



He's my enemy
But I want him...

Wicked

TRUTHS

LILA SHARP

Wicked Truths

An Enemies To Lovers Mafia Romance

Lila Sharp

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Author's Note

Wicked Truths is Book 1 of the Wicked Truths and Lies Duet. Sebastian and Selene's story will conclude in Book 2, Wicked Lies, with a guaranteed Happily Ever After.

This is a dark mafia romance and therefore contains dark themes. Enjoy!

-Lila

Chapter 1

I weighed two identical melons in my hands while watching a man in his twenties strut by with his wallet hanging out of his pocket. His oversized Rolex jangled on his wrist as he tilted it. Quickly, I set down the melons and brushed by him.

One moment his wallet was jutting from his perfectly tailored suit pants and the next moment a hundred-dollar bill was in my wrinkled sweatpants. Before he could even notice the weight difference, the wallet was back in his pocket.

That Rolex tempted me. The amount I could pawn it off for would make a dent in this week's payment to the loan sharks. But it was too risky. A hundred dollars was an amount that man would be unlikely to miss. He'd probably think he'd overpaid his coke dealer, because he'd never suspect someone would snatch his wallet in Williamsburg. Everyone thought they didn't need to look over their shoulder once a Whole Foods came into a neighborhood.

I gritted my teeth as I visualized swiping the Rolex off his bony wrist. But the last thing I needed right now was to have to deal with the cops when they were no longer under my payroll. Everything had been so much simpler when I could just utter my name, and the cops asked what *I* needed.

Instead, I stepped back into the bodega's produce section and examined the melons again. Was there even a difference between the two? I could tell the difference between a counterfeit bill and a real bill with hardly a glance: thickness, color, and ridges were some obvious tells. But when I stared at these two melons, for the life of me I couldn't differentiate between them. It probably also didn't help that until recently, I'd had a personal chef who handled that shopping.

God, I missed Grace's soda bread.

Without looking away from the overpriced fruit, I could feel eyes burning into my back. Instinctively, I set down a melon and reached for the knife in my pocket. I stroked the handle for comfort as I glanced up at the mirror that was supposed to keep shoplifters at bay.

Late twenties. Over six feet tall. Armani suit that was filled out by his muscular frame. Square jaw, lightly bronzed skin, a clean shaven face, and lips quirked up into an arrogant smirk. It was a face I *unfortunately* recognized from my research. Sebastiano Amato: Underboss of the Amato family. The most powerful of the Italian gangs in New York City. Two bodyguards stood a short distance away, trying to appear as if they weren't all together.

With a sigh, I set down the other melon. Seriously though, how could you tell what was on the inside of melons? They both appeared good from the outside. But who could tell if they had already begun to inwardly decay while maintaining perfect appearances? Too bad I couldn't ask Grace. In my father's typical controlling fashion, he'd evicted me from my penthouse apartment when I left the Irish Mob. And there was rarely gas, let alone a functional kitchen in the places I squatted in now.

I took a few steps towards a coupon dangling from a shelf. The coupon was advertising 50 cents off organic celery. I kept my focus on the coupon as I waited for it. There. The smack of Prada leather loafers against linoleum. Then two more identical steps.

Stepping away from the coupon, I made my way out of the florescent lights of the bodega and into the blindingly bright summer sun. The footsteps stayed in sync with my own as the humid air threatened to suffocate me. God, I wish I could afford to stay somewhere with central air.

Without glancing behind me, I could hear the footsteps maintaining a safe distance as we moved along the increasingly yellowed and cracked sidewalk. First we passed by a vintage store. A woman smoking a cigarette outside glanced disdainfully at my terry cloth sweatpants with sparkly rhinestones on the butt.

I kept my face neutral, so Sebastiano couldn't judge my reaction to the slight. But internally I was exasperated. A year ago, I would've been wearing a Chanel power suit on my way to scold underperforming men. Now, I didn't have any reason to wear a suit let alone the ability to afford it.

I ran my finger over my Chanel duffel bag, noticing the threads beginning to come undone. It was the last relic of my previous life. I'd shoved some outfits in it when I'd left behind my old life. The ready-to-wear couture was long since pawned off, but I couldn't bring myself to let go of the bag.

The three sets of footsteps stayed in sync with me as we moved deeper into Brooklyn. From linoleum to gum dotted sidewalk, the footsteps never lowered their pace. Five minutes later we passed by a Goodwill where I'd stolen the sweatpants I was wearing. Five more minutes later, a bail bond service. Thankfully, I hadn't had to use their services yet. Another reminder of things I wouldn't have worried about a year ago.

I moved past a sign exclaiming, "Billy's the only man you can trust in the bond world." A cartoon figure that looked like a copyright infringement of the Brawny Man stood with a dollar bill in his hand instead of an ax. Reflecting back from the tinted window was the condescending grey eyes of Sebastiano Amato.

A few blocks farther, and decrepit stores had shifted into dilapidated row houses. I stopped in front of a house with boarded-up windows. I tugged the unlocked door open, and the hinges squeaked as I slammed it behind me.

My eyes adjusted to the darkness of the room, and I didn't bother trying to flip the switches on. All of the water and electricity in the house had been turned off when it'd been abandoned. And the squatter I'd kicked out of the place certainly hadn't done anything to improve its habitability.

Leaning against the knife pocked door, I tried to ignore the vague scent of urine permeating the house. Silently, I pulled the .22 out of my waistband and peeked through the surprisingly still in-tact peephole. Sebastiano leaned against the cracked wooden siding, raising an eyebrow in the direction of the peephole as if he knew I was staring at him.

What should I do? His guards were nowhere in sight, but I knew they would be close by. Just waiting for an opportunity to turn the yellowed walls a bright red.

I'd been wondering when this day would come. The day the Amato family finished what they started. I wanted to hide in the house until he left, but I knew I'd just be putting off the inevitable. I stroked the handle of the knife in my pocket for comfort.

If I had to deal with this, I needed to find a way to control this situation. And I knew just having one man instead of all his bodyguards surrounding me would increase my chances. I took another glance at Sebastiano's casually crossed arms. Something told me this wasn't a man who was easily controlled.

With a grimace, I kept the gun hidden behind my back as I yanked open the door.

"What do you want?" I growled at him. He quirked an eyebrow, amusement shading his eyes.

"Nice to meet you too, Selene."

His voice was a deep baritone, but its sound was melodic and almost hypnotizing. That charm wouldn't work on me, however.

"I can't say the same," I said.

"We'll see if I can change that. But first, why don't you invite me inside?" he said with a smile that showed off his straight white teeth.

I frowned, so tempted to just slam the door in his face. But I needed to be strategic. "Fine, but you're bodyguards aren't invited. Unless you're too scared of being alone with me." He *should* be scared of being alone with me, I could reach across and snap his neck before he could even blink. He pushed off the concrete siding with an agility that made me second guess that thought.

"Scared is not the word I'd use." The baritone of his voice sent tingles to my lower belly. I ignored it. He was obviously just trying to get me to lower my guard.

Not happening.

Chapter 2

“Welcome to my home, Sebastiano,” I said, sarcastically waving him into the house.

“Call me Sebastian,” he said with a wink before following me inside.

After Sebastian stepped into the dark living room, I slammed the door shut and flicked the deadbolt into place. Fingers of light streamed in between the boards covering the windows. But I could only see the outline of his lean, yet muscular body until he turned on his phone’s flashlight. I kept my hand tight on my gun in case he lunged at me. But the only movement was a frown that formed as he took in the buckling wood floors and missing kitchen appliances.

“If the accommodations aren’t up to your standards you can leave,” I growled at him. *If only* he would take me up on that offer.

“Just trying to find a place to sit.” His eyes landed on some warmed vomit near the cracking kitchen cabinets.

“Even if I had a chair, I wouldn’t offer it to you. Now if you don’t want me to kick you out then put your hands against the wall while I search you,” I said.

He raised an eyebrow.

I pointed forcefully at the yellowing walls.

A small smirk slowly spread across his lips. “Fine, but only because I can tell how much you want to touch me.”

I couldn’t help an eyeroll as he sarcastically approached the wall. If I’d ordered a man to do that a year ago, they’d be staring at the floor and nodding respectfully. My hand accidentally skimmed his hip as I reached for his pocket. His eyes darkened, but he remained silent. I ignored the tension in my lower stomach, and took out a pure gold switchblade with the initials S.A. on it.

Next, I pulled up his crisp white button-down shirt, revealing a dusting of dark hair and abs that looked like they

were carved from granite. When I reached for his glock, my finger brushed against his tapered stomach. His jaw tightened, and my legs clenched together. I yanked my eyelid towards my bag, and continued staring at it even after I'd dropped all his weapons inside it.

There was something seriously wrong with me. This man's family was my enemy, and I was more concerned about his abs than what he was planning on doing to me.

"What do you want?" I asked, some of the exasperation leaking into my voice.

Sebastian turned around, and kicked his designer shoe up against the yellow wall. That interaction seemed to have no effect on him other than slightly narrowed eyes. "The same thing that everyone else wants: Information on your father's business," he said.

What? That wasn't what I was expecting.

Ever since I'd quit working for the Irish Mob, a number of rival gangs in town had offered money in exchange for information. The number of people arriving with offers had grown as my debts to the loan sharks had increased.

But the Amato family... Luca Amato... A flash of images spun in front of my eyes. Darkness. The dark seemed to crawl over me. The sound of crying and the rolling in my stomach that accompanied real fear. My lungs filling up with water, and then a feeling of numbness. A feeling that I wouldn't let anything reach me.

I blinked, and my vision came back to me. Sebastian was looking down at me with a concerned expression on his face.

"What's wrong?" he asked, his voice almost gentle. The sarcastic glimmer had completely disappeared from his eyes.

I shook my head, refusing to go back down that mental route. Tucking those memories away into a corner of my soul that I didn't have to view.

"Selene, don't be worried about retaliation from your father. I'll make sure you're protected," he said.

Protected by the very people who caused me to run away from my old life? I couldn't get past the absurdity of the situation. "That's rich coming from an Amato."

"Why? We might have issues with your organization, but you aren't a part of it anymore," he said.

Weren't a part of it anymore? I chuckled bitterly. If only it were that easy. No, I might not have any of their protection, or money anymore. But you didn't just walk away from the mob. And certainly not the former heir to the Irish mob. I might've run away, but they could snatch me back up in a second, and there was nothing I could do.

"Drop the bullshit. Why are you actually here?" After my last 'interaction' with the Amato family, the last thing they'd be offering was to help me.

