

“All right, well, here’s the big question: can you see yourself being a part of that dysfunction? Long-term, I mean?”

I sit back and consider. Do I want to stay in the Costa family? It was one dinner and it went pretty well, but the way Adler approached it makes me think that might’ve been a fluke, and future dinners won’t be as congenial.

Then again, maybe this family needs an outsider to force them to behave.

“Would you think I’m crazy if I said I’m considering it?” I meet the worried look she gives me with a soft smile. “I mean, have you seen Adler lately?”

“Yes, your husband is a total dime, but come on. He tricked you into this.”

“In order to protect me.”

She gestures at her face. “He did a great job.”

“We both know that wasn’t his fault. We’d both be dead if it weren’t for him.”

“Allegedly,” she grumbles.

“Aren’t you the one that wanted me to give it a chance?”

She groans, leaning back into the pillows. “I know, I know, but that was before I got punched in the fucking mouth.”

“Oh, look at you, things get a little hard, you get punched one time, and suddenly I should run away.”

She laughs and kicks at me. I grin, deflecting her weak blow. “Okay, fine. If you want my honest opinion, I think there’s no rush. You still need his protection right now anyway, and while you’re married to the guy, you might as well find out if you like it.”

“That’s... strangely reasonable.”

“Don’t get used to it.”

“So, what, I should just keep doing what I’m doing?”

“Go to dinner with the guy. Sleep in his bed. Talk to him after work. Fuck him.”

“*Roxie.*”

“I mean it, keep on fucking him. Make sure there’s a real connection, not just a spark that’s going to fizzle out in a few weeks after all this commotion blows over.” She sits up straight suddenly and leans closer. “Do you know how often this sort of thing happens? This guy’s been your guardian angel for nearly a decade. He’s straight up *obsessed* with you, and he also happens to be beautiful and rich and yeah dangerous, but still. You won’t get another shot at this.”

I try to let her words sink in. I really work to picture myself with Adler, maybe having children for real, living in the hotel and working at the tables, making my life in the Sunrise. It’s hard for me to imagine, but it’s also a pleasant little dream. This place has been my home away from home for years now,

and becoming Adler's wife for real will only solidify my connection to this place in a way I never dreamed.

Someone knocks at the door. Roxie flinches, and I get up to check it out. Will's standing in the hallway, looking bored.

"What can I do for you?" I ask, poking my head out.

His eyebrows arch. "I have a surprise for you."

"I'm not sure I like the sound of that."

"It's not bad. Come to my office."

I turn to look back but Roxie already waving at me. "Go ahead, I'll see you later. I hear the spa calling my name."

"She seems comfortable," Will says as we head to the elevators.

"Can you blame her? Adler's paying for everything, so she figures, why not?"

He shrugs and jams the button for the third floor. "I suppose this works out for her. You marrying Adler?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Not everyone gets this kind of treatment."

"I'm sorry, are you pissed at her or something?"

He stares at the doors in front of him, lips pursed. "Roxie's been a good employee for years. Why would I ever give a shit about her?"

I don't know what to say. His shoulders are tense and his jaw works, and it seems like he's pissed about something. Except I don't think Will and Roxie have ever spoken in all the time I've been at the Sunrise, and I have no clue *why* there'd be anything between them.

I keep my questions to myself as Will leads me to his office. It's down the hall past the security rooms. Enormous screens cover one wall, each showing a different view of the Sunrise's gaming floor—from the table games to the slots. I stare in amazement at the level of detail as the facial recognition software works in the background, analyzing faces, pulling up

profiles, scanning through the crowd. I barely notice the person sitting on the chair in front of the desk until he clears his throat.

“Hey, big sis.”

I blink rapidly as Shane stands up. “What? You’re here?”

“Been here for a couple days.” He gives me a sheepish grin. His skin’s pale and he’s covered in a sheen of sweat, but he looks better than I’ve seen him in a while. At least his eyes aren’t glassy. “Struggling through.”

“Are you serious?”

“Cold turkey,” he says. “Sort of. I got a doctor giving me some methadone to help take the edge off, but it doesn’t fucking work.” He glares at Will before composing himself. “Sorry. Struggling.”

“It’s okay,” Will says. “Take a seat, everyone.”

I walk over and hug Shane tightly. He smells like cigarettes, but that’s better than the alternative. “I’m so happy you’re here.”

“Will found me and brought me in. Didn’t give me much choice though.”

“I’m just glad you’re safe.”

“I thought I was good at hiding.” He laughs, rubbing his head. “Guess not.”

We sit then and Will studies us from behind the desk. His fingers steeple under his chin and his lips press together. He’s a decent-looking guy, and I wonder if Roxie got involved with him somehow without telling me. It’s totally possible—she can be secretive sometimes—and he’s totally her type: tall, intense, tattoos, dark hair, dark eyes. But it’s probably just my imagination and there’s nothing between them.

“I’ll be honest, this isn’t an entirely happy reunion.” Will looked at something behind us. “But I’ll let him explain.”

I turn to look over my shoulder—and find Adler closing the door behind him.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

Adler gives me a hard look then turns to Shane. “We need to talk,” he says. “And it’s about Tony Vetch.”

Chapter 38

Adler

The tension in the room gets heavy. Casey doesn't look happy, and her brother's practically shaking with detox and nerves. Not that I blame him—the poor bastard inserted himself into the middle of a nightmare.

“I don't work for him anymore,” Shane says. “That job ended a while ago.”

“But you *did* work for him,” I say, not giving him a chance to wriggle out of this. “He sent you here to spy for him and you happily complied.”

“The money was too good, and I didn't owe you anything.”

“No, you didn't, but you do realize that you should be dead right now, correct?” I hold his gaze and he eventually breaks, looking down at the floor.

“I know,” he mutters. “Casey married you to keep me alive.”

“What are you doing, Adler?” The worried tone in her voice almost softens me, but I can't afford that right now.

“We're discussing business.”

“You're bullying him. You can tell he's sick, right?”

“Dope sick,” I correct. “Not the same thing.”

“It's the same.” She glares at me, standing. “What's the deal with all this?”

I take a breath and let the silence settle for a moment. “This is about what we discussed at dinner.”

“You’ll have to be a bit more specific.”

“Tony Vetch is a problem. Shane is going to be part of the solution.”

For his part, and to his credit, the junkie doesn’t immediately run away screaming. He seems paler than when I first entered the room, but I can’t fault him for that.

“Now you’re using my brother in your little war? I told you Adler, I don’t want any of this. Leave Shane out of it.”

“Shane is going to be my go-between. Tony’s men have gone dark ever since the incident with you and Roxie, which means he expects a violent answer to his transgressions. That’s exactly what he deserves—but I’m thinking bigger right now.”

Casey’s face screws up. “And what’s that have to do with Shane again?”

“Shane here has contacts in Tony’s organization. I can’t get them to talk to me, but Shane can. Isn’t that right?”

Shane nods, looking exhausted. “I know some guys I can talk to.”

“Okay, great, Shane can make some calls, but what then?” Casey crosses her arms.

Will gives me a look, one eyebrow raised. I rub my temple—I’m not used to people talking to me like that, and it’s not great that she’s doing it in front of my subordinate. Will’s going to give me so much shit for it later.

“Then we negotiate.”

“We’re not doing violence,” Will adds. “Which leaves our options limited. Adler here isn’t going to let Tony walk, but we can’t just start burning the whole town to ashes.”

“Erick said something last night that’s sticking with me.” I gesture at Casey. “You remember, don’t you?”

“Tony’s going to be a congressman.” She shakes her head. “I still don’t see how that’s helpful.”

“We are going to own him,” I say, speaking softly. “One way or another, I am going to grind him down under my thumb.”

No, I won't kill him, but I'll do something worse. I'll *control* him."

The room's silent. Will looks skeptical. Shane looks like he might puke. Only Casey seems thoughtful, like she's seriously considering my plan.

"Do you think that might work? I don't see how you could get Tony to do what you want."

"We have leverage. We have you." I gesture for her to come closer. She hesitates then crosses the room. "I won't directly involve you if you don't want me to, but this is how it has to go. Shane makes the connection. We explain to Tony that he has no other options. If he doesn't do what we ask, we'll leak everything we know about him to the press, from the accident up to the shady Chinese businessmen with dubious ties to the communist party back home backing his new hotel."

"And if he refuses?"

"We apply more pressure. It's going to work."

She doesn't look convinced.

But Shane speaks up. "I'll help," he says. "It's the least I can do."

"You don't have to," Casey starts, but he interrupts her.

"I want to do it. I've been such a piece of shit for a long time and I just... I want to be useful again."

I nod once to him. "I can respect that."

"I'll work out the details," Will says. "Who he's contacting, how he's doing it. The manpower we'll put behind him, everything."

"Good. Make the connection. Then I'll do the rest." I take Casey's hand in mine. She hesitates, looks back at her brother, but lets me lead her from the room. "How's Roxie?"

"Hurt but enjoying herself."

"I'm sure. I was told her bill is getting somewhat outrageous."

"I can ask her to tone it down."

“No, don’t. Let her enjoy.”

“Thank you.” She stops and gets up on her toes then does something I don’t expect—

She kisses me.

I hold onto her hips and return the kiss.

“You’re welcome,” I say quietly. “If I knew you’d kiss me for being nice to your friend, I would’ve comped her room much sooner.”

Casey laughs and pats a hand against my chest. “No, it’s more, thank you for getting Shane off the street and helping him get cleaned up.”

“I can’t promise he’ll stay that way.”

“It’s a start at least, right?”

“You’re a good sister. You care about him.”

“Sometimes I worry I don’t care enough, that I’m not doing enough.”

“You’re trying. That’s all he can ask for.” I kiss her gently, and she doesn’t pull back.

It feels natural. Like we’ve always been doing this and it’s totally normal.

But more than that, it’s always something I’ve wanted. This small bit of affection, while normal for most people, is never something I’ve had before.

Women have come and gone from my life, but that was always only for sex. Raw and physical, but there was nothing behind it.

No real intimacy. No real emotions.

It’s always been Casey for me, ever since that night.

“Come upstairs with me,” I say, holding her hand.

“Don’t you have to work?”

“I’m the boss. I get to do whatever I want.”

She laughs. “Is this a proposition or what?”

“Yes, but it doesn’t have to be. Come spend time with me, I don’t care.”

She licks her lips, head tilted. “You’re serious about all this. You know your brothers think you’re nuts, right?”

“I’m aware. What do you think?”

“I also think you’re nuts. But I kind of like it.”

“Which makes you just as crazy.”

“Fair point.” She kisses me again. This time, it lingers. “Come on then, my big husband, take me upstairs.”

Chapter 39

Casey

He goes down on me on the edge of the bed. His tongue, his lips, they lap me up as he kneels in front of me, his hands squeezing my ass.

“Okay, can I admit something?”

“If you have to.” His fingers tease me as he stares up into my eyes.

“I never imagined I’d like having a man on his knees like this.”

“Really? You must have a limited imagination.” He kisses my pussy then licks me.

“I don’t have a lot of experience, remember?”

He lifts my hips up and I yelp with surprise as his fingers slide deep inside. “I’m aware,” he purrs. “Would you like to change that?”

“I’m pretty sure we already are.”

“I mean, would you like to try something new?”

“I’m still getting used to the stuff we’ve been doing,” I say with a giddy laugh. “But sure, I’m open to whatever.”

“I thought you might be.” He rolls me over onto my belly, lifting my hips into the air. “I’ll go easy,” he says, licking my pussy from behind.