His brows furrowed. "I just told you why."

"No," I growled. "Why did Luca Amato send you here?" My shiver crawled up my spine at the mention of Sebastian's older brother's name. But I kept focused. I wasn't going to stand for someone messing with my mind before they fucked me over.

"He didn't send me."

I snorted. I seriously doubted that. A year ago Luca's men drugged me then- I bit down hard on my inner cheek to stop that train of thought. "Bullshit."

Sebastian rolled his eyes. "Luc didn't even want me to bother. But I knew it'd be mutually beneficial for everyone involved."

I examined him, searching for the lie. His muscular shoulders were relaxed, his strong jaw unclenched, and his eyes showed sincerity. Somehow, I didn't think he was lying. And I'd survived for a long time by being able to tell the difference.

Odd. Luca hadn't been the one to send him. And it didn't appear he was about to kill me. But it didn't matter, I'd never make a deal with the Amato family.

Still, something was bothering me.

“Why didn’t Luca want you to make a deal with me?” I knew the answer to that, but did he?

Sebastian crossed his arms. “You know the rumors about your family being responsible for my father’s murder.”

Oh, I was more than aware. It was the reason Luca had drugged and tortured me. It was the reason I’d expected Sebastian to try to snap my neck, so I wouldn’t spill what happened and start a war. But the more we talked the more I suspected that Sebastian wasn’t clued into that situation. It made sense: if it came out that the Amato family had tortured the second-in-command of the Regan family, there’d be a very bloody war. It’s the exact reason, I’d kept my mouth shut for the last year.

“And?” I said, watching him even closer now.

“And what?” he said, his brows furrowing together. Holy shit, he wasn’t lying. He really had no idea what his brother had done.

Before I could strategize how to utilize that, he spoke, “You’ll be protected if you take my offer. Not just from your father, but from the debt collectors.”

My stomach tightened at the reminder of Ray, my debt collector. I’d gone into more debt than I’d ever be able to repay. And my father sure as hell wasn’t helping with the situation. Conor had made sure that I couldn’t even get a job, so I’d be forced to go back to the family.

But Sebastian Amato wasn’t my knight in shining armor. He wasn’t going to save me from my issues. His family *was* my issue, and every moment I spent with him was dangerous. In more ways than one, because the back of my mind was working through the details of the offer. Because lately I’d come to realize how few options I had. But there was no way I could ever trust him not to screw me over.

“Get out,” I said, inclining my head towards the door.

Surprisingly, he actually listened to me. Didn’t dig in his heels and refuse to leave until I acquiesced. Instead he threw

off the deadbolt and stepped into the sweltering heat. Sunlight peaked through the opening and threw his muscular frame fully into the focus. “You should think about it, it’s a good offer.”

I gripped the warped door, and slammed it closed as hard as I could. The sound of the impact echoed through the empty room as I was enveloped in darkness.

Chapter 3

My former business partner walked into his apartment balancing bags of groceries. Ronan's body tensed when he spotted me sprawled out on his couch. But instead of reaching for his gun, he just sighed as he watched me flick through Netflix.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, but he didn't even seem remotely surprised that I'd broken into his house while he was out. After my interaction with Sebastian, I'd wanted something comfortable, something safe. Even if lately the only emotion I felt around Ronan was disappointment.

Instead of responding, I shrugged and turned my attention back to my search. I groaned when the search bar failed to show the new season of Grey's Anatomy. Nope, of course it wouldn't be available when I finally had access to Wi-Fi and a tv. At least I was able to enjoy the central air. It was way too hot to be living in a shack without even a window unit.

When he set the groceries down with a sigh on the Carrara marble countertop, I leaned back into the white sofa and fully turned my attention to him. I smiled at him, but he just rolled his eyes.

“Are you planning on telling me why you broke into my house?” he asked.

“Good to see you, Ronan.”

He raised an eyebrow while leaning his elbows on the island. “Well, it's not great to see you, Selene. You look like shit. When's the last time you showered?”

I shrugged, I hadn't exactly had access to running water.

“You better not get anything on that new sofa,” he said.

I didn't understand why mobsters insisted on having white furniture. We'd inevitably have to get blood out of it.

“Hey, do you have anything other than Netflix? I wanted to check out the new season of Grey's.” I tried to sound flippant, but I couldn't quite put the feeling into it. There was a

heaviness in my stomach that seemed to grow everytime I came to see Ronan.

“*What* are you doing here, Selene?”

“I came to ask if my father had rethought his position on my finances,” I said.

Ronan reached to open a cerused white oak cabinet. The sleeve of his black shirt slid down to reveal Irish script on his shoulder. So many of my father’s men had the same circular tattoo. Another reminder of their unending loyalty to the Regan family. I wondered if Sebastian had a similar tattoo in Italian. Why was I even thinking of that asshole?

“Are you planning on coming back to the Irish Mob?” he asked, while placing a loaf of Barmbrack in the cabinet.

“No.”

He’d asked me that question every single time I’d come to see him. My response hadn’t changed once in the last year, so I don’t know why we went through the motions.

Ronan sighed. “You already know the answer then.”

I stood up from the couch and moved toward the kitchen. Leaning across him, I ripped open a bag of Lays Sour Cream and Onion chips. “I’m his only child. He can’t just leave me to wolves,” I said.

Yet, that was exactly what my father had done, the moment I left the crime family.

“*You* abandoned him first. Just come back into the family already. I’m sure he’ll reinstate you as second-in-command.” He snatched a handful of chips out of the bag I was holding.

I rolled my eyes. “You should loan me the money. I’ve known you since I was eight, you know I’ll pay you back one day.”

“It’s because I’ve known you since you were eight, that I know I’d never see that money again.”

I shoved some chips into my mouth and glared at him.

His eyes softened. “You know I can’t loan you the money. Your father would kill me. He’s hoping it’ll force you to come back to him.”

I’d already known Ronan would reject the proposition before he even spoke. Even though he’d gone on every mission with me since I started. Even though he’d promised to protect me. I knew it was superficial: he would always choose my father over me. His loyalty to my father was eternal as that tattoo.

“I’m not coming back. He needs to accept that,” I said.

Ronan grew quiet, staring at the minimalist wooden bar stools along his kitchen island.

“Why did you leave? A year ago you just left. No explanations given.” His tone grew sharper. “What the fuck happened?”

The words were caught in my stomach and twisting my organs in unnatural ways. I turned away from him and tucked away the thoughts into a deeper corner.

“It doesn’t matter. I’m not coming back.” My voice grew so quiet I didn’t recognize it.

He shook his head, anger growing in his voice as all emotions started to drain from me. “It doesn’t make any sense. Since you were eight, you’ve always been the dutiful daughter. Any mission your father ordered you to do, no matter how dangerous, you did it. And I know, because I was with you on all of them. Then one day, you just left without a word. *None* of it makes any sense.”

I sighed at his choice of words. My life had stopped making sense a long time ago.

Although I wasn’t sure why I even bothered coming to see him. The disappointment turned more bitter every time he refused to choose me. The hope that his choice would change, slowly constricting something soft inside of me.

I turned to walk out the door when my gaze caught on sea salt caramels squares.

My favorite. My throat tightened. Even though he'd only taken care of me in the past because my father had ordered him to, I liked to think he cared in his own way. That he'd bought those chocolates because he was hoping to see me. And maybe that was why I kept coming back.

But that still didn't change the reality, or the fact that I couldn't tell him the true reason I'd left. "You've always known I didn't want this life. That I wished I could be more like Piper, and just party all day and live off my investments."

"But you aren't Piper. You are Conor Regan's daughter. You can't just leave."

I snorted. He had no idea how aware I was of that. For the last few months, I'd been trying to mimic my high school best friend's life. Piper and I bought matching Dior miniskirts and traded off who bought tables at Tao. But ever since my father had cut me off, I'd substituted trust fund dividends with money shark's loans. And that's what got me into this very situation.

Still he was wrong about one point.

"I *did* leave."

"And look how it's going. First you tried to get into medical school, and then your dad bribed the examiner into failing you. Then, you gave up on that, and tried to pretend like you weren't financially cut off. Now you're in way more debt than you should be."

"Maybe, I'll just re-take the MCAT. We both know I'd be an excellent doctor."

I took a bite out of the chocolates, and the tang of saltiness sent a wave of nostalgia through me. It was the same flavor he'd buy me after I'd beat him at the gun range. Although maybe Ronan just let me win to ingratiate himself into my life better. Did he even give a shit that I was currently breaking into crack houses to sleep?

"And then your father would just bribe that one to fail you, too. Plus, I doubt you actually really want to become a doctor."

You just want to pretend like you're on Grey's Anatomy," he said.

Okay, he might have had a point about Grey's Anatomy. When I was younger, every day when I got home from my Upper West Side prep school, I'd religiously watch and re-watch Greys. In a world where I had to slit throats and collect on gambling debts, the tv show had just seemed so normal.

Plus, living a life like those TV doctors sure as fuck beat the one I currently was living. If I could handle having my ribs broken for not repaying the loan sharks, I could handle some dumbass trying to kill me while I was operating.

"Maybe, I'll just bribe the examiner with more money than my father." It was a stupid idea, but Ronan was just pissing me off. It was easy for him to spout off about what to do when he was living in a three bedroom condo with an outdoor shower on the rooftop. I didn't even have running water at half the places I crashed out, let alone one on a private terrace where I could look down at the unfortunate souls wading through the heat of midtown.

"And where are you planning on getting that money?" he asked, his eyes darkening. Easy for him to say when his condo's monthly common charges were more than I could afford to spend on food in a year.

"The loan sharks would be more than happy to loan me more." I couldn't hold back a smirk. His angry expression made all of this worth it.

"Damn it, Selene. You know you can't fuck around with those guys."

I glanced at my hand, and all the elation I felt at working him up seemed to vanish. I was more than aware. The bruises from their last beating had finally faded.

I sighed. "Listen, I'm not going back to my dad. He needs to accept that, and let me start living my life."

"He's never going to do that." Ronan's jaw tightened before he continued, "What happened back then? Let me fix it. Please."

If only it were that easy. “You can’t fix it. And there’s nothing you can say to make me come back.”

I rolled up the Lay’s chips. Then I threw them and chocolates into my duffel bag.

“Selene, you can’t keep going on like this.”

I ignored him as I walked out the door.

Chapter 4

The second I walked into a delightfully air conditioned shop on Fifth Avenue, the saleswoman at the front lifted her upper lip into a sneer. There was no 'Welcome' or 'Let me know if there is anything I can help you with'. There was only a dismissive look at my dirt-smeared outfit. I couldn't help that the place I was staying at didn't have running water, let alone a washing machine. Or if it did at one time, all the components had been stolen.

I should've marched my formerly white colored sneakers out of the chilly artificial air back into the sweltering summer heat. I'd been stealing clothes from the Goodwill because I was so broke: I couldn't even afford a keychain here. Honestly, I really should consider just accepting free clothes from Goodwill, but I couldn't force myself to admit to someone that I needed them.

Ignoring those facts, I strode towards the women's section. It was impossible to ignore the ache of pleasure I felt when I assessed this season's ready-to-wear couture. I thumbed through the dresses. Caressing the chiffon, I wondered when would be the next time I would even have an occasion to wear something like this.

I thought back to the threatening text I had received from Ray. My now very pissed off loan shark I'd been avoiding.

I touched a black velvety dress. Maybe the next time I wore something this beautiful, it would be at my funeral. My first baby outfit was Burberry. Might as well go out in style.

I shook the thought out of my head. The reminder of the happy memories from that point in my life were more painful than the thought of dying. When I moved to the next rack, I saw it. The light hit the dress and made it shimmer reds, oranges, and yellows. It was like a mirror had caught the sun and was reflecting it with a dress. I caressed the silken bodice and admired how it felt like water turned into fabric. God, I missed my old wardrobe. Hopefully, whoever had picked it up from the consignment store was enjoying it.

“Can I help you?” The stiff upper lipped saleswoman asked. Her arms were crossed, and she was glaring at my hand like I was about to snatch the dress and run off with it.

I turned back to the dress again. A year ago, that woman would have been smiling demurely at me, gently asking if she could put anything in the dressing room. Without even looking up from the rack, I spoke.

“Can you get me that dress in a 2 and 4?”

In my peripheral vision, I watched the woman’s lips tighten into a straight line. But she grabbed the dress and walked away. Maybe she was just worried that I’d get dirt on the dress.

I directed my attention to the shoes next. I ran my hands over the platform of six inch high, inky black shoes that were completely heelless. I’d never been big on wearing anything with a platform since I was already tall. And the idea of trying to sprint away from people in these pony heels made my feet cramp.

My hand stopped moving on a cantilevered arch. There was a silken fabric that hung from it, daring me to see if the shoe fit. Or if I could even walk in it. I glanced around for another sales associate, but the only nearby one purposely turned her head towards the door when I tried to make eye contact. I shrugged and picked up the shoe.

“Get me this in a 9 and bring it to my dressing room,” I called to the saleswoman who was avoiding eye contact with me. I plunked the shoe into the woman’s hand harder than necessary.

With my chin tilted up defiantly, I strode past the woman towards the dressing room. Just daring anyone to stop me. When I got to the dressing room, I tried on the size 2 dress that the saleswoman had miraculously brought. But the second I looked in the mirror, the bitter aftertaste of chocolate bubbled towards my throat.

In so many ways, it was like looking at my reflection from a year ago. Everything about the girl looking back in the mirror

was the same. The same muscular yet lean features. The same slightly unmanageable wavy blonde hair. The same pale face. But... the eyes. They were tired, and the light seemed to have dimmed like a star that was slowly dying.

I shook my head, trying to ignore that depressing thought. Maybe instead of trying to go to medical school, I should've been an actress. I was certainly dramatic enough.

I swayed my hips and watched the breezy fabric swish around. Not that I would've been able to afford this dress with an actress' salary. Although, even being a starving actress was outside my realm of possibilities. My father wouldn't allow anyone to hire me. If I wasn't working with him, he'd rather I be penniless and miserable.

I heard a grunt, and a box dropped to the floor. Which could only mean that the saleswoman had finally brought the shoes. I was almost impressed. Based on her expression from earlier, I'd assume she'd be more likely to call security than bring me my size.

I swung open the curtain at the same time I heard a familiar high-pitched voice. A voice saved for Chihuahuas and my old high school classmate Piper.

"I asked you to get me the shoes in *cyan*. In what universe would anyone call this cyan?" Piper sighed behind a curtain.

"I'm sorry, let me get you the right color," the formerly snarky saleswoman said demurely.

The curtain opened. The saleswoman's neutral eyes widened for a moment, then narrowed.

"Oh my Gawd, Selene," Piper's voice rang from the dressing room.

She sprung from the dressing room, nearly knocking over the gaping saleswoman. Piper was wearing a body con white dress with shimmery white feathers draped on it. On anyone else, it would have looked like they had rolled in pigeon feathers. On Piper's tan body it looked like she had just stopped at a party full of Angels, and she was the focal point. Her bony arms stretched open.

When Piper wrapped me in a hug, it felt like I was suffocating between Piper's fake boobs. Still a better death than whatever Ray would have planned if I missed my next loan payment.

Piper moved out of the embrace and studied me with narrowed amber eyes. Finally, her lips moved into a smile that showed off her formerly invisaligned teeth. Piper took a step back and cocked her head like she was appraising a designer's new spring catalog.

"I haven't seen you in forever," Piper said, flicking her straightened hair back with a wave of her manicured hand. I detected a hint of hurt in her eyes, but it flashed away immediately.

"It's only been two months," I laughed, hiding my hands behind my back. I knew Piper would try to drag me to get a mani-pedi if she saw the amount of dirt underneath my chipped fingernails. Something I definitely couldn't afford right now. Not that I could afford anything I was trying on, yet here I was.

"So, what have you been up to?" I asked.

As soon as I asked the question, regret knotted up in my stomach. Now I would have to make up some lie about what I'd been up to when she inevitably asked me the same thing.

Piper pressed her tastefully plumped lips together and began, "Well, I'm having this party Friday. I invited you, but you never texted me back."

"Lost my phone again," I lied with a fake laugh. Two months ago, when Ray's threats had materialized, I'd stopped checking Piper's messages. She knew exactly how to persuade me to go clubbing or shopping, and that was the last thing I needed. I rubbed at the spot underneath my bra where the rib had recently healed. Yeah, really the last thing I needed to be doing was spending money with her.

Although, I wondered if Piper had actually invited me, or if she was just paying lip service. In a way, I was glad I hadn't

checked my phone. I didn't want to know the answer to whether or not Piper had actually missed me being in her life.

Piper's eyes softened. "Typical. So anyways..."

My body relaxed as I listened to who was going to the party. Who she couldn't believe was taking who. I'd missed this, the way she tried to sweep me back into her world without any judgment. I wish I could meld back into that world so easily.

Piper crinkled her eyebrows and said, "Speaking of which, where have you been?"

I mimicked the gesture Piper had used earlier, flicking my hand as if it were a fly, and hoping she wouldn't comment on my nails. I felt like an actress trying to shift into a former character, but merely becoming a caricature. Maybe I should seriously consider being an actress. I could kill it as a tree.

"Oh, you know, traveling. I had been meaning to see more of Eastern Europe," I lied.

Piper's mouth curled slightly at the sight of my hand, but her mouth gaped open dramatically when she looked at the ground. I followed her gaze, slightly concerned my gun had fallen out of my bag. Relief flooded through me when I realized she was staring at the black shoes I had asked for earlier.

"I bet those will look perfect with your outfit," Piper said with a knowing smile. If Piper's occupation didn't consist of trashing her apartment so thoroughly when she partied that I was surprised her maid didn't quit, then she really should have looked into being in sales. She was good. And I had a sinking feeling I wouldn't be able to resist her persuasive comments.

I shrugged. "Haven't tried them on yet."

I remembered the 800 dollar tag on them, but tried them on anyway, praying they wouldn't fit. A year ago, I wouldn't have even looked at the price tag. Spending the last two months basically homeless had shifted my perspective around money.

I slipped my foot into the obnoxiously high arch and pressed all of my weight onto my forefoot. When I crouched

down to tug the fabric around my ankles, I miraculously ended up not falling onto my ass. When I stood up, Piper clapped her hands together like a clapping monkey. With most people I'd find it obnoxious, but with her she seemed so genuinely excited that I couldn't help but smile.

"You *have* to wear those shoes to my party," she said.

I tried to picture myself walking into Piper's party. Sipping champagne worth thousands of dollars with people who never even considered money except as an abstract thought. God, I missed being like that.

An image of the past me surfaced. I was lying on the plush white rug in Piper's living room while sipping a cosmo. Piper was trying on different outfits, trying to decide which would give off the impression of: I'm available, but you're going to have to work for it. While she tried on next season's Versace resort collection, she was talking about who had hooked up with who at Tao last night.

The bitter aftertaste of chocolate crept back up my throat as I leaned into the memory. It was true I had never fully understood Piper's mind space. Our worlds were just too different. Even though I was wearing the same style of clothing, and was mingling with the same people, in a way I'd never felt like I truly belonged. How could I when Piper didn't even know Ronan's name despite the fact that I'd spent basically every afternoon with him since I was eight? Her world felt so distant from mine, even before I'd gone broke trying to replicate her existence.

But despite that distance I'd always felt, I missed her. Truly missed her.

"Sure," the words were out of my mouth before I could even process what I was saying.

"Perfect, my place on Friday. Come around 8," she turned before continuing, "Oh my God, where is f-ing sales person? I swear it's really gone downhill here."

I smiled. I missed that too, the way she could go immediately from exuberant to petulant. Piper sighed

dramatically and waltzed back into her dressing room.

I stared into the mirror. In this dress, I looked like a girl who would go to one of Piper's parties. Scratch that. I looked like I used to when I would go to Piper's parties. Before the debt collectors. Before I'd left my father. Before... that. Maybe it wasn't just Piper that I missed. I missed that old version of myself.

And that's how I found myself at the cash register buying shoes I could barely walk in, let alone run in, and a dress that I'd probably be buried in.

The saleswomen had raised their eyebrows when they saw me moving towards the cash register. Probably thinking I was intent on robbing the place. But they hadn't made any snide remarks when I handed over 2000 dollars.

Two grand that I had obtained through pick pocketing, and stealing. Not that they needed to know that. I waltzed back into the stifling heat with the white shopping bag. The feeling of carrying that canvas bag was just as fantastic as I had remembered.

Chapter 5

My smile didn't last long. The shopping bag had felt like a reprise from reality when I'd snagged an air-conditioned subway car on my trip back into Brooklyn. In my mind, I'd tried to pretend I was still the type of girl who could drop a couple grand on an outfit I'd wear once, and then promptly forget about it.