It’s filthy, and I feel extremely exposed, but that’s part of the fun. He seems to be enjoying himself, based on the very growly and happy noises he’s making, which drive me wild. I

never expected someone to like getting me off the way he does, but it's almost as if making me come is the whole point; his own orgasm is only secondary.

"Now, don't be alarmed," he says as he rubs my ass with one hand.

Then spanks me hard.

I gasp in alarm, looking over my shoulder. "What the hell was that?"

He spanks me again. When I try to wriggle away, he grabs me by the hair and spanks me a third time.

I gasp in shock and pain, but before I can process, he's between my legs again, licking and sucking my pussy, then he sinks his fingers deep inside.

"Oh, my fucking fuck," I groan, my brain exploding with conflicting signals, half pain and half pleasure and all of it mixed as hell. "What the hell is *that*?"

"That, my darling wife, is what a good spanking can feel like." He does it again, a hard whack on my exposed skin, before fucking me with his fingers.

"Oh, god," I moan, moving back and forth against his touch. "I thought a spanking—fuck—was a punishment."

"It can be," he says. "But it can also feel good. It depends on how you do it."

"And you know how?"

"Intimately." He spanks me again, and again, and this time he fucks me faster with his fingers and spanks me a fourth time with them buried deep in my pussy, and that throws me over the edge. I come with my mouth against the sheets, moaning into the mattress as he keeps going with his fingers. When I'm done, I roll onto my back, writhing with pleasure, legs stretched out, muscles tensed.

"What the hell," I mutter, grinning stupidly. "How the freaking hell is that supposed to feel so good?"

“It doesn’t for everyone,” he admits, kissing me lovingly, luxuriating in my body. I love when he does this—like he can’t help himself. “But for some, it’s bliss.”

“I’m one of the lucky?”

“So it seems.”

“You’re going to be spanking me more often, aren’t you?”

“Oh, yes, most definitely.”

“I can’t say I’m upset about it.”

“Good girl.” He kisses me then rolls me onto my belly again. He doesn’t spank—only massages my ass before moving his hand down between my legs again. I wiggle against him, feeling heat spread into my core. “You know what else I love about you?”

“I assume you’re going to compliment me on my charm and wit, correct?”

“Actually, I was going to say your wet pussy. But that too.”

“I think my hilarious personality is better than my wet pussy.”

“Hm, I’m torn.” He pulls my hair firmly but not too hard and kisses me over my shoulder. I get up on my hands and knees, legs spread, and he presses his cock against my aching pussy, already dripping for him.

Slowly, he sinks into me. I groan, back arching as he fucks me from behind. I don’t last long like that—it’s not great on my knees—and soon I’m straddling him, rolling my hips, bouncing up and down on his cock.

He teases my breasts, licks my nipples, sits up to kiss my lips and bite them. He heaps praise on me, tells me how much he loves my body, how much he needs to be near me, to be inside of me, and I can’t get enough of it. I grind harder, riding faster, heat building and building until I come again, my entire body going into a spasm.

Adler doesn’t stop. He fucks me through it and fills me to the brim with his cum, both of us a sweaty mess as we collapse

onto the sheets together, his arms wrapped around my body, our skin sticking together.

“You know, you don’t have to try to get me pregnant,” I tease, grinning a little.

“Why not?” he asks.

I nudge him with an elbow. “Because the contract’s bullshit? You don’t really need a kid.”

“That’s true, but what if I want one?”

A strange, sudden thrill runs down my core. “Do you really want a family? You don’t seem like the type.”

“I do,” he confesses. “I want a chance to do better than my father did.”

I close my eyes. “I like that idea.”

“I can give my children so much. I feel like I’ve been thinking about it for decades now, all the ways my father fucked up, all the ways he ruined us. I think if given the chance, I can do better.” He pauses, breathing deeply. “Or at least fuck up in different ways.”

“I think most parents screw up. Nobody’s perfect, right? Except some of them are worse than others.”

“Like yours, for example.”

I nod slightly. “Like mine.”

“I notice you haven’t been in touch with them since coming to live with me.”

“I’ve spoken to my mom a few times. It’s just—” I sigh, feeling itchy and bad, like I always do when this subject comes up. “My parents weren’t the easiest to be around. They were supportive after the accident, but only for so long. I honestly don’t think I would’ve gone back to work as fat as I did if it weren’t for my father pushing me into it.”

“I wish we were closer back then. I could’ve taken care of you the way I always wanted to.”

“And how’s that?”

“I want to give you everything. Make your life easy instead of watching you struggle.”

“You can’t take all my pain away, you know.” I rub my knee absently. “It won’t ever be like the way it was before.”

“I know that.”

“And you don’t owe me anything, either.” I shift, turn around, and look into his eyes. “I need you to understand that. I don’t want you to keep doing this because of some misguided guilt you haven’t completely dealt with.”

He looks back into my eyes and strokes my cheek. “At first, it might’ve been about that. But then the years passed and I got to know you, really got to know you, and I realized something.”

“Realized what?”

“That I care about you. It wasn’t guilt driving me anymore. It was something else.”

I feel it between us, that something else. An emotion I haven’t been able to define—or at least haven’t wanted to define just yet. The moment I think it, the moment I speak it, that’s when it’ll come into being, and I’m afraid if we try to hold on too tightly, it’ll only ruin what we have.

“I feel the same way. About you. Not about me.”

He smiles. “I know.”

“But I’m still trying to figure this out. I’m not sure exactly what I want. Everything that’s happened, and everything that’s still coming, I don’t know.”

“You’re worried.”

“About a million things. Shane, Roxie, me and you, my parents, your mother, your brothers—” I take a deep breath and blow it out. “Everything.”

“We’ll deal with it all. If you stay with me, I promise, we’ll take it all as it comes.”

“I want to do that.”

“Good.” He kisses me. “I want that too.”

“And Tony? You’re really going through with this plan?”

I nod. “He tried to hurt you, Casey. I’m sorry, but I’m not the type of man to let that go.”

“Even if it means you two are stuck in this cycle?”

“No, because I’m going to do something he doesn’t expect. Tony thinks in violence. He thinks I’m the same way. But I’m going to be better than that.”

I want to believe him. I really do. Only I saw what Tony’s like, and I’m afraid that Adler won’t be able to tame that monster. That the moment Tony gets a shot at hurting us, he’ll take it, no matter the consequences.

“I trust you,” I whisper.

“And I will take care of that trust.”

He kisses me, and for the first time in a very long time, I feel like I’m in the exact right place.

Chapter 40

Casey

I stretch out, feeling lazy. Adler's in the kitchen making coffee. I stare at the ceiling as the sound of him grinding beans echoes up the stairs, and I can't help but grin to myself. That man does nothing halfway.

The past few days flit through my mind, from the awful to the good. I keep focusing on that dinner with this family: I was so convinced that would be a total disaster, but it ended up fine. True, his mother wasn't exactly welcoming, but I can win her over eventually.

And if I can't, does it matter?

Which makes me realize something. I *want* his mother to like me because I don't plan on going anywhere. Which is strange to really consider—I went into this relationship with the assumption that it would be temporary.

Instead, I'm beginning to imagine what it would look like if I remained Adler's wife.

He comes up not long later with two cups. I sit up and sip mine. I love the way he looks at me, even though I'm just in some old t-shirt and a pair of panties. He sighs as he stretches out and glances at the clock.

"I don't remember the last time I was in bed at nine in the morning."

"Really? You should try it sometime. When I have to work a late shift at the tables, I love sleeping in."

“You don’t have to do that anymore, you know. We can set your schedule however you like it.”

My eyebrows arch. “Is that favoritism?”

“Yes,” he says flatly.

“Here I was assuming you didn’t want your wife dealing cards.”

“I don’t, but if you insist on it, then at least I’ll make it as pleasant for you as I can.”

“That’s... surprising, if I’m honest.”

He looks at me. “Not everything I do has some ulterior motive. Sometimes I just like making you happy.”

A strange warmth spreads into my core. I’ve never had someone say anything remotely like that to me before, much less really mean it.

And Adler means it. I can see it in his eyes, but more, I can see it in his actions. Even when what he wants pushes up against what I need, he inevitably makes the decision that will make me happy, or at least he compromises.

“Okay, that makes me wonder. What are your expectations for a wife?” I sip my coffee to cover my anxiety. “You know, for a real one.”

His smile is insufferable. “Well, if I had a *real* wife, not this fake one, I’d expect loyalty. I’d expect affection. I’d want to make her as happy as I can, with the caveat that I have many important responsibilities. I’d need her to be flexible.”

“Is that your long way of saying you work too much and you’ll prioritize your job?”

He tilts his head from side to side. “More that the job doesn’t give a damn what my priorities are.”

“I understand.” I chew on my lip. “That’s not so bad really.”

“What are your expectations for a husband?”

“I’ve never thought about it,” I admit. “Back when I was dating, I was too young to be thinking about marriage. Then

the accident happened, and I was too injured to be thinking about marriage. It only ever really occurred to me when you came into the picture.”

“All right, then what are your expectations for me?”

“Well, *if* we were real—” He gives me another maddening smirk. “I’d also want loyalty.”

“That’s easy. You have it already. You’ve had it for a long time.”

My cheeks flush pink. “Also, I’d want honesty.”

He lets out a breath and runs a hand through his hair. “I haven’t always been the best at that.”

“It’s hard to be in a serious relationship with someone when they’re holding things back.”

“I understand.”

“Could you give me that? Real transparency? Real honesty?”

He’s quiet for a moment as he holds the coffee cup up to his face, inhaling the steam. His eyes close in thought, and he finally speaks after taking a long drink.

“Yes and no,” he says.

“You made me wait way too long for that answer.”

“That’s because I wanted to give you a different one, but you want honesty, and I’m being as honest as I can. There are things in my life that I will not tell you about.”

“Your *other* business.”

“Yes, some of the Costa family’s schemes and connections will remain private.”

“Because of your brothers?”

He shakes his head. “Because of you.”

I squirm, holding tightly to my cup. “Can you just come out and say what you mean?”

“I can’t risk you getting hurt again, not after what happened with Tony. If you were my wife for real, I’d keep you away

from all of that. I'd isolate you, insulate you, make sure my enemies don't consider you a threat or a target or a means to hurt me. That might mean I disappear for a few days without a good explanation on why I left, and it might mean that you aren't ever sure why I'm taking certain meets with specific individuals, to give you a vague example, but I promise I will tell you if something is important."

I drum my fingers on my knee. "That's going to be hard to live with."

"*If* we were real," he says.

"Right. If we were." I drink my coffee. God, it's really good. Fruity and floral. "How much does your mother know?"

"More than she should. Less than my brothers."

"I want to be on that level."

He laughs softly. "If we were real, I'd consider it."

"If we were real, then I could live with that. But I want to know if *you're* in danger too, not just me."

"That'll be hard, since I'm always in danger."

"You know what I mean. Active, immediate threats, that sort of thing."

"I don't want to worry or scare you."

"If we were real," I say softly, looking into his eyes. "I'm willing to accept some fear in my life."

He lets that sink in. "If we were real, I could promise that I won't ever lie to you, and I will tell you as much as I can."

I put my hand on his knee. "One more thing."

"What's that?"

"Children."

"Ah," he whispers. "This again."

"It was a part of the contract." My cheeks are burning red. "And I'm the kind of girl that fulfills her promises."

He tenses. The expression on his face is that of a man trying very hard not to smile. “Are you?” he asks.

“If we were real, I assume you’d want baby. And I guess... I think that’d be fine with me.”

“How many?”

“Two.”

“I want five.”

“I’ll settle at three and a half.”