When I hopped off the subway and stepped past a passed out man with a needle next to his wrist, my bag stopped feeling like a magical gift of temporary amnesia, and more like a reminder of how truly screwed I was.

The vision of me waltzing into Piper's party was replaced with memories of the loan sharks kicking my ribs until they cracked. I stepped around a woman screaming at the cloudy sky. The exuberant energy I'd felt drained into nothing. I should be the one screaming at the sky. My life was probably more fucked up than hers was.

Instead of screaming at the darkening sky, I flopped onto a nearby bench. I slumped forward, ignoring the metal bars digging into my spine. I just gazed blankly at the woman slowly pushing her grocery cart through the park. She kept stopping every few minutes to keep yelling at an invisible figure in the air. I knew where she was coming from. But it wouldn't be an invisible figure I'd be yelling at if it was me: it'd be my asshole of a dad.

I really should head towards my temporary home, or try to figure out a plan to replace the money I'd spent. But I couldn't find the energy to move.

"Why so sad?" That familiar low-pitched voice sent a jolt through my spine that left me sitting rim-rod straight.

My loan shark settled in next to me on the bench and laughed. It was a low-pitched noise, and Ray sniffed at an invisible substance at random intervals. He leaned back on the bench and shifted his weight so he was partially facing me. I kept my expression neutral, but inside I was screaming at myself for spending that money on the outfit.

“So how are things going with our arrangement?” Ray asked, absently swiping at his red nostrils.

“Going,” was my neutral reply.

My reply was neutral, but my brain was anything but. How could I have been so stupid? I needed that two grand for this specific purpose, and of course I blew it on the first cute dress I saw. God, spending money I didn't have is what had gotten me into this mess. You'd think I would have learned by now.

Two months ago, I'd stopped hanging out with Piper and began scraping together money. And the second I saw her again, I blew all the cash I had on me.

Ray glanced at the bag by my side, and I knew I needed to deal with this. I took an internal deep breath, while keeping my expression neutral on the outside. I could handle this; I always did.

“I hope so,” Ray started laughing again. This time, he patted me on the shoulder. I tried to resist the urge to flinch away, but failed. The cords on his neck tensed up.

“Don't be like that. I'm trying to help you,” his voice went from casual to angry in a flash.

I forced my lips into a toothy smile that included my eyes; that go-to smile I had always used to calm down dangerous people who were about to spiral. After a moment, the tension in his body faded, and he leaned back against the bench.

I cocked my head and forced my voice to sound saccharine. “Look, I completely get it.” I patted his hand before continuing, “I have some money. It's just not with me right now. I know, you understand.”

Ray laughed again, but this time it came off a little too high pitched at points. His hand was in his pocket now; he was stroking something. With most people, I'd have been reaching for my gun. But with Ray, I knew I didn't have to worry about him pulling out a knife. His weapon of choice was of the self-inflicted and ziplocked variety.

“See,” he started pointing at me with a shaky hand, like I had said something hilarious. “You've been saying that for the

last two months. I warned you then I needed you to get me the money, but somehow each time I never seem to leave with much. And,” he shrugged his shoulders as if to say that we were on the same side and he was apologizing for what he was about to say, “you know what a bitch interest is.”

You would think between all the coke he snorted it would have rotted his brain a little and made him forget what I owed. But of course not. He probably could have been a Fortune 500 accountant if he wasn't such an addict. Why couldn't I have gotten someone who didn't have any brains left to snort away?

When I remained silent, he pushed back some stringy hair and looked up at the sky. “You know I'm a nice guy, but I can't keep the collectors off you forever. We have a name to maintain. If a few people don't pay us back, then everyone will stop paying us back.”

He stopped and shook his head as if he was trying to get an image out of his head. But his voice was firm when he spoke again. “I'll be back this weekend. Have the money ready, or we'll have to *collect*.”

I rubbed at the rib just below my sweat stained bra. It'd just finished healing, but if I didn't pay up, it looked likely to be re-broken by steel tipped boots. I really needed to decide who I was going to take the money from if I didn't want to wince in pain every time I took a deep breath.

Instead, I watched a couple trying to avoid the yelling woman with the grocery cart. The couple's biggest problems were likely whether or not they would get a higher year-end bonus. Whether or not they actually wanted to stay together and get married.

God, I would kill to be so blissfully unaware. To have the world seem so neutral. Had I ever been like that? Life had never felt this complicated before all this happened. Now, my life felt more similar to the woman with the grocery cart.

Out of my peripheral vision, I could see Ray watching me. What could be going through his mind was beyond me. Finally, he stood up and nodded at me meaningfully. I nodded back, but I had no idea what that meant. That I'd pay him

back? I'd sure as hell try, but who the fuck knew anymore? My capacity to hold on to cash was as likely as a baby holding a bowling ball. And the only people who could get me out of this debt would just be leading me back into the life I'd run away from. Ray strode away, clutching at whatever was in his pocket until he disappeared down an alley.

Once he was out of view, I let the neutral expression slip off my face. I'd been so stupid to take that money from the loan sharks in the first place.

I slumped back against the bench and groaned while thinking of Ray's parting words. He was right of course. Ray was always right about money, and he wasn't the type to give an empty threat. Last time he'd threatened me with 'collections', he'd followed through.

I moved my finger over an indentation three inches above my hip. The laceration had been a bitch to get to stop bleeding.

The beating from his men hadn't been a fun experience, but I wasn't concerned about being kicked around again. The question was: would this be the time it escalated beyond that?

When I had been checking up to make sure that I hadn't recently been charged with any crimes, I'd also dug up these lowlife loan shark's files. It appeared they had connections in the police department, because no charges ever came out of the murders that they were obviously connected to. But the pictures were brutal, even by my standards. Limbs flung all over the ground. So much blood that skin was barely visible.

And according to the coroner's report, the victims had been alive for the whole thing.

Chapter 6

After I could finally focus on something beyond the impending deadline, I began checking Instagram. Leaning back onto the hard bench, I scrolled through images of people who'd tagged themselves in the vicinity.

When I came across a photo of a family smiling in front of a television set, I paused my scrolling. I zoomed in on the dusty cable box on top of a clunky wooden console. I was dying to watch some Grey's, but I couldn't exactly use some random person's Hulu without them noticing the activity.

I clicked on their profile, and I smiled. An elementary aged girl was wearing oversized mouse ears that dwarfed her freckled face. Her father was holding her up in the air as princesses marched past them in a parade. The photo was posted today: they appeared to be at a theme park in Orlando.

Although that could be an old photo they just decided to post today. In incognito mode I clicked on their story from an hour ago. The little girl was hugging a green ogre. As she squeezed his comically oversized arms, a huge smile appeared on her face that showed off two missing front teeth.

Bingo. I scrolled through photos of them at their house and made sure there were no cameras. It was going to be more difficult getting into this house than the abandoned shacks I'd been living in previously. But I was dying for a hot shower, and the ability to do my laundry.



Two days later, I leaned back into a grey-and-yellow striped couch with small tufts of yellow fiber sticking out of it. A new medical show called The Intern had just started playing. It was no Grey's Anatomy, but I couldn't just flip to on-demand. I needed to leave this house exactly as I found it, and this family's on-demand viewing seemed to revolve around Dora.

A firm knock sounded against the front door and rang throughout the house. I turned off the muted television,

glancing around the house to make sure I'd left everything in its place.

It obviously wasn't the family. I watched their story fifteen minutes ago: the little kid was bouncing up and down while a man in a sweaty superhero costume signed her autograph book. Plus, no one knocks before entering their own house. Did they have a maid scheduled to come in? That didn't make sense though. The dust bunnies looked older than their kid.

When I didn't hear the telltale clicking of a key, I crept across the cream carpet and moved toward the peephole. I thought back to my hiding place in the master bedroom closet. I'd have to be silent, but I could make it there if it looked like someone was about to enter.

I pressed my face to the door and peeked through the peephole. Sebastian's arrogant face was smirking back at me, his grey eyes focused on the peephole like he knew I was behind the door watching him. Even his posture screamed cockiness.

What the fuck was he doing here? I paused for a moment, hoping he would leave. Instead he raised his hand again. Shit, I didn't want the neighbors to call the cops.

Before his hand could hit the peeling oak door again, I opened the door and pulled him in by his black suit lapel. I carefully closed it, but the door still squeaked slightly. I locked the door and swung the deadbolt in place. Then I turned to glare at him.

"Are you fucking stupid?" I whispered to him. "Do you want the cops to come and arrest us for breaking and entering?"

"I don't have to worry about them arresting me," Of course, he wouldn't. The cops wouldn't dare touch the Underboss of the Amato family. Since I'd abandoned my own family, I didn't have the same luxury.

"Why the fuck are you here? I told you I wasn't interested in your offer."

He wandered over to a leather lazy boy, and his corded arm muscles flexed as he leaned against the back of it. “Nice improvement over your old place.”

I felt like stabbing him with the knife I’d stolen from him last time. Reflexively, I snapped open and closed the engraved switchblade.

Sebastian stayed lounging in his position, his smile deepening. Part of me debated shoving him back outside, and taking my chances with the cops.

“Any chance you plan on giving that back?” he asked, nodding at the knife.

“Sure. Which artery would you like me to put it in?”

Sebastian opened his mouth, laughter in his eyes. Before he could speak, the sound of the front door handle jiggling echoed through the silent house. A moment later, the door clattered against the deadbolt.

My legs tensed, ready to dash to my hiding place. But when there were no further sounds from outside, I glared at Sebastian. He never went far without his men circling around. Was it them?

He silently shook his head. Not that I trusted him, but it made sense. Why would his guards randomly have access to the keys?

“Where is the deadbolt key?” A deep voice echoed outside the door.

With my free hand, I reached for my bag. Thankfully, I’d been prepared for this unlikely scenario. Everything I owned was in that bag, and I’d made sure to leave nothing out of place.

I nodded my head to the bedroom, internally groaning to myself. Thankfully, he silently padded behind me. Once we reached the carpeted floor of the bedroom, I sprinted for the large walk-in closet while he moved at an agonizingly languid pace behind me. I hurriedly gestured towards the six foot wide armoire that was wedged into the back of the closet. I couldn’t

believe I was seriously asking him to squeeze in with me. But I couldn't afford to go further into debt by paying off the cops.

"There's room behind the armoire. I made it into a hiding spot in case some dumb ass got me caught," I said when he was finally close enough for me to whisper to.