“We’ll round down to three then.” He leans forward and kisses me gently. “If we were real, I’d want to get started right away.”

“I think you just enjoy the process.”

“Very true.”

“I’d want to wait. A little while anyway. Might’ve already happened though.” I frown down at myself. “We haven’t been careful.”

“No, we haven’t been. I blame myself.”

“Good. I blame you too.”

He laughs and kisses me again. “If we were real, I’d want to tell you something every day. Can I say it now?”

I touch his cheek, looking into his eyes. My body shivers, but I nod. “If you want to.”

“I love you, Casey. I’ve loved you for a very long time.”

I pull in a breath. A lump fills my throat. Why am I reacting this way? It’s what I wanted to hear—what I’ve been dreaming about since the start of this fake relationship. From the beginning I’ve wanted it to morph into something more and now here we are, talking about the shape our future’s going to take.

Together.

“I love you too,” I manage.

He kisses me. I spill my coffee. He curses, strips the sheets, strips me, and shows me exactly how good a punishment can feel.

Chapter 41

Adler

The meeting takes place at a neutral hotel.

The place is loud. Lots of neon, lots of music-themed memorabilia. Slot machines beep and spin, a group of young men cheer around a craps table. I sit at a sports bar with an electronic gambling machine in front of me. Tony sits on my right.

Around us, our men are spread throughout the casino. Will's sitting nearby, working hard to pretend like he's not trying to eavesdrop. Tony's second, Dustin, lurks in the shadows, and their soldiers are nearby too, waiting for an excuse to cause violence.

But everyone's on their best behavior.

"I'm surprised you showed," I admit once the bartender brings our drinks.

"You sent your brother-in-law. I felt it was a reasonably important gesture." He glances at me, eyes narrowed. I know that look. After all these years, Tony hasn't changed much, despite everything that's happened. "Why aren't you trying to kill me?"

I grunt at that and take a sip of the whiskey. It's good stuff. Smoky and strong. I lean back in the chair, studying my old friend.

He's older, gray hair, soft stomach, but the age has made him more distinguished. It softened his old Italian gangster face

into something respectable. It's the face of a man that would blend into Congress.

"My wife asked me not to."

Tony laughs. He seems genuinely surprised. "Did she really?"

"She doesn't think violence is the answer."

"Seems like she married the wrong man then."

"Maybe people change." I tilt my head. "Maybe they don't."

"What do you want, Adler?"

"I want to make a deal with you, as distasteful as that feels." I don't look at him as I talk. If I keep studying my old friend, I'm going to lose my temper. This man tried to hurt my wife. He tried to kill her like she's a problem that could be easily wiped off the map.

If this plan is going to work, I have to keep it together.

Even if I'm *seething* internally. I hate every second of this. Sitting here next to Tony, it's demeaning, it's beneath me, and yet it's necessary. This one last time at least.

"The great Adler Costa wants to cut a deal." Tony swirls his drink. "What made you come around, huh? Is it the new hotel? I know you're threatened by it. Or maybe the fact that I'm getting into politics?"

"Both," I say. "The politics more than the hotel."

"I knew you'd hate it. You fucking Costas think you run this town, and you don't like sharing power with anyone else. Too bad you can't stop this from happening."

"You're right, and I don't want to."

Tony's eyebrows raise. "You realize I'm going to torch you? The second I have the ear of lobbyists and senators, I'm going to make sure they're aware of just how shady your business dealings are. This is the end for you."

"Actually, I'm thinking it's the beginning of something better." I shift toward him. "Here's what I propose. You will act as my surrogate in Congress. You will take up my causes, vote the

ways I need you to vote, and make contacts among those senators and lobbyists you just mentioned. You'll also give me a fifty-one percent stake in your new hotel."

Tony just laughs with astonishment. "Why the fuck would I do any of that?"

"Because if you don't, I'll go speak with Rhonda Donaldson. She's the chair of your political party, isn't she? Without her support, you won't get any national attention, no backing from donors, nothing. You'll be dead in the water."

"Rhonda already knows all about you," Tony sneers. "I've been speaking with the party for months now. They know everything and they're prepared to see this through."

"But do they know about the shady Chinese billionaire that's financing your new hotel? You know, the one with the close ties to the Chinese Communist Party? You do know connections to the CCP are frowned upon in government, correct?"

Tony's face droops. He looks slack-jawed, off-balance. "You don't know what you're talking about," he says, but his denial isn't forceful.

"I'll give Rhonda everything my people have dug up over the last year, ever since you started construction on that fucking monstrosity. If you hadn't gotten into politics, this information wouldn't matter much—you'd just be another guy with questionable business practices. But as a congressman? Well, you didn't hide your dirt well enough. Not before I found it."

He takes several deep, angry breaths. "That isn't enough. I won't work with you, Adler. Not after all the shit we've been through."

"You think I like this? You think I want to be anywhere near a traitorous coward like you? Tony, you tried to kill an innocent girl. You're pathetic. You make me sick. And I will fucking *own you* for the rest of your life. Because if you disobey me, I will release everything I have, every bit of dirt, every scrap I've collected over the years. I'll torch your new career. I'll burn the whole fucking city to the ground."

He gapes at me. Anger twitches across his expression. He's going to explode—and say something he'll regret.

“Or—” I say before he can open his mouth, “You can play along. Do jobs for me. Act as an extension of the Costa family in Congress. That way, you can keep your exciting new political career, and who knows? Maybe one day in the future, you'll amass enough power to cut me out completely.”

But we both know that'll never happen.

Though I don't say it out loud.

His rage doesn't go away, but it dims enough that he's thinking. Tony's a lot of things, but at least he's clever enough to see I'm ready to do whatever it takes to ruin him, even if it means destroying myself in the process. He went too far, and this is his only option.

“I'll consider it,” he says at length. “You can't have the hotel though. That's mine.”