Muffled cursing echoed outside. Maybe the man wouldn't find the key to the deadbolt. Whoever he was.

Allowing the cursing to muffle the closing of the closet door, I began explaining my plan, "These walls are paper thin." I cringed as I remembered how thin they were. For the last two days, I'd heard the neighbors' morning 'calisthenics'.

I continued, "You'll need to climb over that without anyone hearing you."

I glanced down at his muscular legs straining against his tailored suit pants. The armoire was seven feet tall, but I begrudgingly admitted to myself that he'd be able to manage it.

I tensed my body, preparing myself to jump over the top. When I bent my knees to jump, his large hands grasped my waist. Was he seriously making a pass at me when I was moments away from getting caught? I turned towards him and raised an eyebrow at him. But he ignored my look and lifted me into his arms, bridal style. My right arm was pressed up against his rock-hard chest while his muscular arms gripped me tightly. The physical sensation sent heat down to my lower body. I suppressed a moan building up inside me.

His warm hand caressed the back of my legs as he deadlifted my body towards the popcorn ceiling. The fact that I hadn't kicked him in his smirking face probably had more to do with me not wanting to alert the neighbors of our presence.

That was the *only* reason.

Chapter 7

When my butt was resting on the cracked top of the armoire, I stared down at him for a moment. His face held a tension that I'd never seen before. It didn't make sense, because as he'd said before, *he* didn't have to worry about the cops arresting him.

At the thought of having to deal with paying off the cops to erase their body cam footage and walk away, I snapped back into action, and swung my legs towards the back of the closet. Then I pressed my palms into the top of the armoire. Feeling grateful I'd kept up my intensive workout routine even at derelict houses with only rotted furniture to lift, I lowered myself into the small gap behind the armoire.

"Found it!" the deep voice echoed from the other side of the house. Shit.

"Get in," I forced myself to whisper, even though I felt like screaming at him for being so slow.

When I didn't hear him move, I pulled myself up so I could glare at him over the top of the armoire. His eyes were glazed as he stared straight ahead at the dresser.

That annoying squeaking noise that I'd learned to associate with the front door echoed through the house. Sebastian still hadn't moved an inch.

"Please," I whispered.

His jaw tightened, and he stared at the armoire for another moment. And all I could visualize was having to come up with enough money to make this situation go away when the cops showed up. I'm sure Ray would respond *really well* to me asking to add to my loan.

Or maybe this was Sebastian's plan? When the cops arrived, he could call in a favor for me. Then I'd be indebted to him, and be pressured into giving him the information about my father's gang.

"Please, don't make me beg." I tried to make it sound like a joke, but I hated the way my voice cracked as I spoke.

He placed his hands on the top of the dresser, and his arm muscles clenched as he pulled himself up. A distant bedroom door clicked open as Sebastian silently swung his legs onto the top of the armoire. Thank God this was a three bedroom house. But I couldn't depend on them not picking this room to come into next. I lowered myself into a tight ball in the corner.

Sebastian stared down at me from the top of the dresser. Why was he hesitating? Footsteps padded this way. With a grimace, he lowered himself into the corner beside me. The space was so tight that his corded arms were pressed up against me.

The bedroom door creaked open and light trailed into the room. I could feel the tension radiating off Sebastian: his arms were tensed like a coil that was about to spring. He was obviously anxious, which didn't make any sense. If we got caught, the only person the police would take away was me.

There was a clicking sound and then an overhead light flickered on.

"I don't see anyone here, miss." The deep voice from earlier carried through the room.

Muffled footsteps moved towards our location.

"There were four suspicious men peaking in the windows. I *know* they were casing the joint," a feminine voice said.

Casing the joint? Did this lady think she was on *The Wire*? The closet door creaked open, and I held my breath.

"Well, we've searched through most of the house. And there's no sign of a break-in," the deep voice replied.

"Well, check again. I know I'm right."

The door closed, and the muffled footsteps moved into another part of the house.

"Are you okay?" I whispered into Sebastian's ear. My words were quiet enough that they wouldn't be able to hear. Although, I really shouldn't be pushing it.

"Aww, are you worried about me?" he said.

The condescending tone of his voice sent a shiver down my spine. No man had even spoken to me that way. My father's men always spoke to me with a hint of fear behind their voices. Sebastian's eyes narrowed as he watched my expression.

"Not at all," I growled, slightly louder than I meant.

He let out a small chuckle, and the warm puff of air on my neck had my body tensing tighter.

"You might want to speak a little quieter if you don't want them to catch you. Although, I'll admit I wouldn't mind watching the police force your hands behind your back."

An unbidden image peppered my mind: Sebastian laughing mockingly while the police officer's restrained my arms. Whispering in my ear as the police pinned me to the wall... A small part of me wanted to continue with the fantasy, but the more rational part of me prevailed.

"Fuck off," I growled.

He shrugged, but there was a knowing look in his eyes. "If you say so."

Before I could respond, the front door let out its telltale squeaking noise. Immediately, Sebastian leaped up from his position. Before I could tell him to wait a moment in case they came back inside, he'd already vaulted over the armoire.

I knew he'd been at this less than a year, but he should've known better than that. With a sigh, I stood up. If our position was already compromised, there was no point in staying in this dusty corner.

I jumped up onto the top of the dresser, and this time he didn't offer a hand. He was staring ahead, a sheen of sweat on his forehead. It was obvious that the sweat had nothing to do with physical exertion. As much as I hated to admit it, he was in fantastic shape.

The most obvious answer was that he was claustrophobic. If he hadn't been distracting me when we were behind the dresser, I would've reached that conclusion much sooner.

I moved out of the closet, and he followed behind me. When I glanced towards him, his face was still uncharacteristically tense. In our world, we couldn't allow ourselves to miss our enemies' weaknesses. It was time to test my theory, so I gestured up at the ceiling.

"It's not worth risking them seeing us leave. We should go out through the air duct," I said. I wondered if he'd noticed the through-the-wall A/C units underneath the windows.

He shook his head.

"Give me one good reason we shouldn't," I said, while watching for any shift in his expression.

"This apartment doesn't even have central air, so there isn't even ductwork for us to crawl through," he said.

More observant than I would've guessed, but his tensed shoulders at the idea of going into a crawl space gave me the answer I needed anyway.

He nodded towards the front door. "Check the peephole. They're probably gone."

With a shrug, I peeked through the peephole. A woman in her mid-fifties was gesturing angrily at my front door. Next to her stood a man with brown hair and a polo shirt that read "Regal Apartments Management".

The man was absently jangling an oversized keyring as she continued ranting. She finally stopped and looked at him pointedly. He shrugged and began flicking through his phone. The woman's nose pinched up. Without even glancing up from his phone, he walked away.

She stared at him for a moment, her expression growing angrier. Shaking her head, the woman stomped into an apartment three doors down. Even though I was tempted to rush out the door, I waited.

A minute later, the woman burst out of her apartment with a lawn chair wedged into her sweat-dampened armpit. She unfolded the plastic chair and placed it in front of her apartment door. Facing towards our apartment.

I stepped away from the door, and whispered to Sebastian, “It looks like we’ll be stuck here awhile.” I couldn’t hold back my groan.

“That doesn’t sound so terrible,” he said while slowly easing off his suit jacket. His eyes darkened as he slowly stripped the jacket from his body.

Chapter 8

Sebastian tossed his suit jacket over his shoulders, but all I could focus on was the way his arm muscles tightened against his white button-down shirt.

“Feel free to make yourself more comfortable,” he said, his eyes flickering over my terry cloth sweatshirt. Those words shook me out of my trance. God, he waltzed into *my* space, and acted like he owns the place. Fucking asshole.

Now, I felt like adding more layers just to spite him. But I finally had cleanly washed clothes and was freshly showered. I didn't want to ruin that, especially since the second that woman cleared out, I'd have to go find a replacement home.

I groaned as I flopped down onto the striped living room couch. With my history of housing, the next place likely wouldn't even have running water, let alone cable. I glared at Sebastian as I reached for the tv remote and pressed the power button.

Ignoring my look, Sebastian sat down next to me, and watched as Molly the medical intern opened a patient up on the table.

“Wouldn't have guessed this would be what you wanted to watch,” he said while unbuttoning the buttons around his wrists. He pushed up his sleeves to expose tanned, built forearms, and I forced my attention back to the television.

“There's a lot you don't know about me.” And it'd be better if it stayed that way.

“Try me.”

Hmm, it would be good to know how much information he'd dug up on me. “Fine: my favorite pizza.”

“If you're in the city, it's Joe's. If you're in Brooklyn, you always hike over to Julianna's. Although, if you're already in Brooklyn Heights, I don't know why you wouldn't go with-”

“Don't even finish that sentence,” I snorted. “It's so obvious you grew up in Connecticut.”

“Sounds like someone’s done their research on me. I thought you weren’t interested in my offer,” he said.

“I’m *not*.”

“So you’re just interested in me.”

God, I wanted to smack that smirk off his face.

“I just wanted to find out who I’d be killing if you kept harassing me,” I said.

His smirk deepened. “We both know you aren’t going to kill me. Plus you like me, just admit it.”

“I most definitely do not like you,” I growled.

“If you say so,” he said, flashing that same condescending look from earlier.

I glared at him, and he chuckled. *Fucking chuckled*. I’d thrown that same glare at seasoned enforcers, and they’d looked at me like I was peeling their fingernails from their skin.

“I’m enjoying this game. What question do you want me to answer next?” he asked.

“Fuck off.”

Sebastian leaned towards me, and his eyes darkened as he spoke, “I have some other games we can play.”

My legs clenched together, but I forced myself to say, “I’ll pass.”

His head fell backwards as he laughed darkly. Goosebumps gathered on my skin as I turned my attention back to the show. Molly walked into a medical closet. I knew where this was heading.

“So *that’s why* you like watching this show,” Sebastian said when Molly started banging the resident. Great, this was doing nothing to lower the sexual frustration I was feeling. Time to change the subject.

“No, I like watching this show because I wanted to be a doctor.”

And because I enjoyed watching the doctors bang on screen. But I wasn't about to admit that.

“Yeah, I heard all about your MCATs. You scored a 520 on the test, but your dad forced the examiner to invalidate it. Too bad you don't know someone who had the influence to make sure you passed.”

“Is that your offer? In exchange for guaranteeing I pass the MCATs, I *only* have to tell you every single detail about the Regan family's organization. Seems like a great deal,” I said, matching his own sarcasm.

He shrugged. “You know I can offer you a lot more than that.”