“I don't give a fuck about the Oceanview.”

“And you can't have fifty-one percent.”

“I'll gladly take slightly more than half of your stake then.”

“Mother—” He takes a deep breath. “I'll think about it.”

“It's either this or everything burns. And you know me, Tony. I don't make idle threats. Just think about it and be smart.”

“I'll be in touch.” He shoves back from the bar. Before he walks, he looks at me. “How'd you find out about the Chinese?”

“I've had spies in your organization for a long time. You think I'd let you run around my town without keeping close tabs?”

His jaw tics. “All this for the girl, huh?”

“All this and more.”

He shakes his head and walks away. I watch him go for a moment before Will sits down in his place.

“Well?” Will asks. “Is he going to bite?”

“He’ll struggle against it for a while, but he’ll come around. And if he doesn’t, we’ll burn down his new hotel and blame it on an electrical fire.” I grin viciously. “Then we’ll kill him.”

Will laughs. “I’m guessing that was plan A and this is plan B.”

“That would be correct.”

“This is better. Killing Tony would make you feel better for a few seconds, but this is going to net your family more in the long run. A real connection in Congress—it would be a huge win.”

“Assuming we can leverage him enough.”

“We’ll dig up even more dirt in the meantime. Don’t worry about that. Tony’s as filthy as they come.”

“This feels soft,” I admit like I’m spitting on the floor.

“That’s true, but anyone can pull a trigger. It doesn’t make you strong. Taking control of Tony, making him suffer, bleeding some benefit out of him, that’s what a real Don would do.”

I grunt in reply. Will pats my shoulder before walking off. I stay at the bar a little longer before I take out my phone and send a text.

Adler: Are you busy?

Casey: Just finished up some time on the tables. What’s up?

Adler: Meet me at home.

Adler: I’m feeling stressed.

Casey: Is this a booty call?

Adler: Yes.

Casey: I’m into it.

Adler: Good. See you soon.

I finish my drink, stand up, and shove my phone in my pocket.

A real Don, a real husband, a real family man.

I feel the pieces click into place, and I see a path forward from the dark forest I’ve been stuck inside for the past seven years.

It's not easy—there are twists and turns I'd rather not travel—
but this is how I'll grow.

All I have to do is walk.

Chapter 42

Casey

One Year Later

THE SUNRISE IS PACKED FLOOR TO CEILING WITH MEN AND women in business-casual outfits streaming around the slot machines and gaming tables. Not many are gambling—though a few adventurous souls were doing a great job losing money at the blackjack table—and all eyes are glued on the television screens.

“How much are we losing again?” I ask Adler as he brings me a club soda with lime, my tenth of the evening. “Revenue-wise from closing down the casino for the night?”

“A lot,” he says, hugging me against him. “But this isn’t about the casino.”

I grumble that maybe it should be, even though I know it’s right.

The center of all the action is down in the sports book, though tonight there aren’t any sports on the enormous wall-sized TV screens. Instead, it’s CNN droning on about projections, polls, and election results, as the numbers stream into their studio.

And at the base of all those screens, shaking hands, laughing it up, grinning like a maniac, is Tony Vetch.

“Did you ever think we’d see that guy in here?” I ask.

Adler grunts in reply. “I’m going to have the entire place fumigated once he’s gone.”

“We might as well burn it down.”

“Good point. Once the creatures are inside, there’s no getting rid of their stench.”

I snort-laugh and let out a long breath. “All right, that’s enough standing. My knees are killing me.” I press a hand against my pregnant belly. “Who knew that adding a thousand pounds of weight would make all my injuries worse?”

Adler practically carries me to the nearest bar, snarls at a guy in suspenders to fuck off, and gets me sitting down. I smile at him apologetically, not sure if he was important, but the guy hurries away.

“Thank you, husband,” I say and give him a prim kiss, but before he can pull back, I grab his hair and keep him in place. “When this baby is out of me, I am going to thank you *so* fucking hard.”

“Don’t worry, love, we both know I do all the *thanking*.”

“Did you say spanking?”

“You have a hearing problem.”

“I guess so.” He grins as I release him. I lean back, rubbing my knee, and watch Tony prowling around.

I hate that he’s here.

Not because I’m afraid of him—what happened last year is very much in the past now—but because he’s such an odious part of our business.

I don’t like having any associations with the guy.

But I’ll admit, he’s useful. He’s already making introductions for Adler, breaking the Costa family into a new elite level of influence. Meanwhile, Vetch’s own organization has all but crumbled as his attention has shifted from street-level Atlantic City brawling to transforming himself into a *respectable* politician.

He even has a new wife—an anchor on some small-time online news start-up with hair so stiff from spray it might as well be straw. They're perfect together.

This whole show is his ultimate weakness: he wants to be a politician more than anything in the world, and he's willing to do whatever it takes to achieve his goals. That includes taking my money and my patronage—and letting me own him. Making a deal is all about finding what the other party wants and giving it to them—and extracting everything in return.

As Tony's procession moves past, Adler raises a hand. Tony looks over—and spots the two of us sitting nearby. He excuses himself and hurries over, grinning the whole time.

"Thank you for hosting this, Adler," he says, shaking my husband's hand.

"You know where we stand," Adler replies, talking very softly so only Tony and I can hear. "And you know your place. I need to remind you what will happen if you decide to step out of line."

"I understand," Tony says through his plastered-on smile. "You prick."

"Good boy." Adler releases him and Tony hurries off. He sighs and leans up against the bar, flagging the waitress for a whiskey. "I really thought owning him would be more fun than it is."

"Still wish you had killed him a year ago?"

"Don't think he's out of the woods yet."

"Oh, Adler, my big, scary husband." I grin and lean against him. "Everyone's trembling when you're around."

"They tremble with fear. You tremble with something else."

I roll my eyes. "I love you. You know that?"

"I love you too."

"If Tony's a problem, I give you permission to sink him to the bottom of the Atlantic. With all due respect."

“Thank you for permission.” He kisses me softly. “Now, let’s go watch the returns come in. I think our boy’s going to win.”

“He’s already up by ten percent and almost everything’s reported. Pretty sure it’s a landslide.”

“We’ve created a monster.”

“No, we *own* a monster.” I take Adler’s offered hand and get to my feet. “Your mother’s here, over at the slots. Gambling.”

“Donating to the cause.” Adler squints toward her. “Should we say hello?”

“I will. You go on ahead.”

“You sure?”

“Positive.”

He kisses me again and walks off toward the televisions. I sigh, shuffling over toward where Adler’s mother is jabbing at the electronic slot screen with her manicured finger.

“Good evening, Casey,” she says, glancing at me. “How is the baby?”

“The baby’s fine. How are you?”

“Tired. Sick of all the commotion. I remember when the Sunrise was a respectable place.”

“That’s not how Adler remembers it.” I sink down in a chair at the machine next to hers. “I’ve been thinking. We don’t have a name for the baby yet, and if it’s a girl, I was maybe going to name her after you.”

Her eyebrows raise and her finger hesitates over the spin button. “Really? Why?”

“Because Adler would like it and it’d be nice if our child had half the strength you do.” I’ve gotten to know his mother very well over the last year, and though she still doesn’t fully accept me, things are better than they were. And now I feel as though I understand what she went through as the wife of Adler’s father.

“I’d like that.” She jabs the screen, lips pressed together. “Aren’t you up late, dear? You’re pregnant. You should be resting.”

“Yes, I know,” I say, getting to my feet again. “Lovely speaking to you.”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

I walk off, smiling to myself. I pause in the crowd and look around—at the casino, at the people moving through it, and at Adler standing among them like he could control the flow of humanity with a finger. My grin gets bigger, and I approach him, getting up on my toes to kiss his cheek.

“I’m happy you hit me with that car,” I whisper.

He grimaces. “That’s not funny.”

“Well, I am.”

“And anyway, Tony did it.”

“Then I’m happy you were there. Otherwise, I don’t know where I’d be right now.”

“You wouldn’t be in pain.”

“Overrated.” I kiss him again. “Now how about escorting your wife back to our apartment? Your mother says I need to rest and that’s excuse enough for me to ditch out on this.”

“Happy to oblige.” He offers me his arm, and I take it.

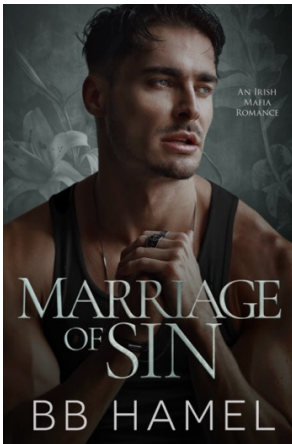
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Preview: Marriage of Sin



Chapter One: Dara

There is no way in the world I can face my bank account sober.

But I also need to make sure I can afford to drink before I go into this bar and drown all my problems in overpriced wine.

I take a deep breath as I thumb through my phone. Around me, traffic buzzes along Boylston Street in downtown

Boston, kicking up fumes. Young couples sit outside of bars talking in the early evening shade cast by enormous office and apartment buildings, dads push strollers, old people walk dogs, and here I am a few blocks away from where I work sitting on a bench beside a scraggly tree about to find out just how bad my life's gotten.

Is this rock bottom? Let's find out.

I unlock my banking app, close my eyes, take a deep breath, and open them again.

Zero dollars stare back. Zero in checking, zero in savings.

My heart sinks into my feet. Zero, zero, zero. Nothing across the board. I knew it would be bad—but this is so much worse than I ever could've imagined.

“Lucas, you motherfucker,” I whisper, horror and anger warring against sorrow.

I really wish I bought that drink first.

But at least I didn't sit through the indignity of my card getting declined.

This wasn't how I thought today would end. I figured it wouldn't be great—getting woken up at six in the morning by my roommate and the man I thought I was going to marry, only to find out that they've been sleeping together behind my back, and oh, yeah, they're in love, that's not easy.

That was a pretty spectacularly horrendous way to start the day.

But it somehow took a nosedive at five-thirty when I was leaving the office, only to get a text.

Lucas: I'm so sorry about this morning.

Lucas: And I'm so sorry about the money and your things.

Lucas: It's just, I'm in love with Christine, but we're both broke. You'll be OK, right? You have that amazing job. You'll be fine.

I stared at my phone for the five-block walk to a local bar called Trevi's before I finally worked up the nerve to find out what he meant by *the money*.

Which is why I'm staring at a bunch of big, fat zeroes.

I open the messages app and start texting furiously.

Dara: You emptied my bank account???

Dara: And what do you mean my things????

Dara: Lucas, you piece of shit, what did you do???????

I'm in full-on panic mode. I knew Lucas was a monster, but I never imagined he would sink this low. When we met in school, he was a lovable dork, a guy that loved cheap beer, football, and bad horror movies. I fell for him when he rubbed my feet during a marathon of Halloween movies.

I thought he was the one. Lucas isn't anything exciting, but he's been dependable, always there for me, always asking how my day went, always offering those lovely foot rubs of his.

So what if there weren't fireworks? There weren't nuclear bombs? It was steady. Comfortable.

Now it's like my skin's been peeled off, leaving me raw.

I'm about to call my ex when I hear my name called out. I flinch, look up, and find my manager, Johnnie, standing a few feet away flanked by a couple of Patagonia Bros in matching vests I don't recognize.

"What are you doing all alone out here?" Johnnie asks, flashing me his patented Country Club Smile. He runs a hand through his wavy hair. "Come to think of it, I don't think I've ever seen you outside of work, Dar."