The sexual innuendo had left his eyes. He was back to the business of trying to convince me to turn over all my information.

Even if he wasn't related to the devil incarnate, the problem was the second I gave them the information they wanted, there'd be a bounty on my head from my father. I'd need to work for the Amato family in order for them to protect me. And that wasn't fucking happening.

His deep voice interrupted my thought process, “Although, I don't think you really want to be a doctor. The second you failed your MCATs you just started partying with your friends, and never even bothered again.”

I blinked. Ronan had said the same thing: that I didn't really want to be a doctor. I'd expected it from Ronan, he'd known me for most of my life. But I hadn't expected Sebastian to read me so easily.

“Why would I bother taking them again? My father would make sure I failed this time, too.”

He let the conversation drop, but I could feel his eyes on me as I watched Molly operate on another patient. When a commercial popped up on the screen about ‘*The only pain medicine you can trust*’ he spoke again. “I am curious about something-”

“I’m shocked,” I interrupted him. “Let me guess: how do we organize our underground gambling group, or what is the secret to our success with the counterfeiting machines?”

He smiled. “I wouldn’t say no to you answering either of those questions. But I was going to ask you about your name. Why Selene? I wouldn’t have expected the heir of the Regan family to be given a name that wasn’t Irish.”

“I wasn’t supposed to be the heir,” I shot back.

Sebastian raised an eyebrow, obviously waiting for me to elaborate. I kept silent. He didn’t need to know that when I’d been born, my mother had no intention of allowing me to ever be a part of this life. He didn’t need to know that my parents agreed that when my mom had a boy, *he* would become the heir. And he certainly didn’t need to know that everything had changed when I was eight, and my pregnant mother was murdered.

However, he probably knew all of that. If he knew my favorite pizza place, I could guarantee he knew the more important things from my past. Which means he was just looking to see my reaction: to see what makes me tick. Because despite the fact that we were sitting here watching *The Intern*, and my body kept traitorously reacting to him, I most definitely could not trust him. Anything I said to him, he would use against me in order to get what he wanted.

The question was: what *did* he want from me? An Underboss had way more important things to do than deal with a former gangster, no matter how useful how my information was.

Worrying about that was a complete waste of time, I had more pressing matters to deal with. Instead of being distracted by his toned arms, I needed to figure out a way to get Ray his money. Every day I woke up in this blissful 68 degree apartment, I’d promised myself that today would be the day I left the safety of this nest and began pickpocketing the money. I couldn’t keep watching television and pretending that Ray wouldn’t back up his threats when he saw me next.

It'd been stupid to waste as much time as I did. To live in this hazy state of ignorance, and medical shows. But soon enough, Sebastian wouldn't be the only one knocking on my door.

A plan formed in my mind as to how to get the woman outside to leave her perch.

"I can get us out of here," I said, while pulling out my cracked phone.

Twenty minutes later, I checked the peephole again. The neighbor was still planted in her lawn chair. She held an electric fan in her hand as sweat trickled down her chin. Ugh, I really was not looking forward to going into that heat.

The neighbor's lips shifted from a thin line to a gaping O. A petite woman with her entire body covered in blue linen marched towards the neighbor. Bingo. The religious woman gestured at the sky with her long sleeve clad arm and then tried to hand the nosy neighbor a pamphlet. She jumped up from her seat and scrambled for her keys, abandoning the folding chair to the woman's sermon.

The door slammed shut, but the religious woman didn't miss a beat, continuing her speech in front of the door.

"She'll be holed up in there for a while. Let's go," I said.

I silently opened the door and gestured for Sebastian to follow. We hurried in the opposite direction of the requests to hear about how everyone's soul could be saved. We didn't stop, I'm pretty sure my soul was beyond saving. I had to give her credit though; I wish I was that passionate about anything.

We stopped when we were finally in sight of a darkly tinted vintage Porsche with a muscular man helming it.

Sebastian leaned against the car.

"So what are you going to do now?" he asked.

"You mean now that you lost me my house?"

He shrugged his expression unchanging.

“You know, *no big deal*. It’s not like I was planning on staying in this one for another week,” I rolled my eyes as I said it. But honestly, Sebastian had done me a favor. It was time for me to re-enter the real world.

“I know how I can make it up to you,” he said with a salacious smile.

“I’m not interested.”

“I *seriously* doubt that,” he said, his voice deepening in a way that made my stomach tighten. His eyes flicked to that exact spot, and a lazy smile spread across his lips. “In fact, I have a feeling you’ll be begging me to-”

“In your fucking dreams,” I spit out, but my sharp intake of breath undermined it.

Before he could respond, I started walking to a nearby park. Sebastian’s laughter echoed behind me.

Chapter 9

As I placed my hand on the clear, perfectly polished door, I wished I'd had the foresight to take some shots beforehand. Although, the last thing I needed to do was cut into the money I'd collected for Ray over the last two days.

I hobbled towards the doorman of Piper's building and absent-mindedly smoothed over the completely unwrinkled dress that I shouldn't have bought. These heelless shoes would be the death of me. Not only could I barely walk in them, if I had to fight for my life I couldn't even lean my weight backwards without falling on my ass.

The doorman nodded at me as I dropped the Chanel duffel bag with my entire life inside on the lobby counter. Part of me was hesitant to leave the cash I'd collected for Ray. But I couldn't afford to buy a purse, and I couldn't exactly shove a couple grand into my bra.

To the doorman I probably looked like an impeccably mannered socialite whose only thought on her brain was where the coke was located. He'd never guess that I'd packed my entire livelihood into that duffel. And drawing attention to the value of the contents would only make it more vulnerable.

Maybe it was stupid to be here. The elevator door binged. No, it was *definitely* stupid. I'd made a good amount of money in the last few days, but I should be out there stealing more.

Despite that thought I stepped inside the elevator. I seemed to be getting better and better at ignoring common sense.

I leaned against the mirrored wall and stroked the tiny knife strapped around the top of my thigh. That had been another stupid thing I'd done: I'd left everything inside of that duffel bag, including most of my weapons. If the collectors came after me now... I shook my head, interrupting the thought. The idea of Ray coming after me should make me feel terrified, yet somehow I couldn't force myself to feel anything.

Ever since I'd put on this outfit and headed into Manhattan, I'd felt a sense of detachment. This might be my last hurrah before Ray knocked me off — who knew if the amount I'd

give him would be enough to get him off my back — and yet I couldn't even bring myself to feel excited about Piper's party.

The door binged open and thankfully interrupted that train of thought. I grabbed a flute of champagne off a waiting server's tray and chugged it. Piper's excited eyes flicked my way.

"Selene," Piper squealed in her familiarly high-pitched voice.

She flounced forward, a man with dusty brown hair only a few steps behind her. I blinked as my ex's face came into view.

"Hey," Mark said, nodding at me.

I nodded back as he ran a hand down Piper's arm. She moved away from him and began talking about last night's drama. But I couldn't focus on the story about some D-List actor trying to steal her VIP table at Electric Room. Instead, I zeroed in on the way Mark seemed to be enraptured by her words. As if her story was about the miracle of life rather than the miracle of security guards getting her table back.

Was there something going on between him and Piper? I shouldn't feel jealous since it'd been years since Mark had broken my heart. Junior year he'd told me I didn't have enough time for him after school, and that I couldn't be open enough with him. Yeah, no shit. When I was in high school, it'd been a little difficult to find time to hook up in his parents' wine cellar when my bigger priority was checking that the local dry cleaner was laundering more than clothes.

When he'd broken up with me, I'd blown off Mark's words and kept my face perfectly emotionless while I walked out of Serafina. But the second I reached Piper's parents' penthouse, I'd fallen into her arms while sobbing.

Presently, Piper didn't seem to reciprocate any of Mark's come ons, but that could be because I was standing there. I would have thought the idea of Piper and Mark getting together would have made me feel sad or even jealous. Instead I just felt the numbness continue to bubble up inside me. It

pushed me to drink more of my champagne. The more Mark talked about vying to become a junior partner, the greater the distance felt between my world and theirs.

“I’m going to die if I have to listen to one more asshole talk about the good old days of corporate law. I know what it was like when they started: the dinosaurs were still alive,” Mark said. When I didn’t bother to give him a fake laugh, he turned his attention to me.

Before he could ask me what I had been up to, I inclined my head towards the bartender and slipped away.

Leaning against the white marble cocktail bar and sipping my champagne, I watched them in silence. Piper was leaning against a new set of bar stools around the open kitchen. It’d only been 2 months since I’d been here, but she’d already redecorated the place. What else had changed?

Mark sat down on the barstool, and nodded along with each sentence out of Piper’s mouth. In high school, I had always felt the tug of a future consumed by blood and guns. But when I was in school with Mark, laughing about the way the teachers ranted about the supposed downfall of New York, I had been able to forget that tug.

I slammed back the champagne, ignoring the bubbles catching in my throat. While I handed it to the tuxedoed bartender, I eyed the last person I expected to see there.

Sebastian.

He was sitting on a white sofa that looked like it’d been constructed out of clouds. Sebastian’s lips curved into a smile that held none of the sarcasm he seemed to save for me. And he wore a short sleeve button down and dark wash jeans that molded to his muscular thighs. I hadn’t thought he owned anything other than a suit. I examined the guy he was talking to. A Wall Street Bro if I’d ever seen one. He was even wearing the midtown uniform of a navy vest over a button down white shirt.

What the hell was Sebastian doing here? The idea of him being at Piper’s party was as incongruous with the

environment as the thought of Piper slashing a guy's throat. And yet, Sebastian's pose was relaxed, his arm thrown onto the back of the couch.

Part of me yearned to ignore him. To have a night where I forgot about my problems. But if this was his attempt at threatening Piper, I needed to know.

I took the refilled glass of champagne from the ever ready bartender and circled past giggling socialites in next season's couture. It was tempting, but I ignored the glittering Van Cleef on their wrists that would put a chunk in my debt. I circled behind the back of the couch, listening to the Wall Street Bro talk about the dip in the market, and how NOW was the time to buy.

I plopped down next to Sebastian, my crossed legs only a few inches from his muscular ones.

Those grey eyes shifted from amusement into confusion. Holy shit, this was *actually* a coincidence. His jaw clenched as I propped my elbow on the armrest. It was obvious he wanted me to leave, so naturally I did the opposite.