I grimace at the nickname. Nobody calls me Dar except for Lucas, even though I've asked him not to half a dozen times. "I was about to get a drink actually," I say quickly, glancing down at my phone. The screen remains dead and quiet. No reply from the piece of crap that ruined my life. I'm thinking about calling the police, about getting the FBI involved, but mostly about tracking him down myself and killing him with my bare hands.

But I know it won't help.

Because whether I catch Lucas and strangle the life from him or not, my heart's still broken.

And my bank account's still empty.

"You should come with me, Patagonia Bro 1, and Patagonia Bro 2 over to McNally's. Come on, Dar, you seem fun. Let's have a good time, yeah?"

He doesn't actually say *Patagonia Bro*, but I blank out their names on purpose. I don't have time for this, but Johnnie's my manager at a heavily male dominated accounting firm, which means I have to smile, bat my eyelashes, and play nice. Otherwise, they call me a bitch behind my back, and I don't get promotions or raises.

"Sorry, I'm meeting a friend," I lie, shifting uncomfortably. "Otherwise, I'd totally come."

“A guy friend?” Johnnie sits next to me while his Patagonia Cronies leer at me, both of them grinning, like this is totally normal behavior. Johnnie’s breath reeks like liquor. Did he cut out early and start drinking or something? “What’s his name? Actually, don’t worry, it’s fine. I just figured, you know, since there’s a vibe here, it might be fun to explore it outside of a professional setting.”

His eyes are glassy as he glances down at my tits. Yep, definitely shitfaced.

“I’m sorry,” I say, blinking rapidly. “A vibe? What are you talking about?”

“Ah, damn, don’t get all feminist on me, okay, Dar? It’s just, I notice the way you look at me when you come into my office. I notice the blouses with the top two buttons undone? You’re pretty hot, you know? A solid six, but you could be an eight if you worked out more. You wear some borderline inappropriate attire, but nobody cares because you have absolutely *fantastic* tits.”

I feel like my head’s about to explode.

Johnnie’s always been a prick. He’s one of those Nantucket Assholes with a trust fund the size of Georgia and a yacht to match. He only has this job because his uncle’s a founding partner. Johnnie’s got fewer brain cells than my bank account has dollars, which is still zero, by the way.

“There’s absolutely no vibe,” I say quickly, standing up. “And you have to be absolutely fucking batshit *insane* to talk about my clothes and my fucking tits right now.”

Under normal circumstances, I’d never talk to a vindictive little prick like Johnnie like that, but I’m way past my last nerve, basically working on reserve nerves at this point, and I’m lashing out.

Johnnie’s face falls. His Patagonia Cronies stare at him like they’re about to laugh—which makes his face turn a disturbing shade of pink.

“You fucking bitch,” he says, standing up to stare down at me. “You do realize I’m your manager, right?”

There it is. I was waiting for that. The threat in his tone is clear.

“I’m not in the mood for this,” I say, shaking my head. “Just leave me alone, okay? I’ll pretend you didn’t just say the most asinine, sexist thing in the world, and you can swallow your pride for once in your life.”

“Fuck that,” he says quietly. “You can’t talk to me that way.”

In all my time at Bankman Associates, I’ve held my tongue. I’ve kept my head down, smiled politely, nodded at inane comments, laughed at inappropriate jokes. I’ve done all the things women have to do in a toxic workplace environment. I’ve done it, because the job pays exceedingly well, and I was raised to value money more than anything else.

More than my own self-esteem, apparently.

But this is too far.

Ten hours ago, I had a boyfriend.

A nice boyfriend. Nothing spectacular, but still. A guy I thought was going to propose soon. We had plans, long-term plans. We were merging financial assets. I had a lot of hard-earned money saved in the bank, ready to be spent on a wedding, or a down payment for a house, or maybe on baby clothes and a crib.

Now, I’m twenty-four years old, and I have none of that.

Instead, a white-hot rage (admittedly pointless and impotent) burns in my belly.

I jab a finger at Johnnie. “Listen to me, you walking stock option. I need you to apologize right now. I need you to accept the consequences of your actions, because other people have feelings. You realize that, right? You can’t go around saying whatever you want, fucking whatever moves, stealing whatever you need, throwing away whatever you don’t care about, cheating on me with my fucking roommate, all because you’re a selfish piece of fucking *trash*.”

I’m projecting here.

A little bit, anyway.

Johnnie's gaze darkens. "You just crossed a line, Dar," he says through his teeth. "I don't know what's gotten into you, but you're *not* going to get away with embarrassing me in front of my bros."

He grabs my arm. I stare as his fingers dig into my flesh, biting down hard. I yelp, more from shock than from pain, but he doesn't let me go.

I start to freak out.

Johnnie's a big guy, easily over six feet. His Patagonia Cronies are also tall, both of them looking like they're from Abercrombie catalogues, like they're one step away from the polo club, and neither seem to mind that their friend is publicly manhandling a girl.

This is getting out of control very quickly.

At least until a shadow appears at Johnnie's side.

"You should let her go." The voice is low and resonant with malice.

A man's standing there. Stubble on his chin. Big hands balled into fists. A pristine suit, slim fitting.

I stare at the stranger, at the tall, broad, athletically built man, as a terrified pulse shivers down my spine.

He's handsome. Sinful, absurdly handsome. Like, beyond inappropriately handsome. Dark, wavy hair pushed back in a lazy sweep. High cheekbones, tanned skin, blue eyes like early morning frost. A reddish beard clings to his cheeks, trimmed, but somehow still unruly. He's in a suit, black and tailored to his muscular frame.

Holy hell, this guy is *hot*.

Stupidly hot. Like he's a very unnecessary distraction.

Johnnie's eyes bulge. For a second, I don't think he's going to release me. I imagine he'll use me as a human shield.

Instead, his grip slackens, then disappears. "Who the fuck are you?" Johnnie snaps.

The stranger looks at me for a beat before saying, “I’m her boyfriend.”

Oh my god.

What the *hell* is this guy doing?

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