I settled into my seat, and fed on Sebastian's unease. He stayed silent for a moment, his eyes searching my expression while I attempted to keep the smirk off my face. Wall Street Bro stopped his diatribe on a '*Guaranteed* High Performing Investment.' He glanced between Sebastian and I, obviously waiting for an introduction. I raised an eyebrow at Sebastian, daring him to introduce me.

Sebastian's eyes promised retribution. Bring it on.

When no introduction came, Wall Street Bro announced, "Jared Conors the Third," while sticking his hand out for a stiff handshake. *Of course*, he was 'the third.'

"Selene, the first," I responded, returning the handshake while watching Sebastian's mouth shift into a stiff line.

"So how do you know each other?" I asked, savoring the barely concealed anger on Sebastian's face. His large hand clenched a fluffy white pillow. A perverse part of me wanted him to grip me like that. God, what was wrong with me?

“Connecticut Prep School,” Jared answered, oblivious to Sebastian’s growing irritation.

“Aww, boarding school boys. I bet you have a lot of fun stories to share about Sebastian,” I said, enjoying the tension radiating off Sebastian. Feathers popped out the side of the pillow.

This was going to be fun. Although the look in Sebastian’s eyes told me he had the opposite reaction.

Jared’s eyes glinted as he opened his mouth, but Sebastian beat him to the punch, “Not really.”

“Oh, I *seriously* doubt that,” I said. My smile deepened, as I relaxed into the couch. Yeah, it was actually as comfortable as it looked. It was a relief for something to actually match its appearance.

Jared glanced between the two of us, finally seeming to pick up on Sebastian’s tension. Hopefully, he was quicker on the uptake at the trading floor.

“How do you know Sebastian?” Jared asked.

“Yes, Sebastian. How do the two of us know each other?” I asked, failing to keep the snicker out of my voice.

There was silence for a moment. My grin grew as I tapped my dirt encrusted fingernails lightly against the soft fabric of Sebastian’s abused pillow.

“Through work,” he replied. Authority flashed in his eyes. They told me he would not tolerate any arguments. As if he could order me around so easily.

“We work in a very *cut-throat* business,” I explained to Jared.

“Which business?” Jared leaned forward eagerly, probably coming up with a pitch on how he could triple my retirement portfolio.

I raised an eyebrow in Sebastian’s direction giving him the floor.

Before he could come up with a response, Piper's high-pitched voice danced across the room, "Seleene, I see you've met Jared."

I glanced over at Piper's approaching figure and tried to keep the building dread off my face. I'm sure to some extent Piper was aware of what my family did. There had been whispers in high school regarding dirty money. The whispers had never grown too loud out of fear of retribution. But Piper had never brought it up, and when it came to her, I liked to pretend that portion of my life didn't exist.

The only bright side was that I didn't have to deal with Mark, too. He was off in the corner, speaking to a girl sporting next year's Versace resort collection.

"We just met," I replied while Piper daintily guided herself down into the mint green chair across from me.

Sebastian released the grip on the pillow and placed it in my lap. I flicked the pillow off to the other couch cushion like it was a rat. A wicked grin spread across his face as he leaned back into the couch.

Chapter 10

“And who is this?” Piper asked, her eyes shifting from ditzy socialite to on the prowl. Ahh, what a familiar sight.

“Sebastian,” he said, his grin growing more sinful.

“Piper,” she said with a wink.

“How’ve you been, Piper?” Jared cut in, probably waiting for an opening to start discussing ‘guaranteed’ investments.

“Good,” she replied, her tawny eyes not leaving Sebastian’s grey ones. “Jared, would you be a doll and grab me a refill?”

Jared glanced down at Piper’s barely touched cosmo, and shrugged. He understood a dismissal when he heard one.

While Jared searched for another target for his investments sales, Piper brushed a manicured hand against the bottom of her feathered dress. I usually felt nostalgic when Piper enacted her playbook. Today that emotion was overwhelmed by dread. I glanced towards Sebastian to see if step two of Piper’s playbook to get a guy was working. Internally, I prayed it wouldn’t. I’d rather take another steel-tipped kick to the kidney than see Piper involved in our world.

But Sebastian wasn’t even looking at Piper. His eyes were rooted on my face.

“Seleene,” he mimicked Piper’s high-pitched greeting, “I’m surprised that you never introduced me to Piper before.”

“Yeah, Selene!” Piper agreed, leaning forward while subtly sticking her fake boobs out. Already onto step number three. From experience, I knew there was no way I’d manage to drag her away from this conversation. But what the hell *was* Sebastian doing here? He didn’t even know the host of the party.

I shrugged while keeping my face blank. “You come from two different worlds, I never thought I’d see you both in the same room.”

He snorted. “I wasn’t aware that Connecticut and the Upper West Side were ‘two different worlds’.”

Of course he knew which part of Manhattan I'd grown up in. He probably even knew the minute details like Piper and I's Friday high school lunch spot: Barney's Greengrass, 2 orders of bagels and lox with just a squirt of lemon. After all, he'd made it his job to know everything so he could blackmail me into doing what he wanted.

That ended now.

"Piper, want to come with me to the bathroom?" I asked.

Her seductive half smile slipped into a frown.

"There's so much I have to tell you," I added, inclining my head slightly towards Sebastian. Her eyes lit up, while his eyes seemed to laugh at me. She bounced up from the chair.

"We'll be right back," Piper announced with a wink.

No, we wouldn't be.

Once we were in the third guest bathroom, Piper sat on a white leather chaise in front of the mirror. She opened the drawer and reached for a tube of blood red lipstick.

"Spill," she ordered while she began reapplying.

"Sebastian's interests don't align with yours-" I started.

"Jealous?"

"His activities are a little more dangerous than you'd like."

"That sounds right up my alley," she said, puckering her lips in the mirror.

"He hunts," I replied, knowing the one thing that would stop her in her tracks.

"Ew," she squealed.

Piper was currently staunchly vegan. Despite the fact that her closet could probably fill up a small zoo of dead animals.

She opened the white oak drawer underneath the sink and tossed back in the lipstick. "I don't understand guys who kill animals for fun," she said.

Sebastian's prey were of a human variety, but she didn't need to know that.

“So you and Mark?” I asked, bringing her mind away from the dangerous territory of Sebastian. Just in case she overlooked his interests because of his broad shoulders.

But also I was curious. After Mark broke up with me, she’d sent her maid off to grab five boxes of caramel sea squares. We’d gone through all five boxes while I’d sobbed through half a season of Grey’s Anatomy. It surprised me to think she would go for him after that. But I’d ditched her months ago when Ray was putting pressure on me. Who knows if she still held any loyalty to me.

She rolled her eyes as she reached for the bronzer. “Do you really think I would go for him? I saw him at Soho House, and since you were coming, I’d thought I’d let him see what he was missing.”

A feeling of relief flooded through me. Piper hadn’t changed at all. Then the meaning behind her words carried into my mind. Was she trying to get me back together with Mark?

I tried to conjure up an image of a life with Mark. I somehow couldn’t picture him sneaking into a broken-in rental house to Netflix and Chill.

I shrugged. “I have zero interest in Mark.”

“Because you’re too focused on Sebastian?” she asked.

A tinkling laugh escaped from her lips when I frowned at her.

“I’m not an idiot,” she continued, dropping the bronzer back into the drawer, “You’re one of my best friends: I know when you like someone.”

I most definitely did not like him. I didn’t even bother deigning her comment a reply. Instead, I just shook my head.

She closed the drawer and stood up from the fluffy chaise. “Don’t worry, I’m not going for Sebastian or Mark,” she said.

Piper opened the ten foot high oak door, and muted chattering morphed from a whisper to a roar. She wandered off

towards her next target, and I glanced around the room for an annoyingly familiar face.

Sebastian leaned against the marble bar sipping on whiskey that cost as much as my dress. A tanned woman was perched next to him in five inch heels almost as thin as my fingernail. God, I would've killed to have even that thin of heel. These heelless shoes were cramping my calves so badly I doubted I could've outrun Piper, let alone Ray's men.

Sebastian's eyes hooked on mine like a net around a wounded animal. Maybe I was taking the hunter analogy too far.

He stepped away from the bar, not even glancing at the girl still speaking to him. The way his eyes narrowed as he approached made my stomach dip against my will.

Okay, maybe the hunter analogy wasn't *too* far off.

Ignoring the feeling in my stomach I stepped towards him, challenging him with my eyes.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded.

"Nice dress," he said. His eyes flicked over my figure, and I hated the way my thighs clenched together. "I didn't think you owned anything other than sweatpants."

"And I didn't realize you had a habit of stalking me at personal events," I shot back.

"Oh, because my entire world revolves around you," he answered with a snort.

He inclined his head towards the door to the balcony, and I followed him while resisting the urge to knock him over the head with an asymmetrical bronze statue. Sebastian held the door open for me, and I was rewarded with warm air smacking me in the face.

I stared out at the neon landscape, while he muscled the door closed. "Why are you here?" I asked again, my voice low. If his presence had anything to do with hurting Piper, I'd push him off this balcony.

“Friend from high school,” he replied with a shrug, settling down into a linen settee.

I blinked, surprised at his honesty. Unless he was lying? I remained standing, waiting for a shallow breath or a stiffening of his arm to give him away. His posture remained languid, and I shifted my gaze up to this face. I’d stared into the faces of many liars, some who’d skimmed money from me, others who didn’t want to admit they’d fucked up a negotiation. Sebastian lifted the tumbler of whiskey to his lips, gazing back at me steadily.

He wasn’t lying, he just *really* didn’t care what he revealed to me. I seriously did not understand him.

Fine, I could use that against him. Shaking my head, I sat down on the settee parallel to him. But I kept my feet settled firmly on the ground, ready to kick him in the face with these obnoxious heels if needed.

“You looked awfully pissed when I was talking to Jared,” I teased.

He sipped on his whiskey before speaking, “Initially, I was worried you’d tell him about our shared industry. But I had no reason to worry. If you say anything to him I’m sure Piper would *love* to hear about all of your escapades.”

“If you say anything Piper, I swear I’ll make you regret it.”

“I guess that means you’ll have to *behave*,” his voice deepened on the last word, and I felt a shiver run up my spine that had nothing to do with the sweat trickling down my back. Instead of indulging that sensation, I glared at him. He just chuckled.

“Why did you come here tonight?” he asked while leaning further into the chair. “It doesn’t seem like it’s your scene anymore.”

“Why do you care? I’m not taking your offer, so you can stop wasting your time trying to convince me.”

“Tonight’s my night off.”

I examined him, trying to find the lie in the statement. And when I couldn't find one, I snorted, "Good luck with that."

He took a slow sip of his drink and seemed to ponder his words for a moment. "How do you manage it? Going back and forth between this world and our world so easily?"

There was a glimmer of emotion in his eyes. I wasn't used to people easily displaying emotion. It was safer to remain hard. To let no one in.

"You just get used to it," I said, unable to believe we were actually having this conversation.

Sebastian smiled, but there was a sadness tinged to it that I'd never seen before.

"You miss it," I said, unsure why I was continuing to indulge this conversation. As soon as I'd found out that he had nothing planned for Piper, I should've marched back into the living room and knocked back shots with Piper. Yet for some reason, I relaxed back into my seat, and kicked my feet up.

His eyes moved back to me, languid and relaxed. "Miss what?"

I gestured behind us, at the door leading back to our high school friends. "That life. Everyone in there probably doesn't even know the difference between a Glock and a Beretta. And they certainly will never have to use one. Do you miss being so ignorant?"

Sebastian took a sip of his drink and stared at me. I shouldn't be admitting my favorite cocktail let alone revealing something so personal. But the desire was bubbling up inside of me like the numbness had earlier. Maybe it had been the vulnerability. I had seen a part of him I'd never seen before. And it made me want to see more.

But also, I'd never been able to talk with someone straddling the two worlds. Even though I shouldn't, the desire to share my thoughts with him was dancing to the surface.

"I was never ignorant to this world. I was just able to ignore it," he said.

“I wish I could’ve ignored it,” I said with a laugh, but it was more bitter than I’d intended.

“Is that why you won’t take the offer?” he asked. “Do you hate that life that much?”

“I just want to live my own life.”

I stared out at the skyline. The wind whipped across my bare shoulders as I wondered what my existence could have been like if my father hadn’t forced me to join the mob.

Chapter 11

I blinked awake, and tensed when I noticed the sunlight peeking over the skyscrapers above us. Sensing movement, my eyes swung right and met Sebastian's steely grey ones.

He was watching me passively, leaning back against the seat with one large hand propped underneath his head, and the other hand absently scrolling through his phone.

"Sleep well?" he asked. There was a softness in his eyes, but I knew eyes could lie.

I shifted my gaze down: my clothes were still in place. No blood was dripping onto my uncomfortable shoes. The tension released from my shoulders. Even though it definitely shouldn't.

What the hell had I been thinking? Falling asleep in his presence might have been the stupidest thing I'd done lately, and I'd done a lot of stupid shit.

"Terrible," I lied in response to his question. It was odd. I couldn't remember my last nightmare-less night, yet I'd slept just as peacefully as I had when I used to snuggle under cashmere sheets. At the reminder of my nightmares, I shut down that part of my brain before the images could suffocate all other thoughts.

He raised an eyebrow at my answer, disbelief apparent on his face. But he didn't push it.

"What time is it?" I asked, eyes back on the fingers of the sunrise.

Sebastian glanced down at his phone for a moment then his eyes targeted back on my face again. "5:30," he said.

How had I slept that long? Even if I ignored the warm gusts of wind, and the light sheen of sweat coating my skin, how had I fallen asleep next to someone whose family had ruined my life? This man was a threat, even if my body refused to acknowledge it.

I fought against the feeling of relaxation in my stomach that coaxed me to stay exactly where I was. Ignoring it, I swept my feet off the chair and moved towards the glass railing of the balcony that barely reached my stomach.

“What did you do?” I asked, tapping my fingers against the hidden spot of my knife.

“What are you talking about?” he said.

I glared at him, threats in my eyes that I could easily follow up on. We lived in a world where someone was always taking, and someone was being taken from. By letting my guard down, I’d been in the losing position last night. He’d lulled me into a sense of safety. What had he gained from it?

Did he hack into my phone? Were all of his men outside, ready to strong arm me into giving him the information he wanted?

“Relax,” he said, flicking his hand as if he was flicking away my thoughts. “You looked so peaceful sleeping, I didn’t want to disturb you.”

I snorted, *yeah right*. Like I would believe that. Keeping my hand in reach of the knife, I strode along the marble decking towards the door. My eyes locked on his reflection in the sliding glass door as he stood up from the lounge chair. Sebastian stretched his long, muscled arms towards the orange and pink sky.

I cracked open the door, tracking the sound of his nearly silent footfalls behind me. Confirming the lack of noise in the room ahead of us, I nudged the door open quietly, and sidestepped in so my back pressed against the light grey wall.

While Sebastian followed in after me soundlessly, I glanced around the room. A Wall Street Bro was passed out on Piper’s custom made couch, drool thankfully coming out of his mouth instead of investment talk. Red stains bloomed on a one-of-a-kind chair, but that was due to a knocked over glass of Malbec, not the blood of the recently stabbed. After all, this was Piper’s world, not my world. Stepping over broken glass,

I soundlessly padded towards the front door with Sebastian step-in-step beside me.

I shot one last glance at the chaos before we exited and almost felt sorry for Piper's maid Anett. She was an older Hungarian woman who prepared Piper's meals along with transforming the apartment so it appeared the previous night's debauchery had never occurred. If Anett ever got sick of cleaning up after bored socialites, she should consider a career with the Regan family. The knowledge of getting dark stains out of carpets was always very much in demand.

Once we were down to the lobby, I nodded towards the doorman. It was a different man from last night, although this one also had an impeccably ironed suit and vacant look.

"23F," I said while reaching my hand out.

When he handed my bag back to me, I unzipped the bag and felt around for my gun and few remaining worldly possessions. No offense to the doorman. He was a polite but sterile staple of this building, and he had seen plenty of Piper and I stumbling back into the apartment without even raising an eyebrow. But everyone in this city had a price. And I wasn't about to walk out that door without a gun or money close by. If I walked out of this building without Ray's money...

Sebastian's eyes never left me as I finished checking the bag. I'm sure he had been asking himself a lot lately what *my* price was.

When I was outside of the blissful air conditioning, and sweating below the rising sun, I checked for signs of an ambush. Instead, all I saw was one or two curious looks at my heelless shoes and slightly crumpled dress. Most people paid us no mind, too numb to the city to have had a reaction if I had been walking around wearing nothing but candy wrappers.

When I finished checking the perimeter, I swiveled towards Sebastian and raised an expectant eyebrow.

"Yes?" he asked, looking almost amused.

I crossed my arms and remained silent. He obviously was going to push me for more information. Why else would he still be standing there?

“Need a car?” he asked, jerking his chin towards the passing yellow taxis. I shook my head and nodded towards the nearby subway entrance. Somehow, I thought the taxis would decline the offer when I told them how deep in Brooklyn I needed to go.

He rolled his eyes and held out his hand as if to say ‘after you.’ We walked in silence until we hit the staircase to the subway. Down below, the stench of sweaty air greeted me like a smack in the face.

I stopped before the gum dotted staircase and waited for him to pepper me with questions.

“Are you planning on coming home with me?” I asked sarcastically, stepping aside as a miserably hungover woman moved past me, mascara smeared underneath her eyes.

Sebastian moved closer, and it surprised me that I allowed him to get that close without pressing my knife against him.

His warm breath tickled my ear as he whispered, “When I come home with you, you’ll be begging me.”

The warmth traveled from the shell of my ear down to my chest. I internally reminded myself that it was dangerous to be around him. The sooner I was away from him, the better. Sebastian stared down at me as I hobbled down the stairs, stepping over a passed out man. The stale vomit beside the man sent up whiffs of soured pizza and scents I didn’t even want to identify.

I glanced at the cracked circular mirror at the bottom of the stairwell. Sebastian was still standing at the top of the stairs, a small smile playing across his lips while his eyes stayed glued on me.

Chapter 12

Circling around the abandoned house, I attempted to find one spot that's flooring wasn't completely warped and didn't have trash or piss occupying the space. I'd almost felt bad when I kicked out the previous squatter. But more than anything I was just relieved that he was too out of it to realize where he was, let alone fight me.

It probably would have been prudent to do this during the day. Then I wouldn't be forced to use my phone's flashlight to find the one square foot in this shit hole I could actually sleep in. But I'd been busy since I'd left Sebastian behind in Manhattan. I'd been trying to pickpocket money from people, but I had limited success when everyone was dashing down the block to get out of the summer rain shower.

My phone's flashlight reflected over yellow liquid seeping into the wooden floor. It was stupid to be wasting my phone battery on this. There was obviously no electricity hooked up in this abandoned rowhouse, so there'd be no way to recharge my phone. But I refused to fall asleep and woke up with someone else's vomit in my hair.

When I'd failed to make more than a few bucks this afternoon, I should've cut my losses and started scouting for houses. It's not like the neighbors would have cared if I'd forced my way in during the day. This wasn't exactly the type of neighborhood to call the cops.

Near what remained of the kitchen, I finally found a spot that I could potentially fall asleep in. Aiming my phone at what used to be a wooden cabinet, looters had predictably stolen everything from the wood door to the metal hinges, I squinted and prayed there were no rats. My nose wrinkled up as I pushed in for a closer look inside the cabinet. There was a rusted line underneath the pipe where the copper had been stolen, but there were no visible mouse droppings or the telltale sound of scratching feet scrambling around. I turned the light up toward the windowless wall, hoping I didn't see any cockroaches crawling around.

When I was satisfied by the lack of vermin, I turned off the light and dropped my phone in my duffel. Hesitantly, I laid down on the one clean spot and placed my ever present duffel bag underneath my head. I stared up at the shadowed popcorn ceiling. How had I gone from a 7 bedroom brownstone to this?

A knock echoed from the door, and I forced my body to stay completely still. Hopefully, the squatter wasn't back, amped up and angry. I didn't know if I could emotionally deal with a naked addict with the temporary strength of a grizzly bear.

The next bang was louder, and there was a familiar voice to accompany it, "Selene, we know you're in there."

Shit. Ray was here to collect his money, and from the sound of it he wasn't alone.

Soundlessly, I crawled across the room avoiding the spots with vomit and other bodily fluids I didn't want to think about. The front and back windows were boarded up, so they couldn't see in. That plywood wouldn't do much if they started shooting though. Although, there wasn't a reason for them to shoot. Over the last few days, I had collected a decent amount of money. Keeping a hand on the gun tucked into my waistband, I peeked through the door hole.

Ray and four men were bundled underneath umbrellas, which failed at shielding them from the torrential rain. Ray's men were all brandishing guns as they stared down at the door.

My stomach knotted when I examined the steroid-enriched men waiting in the dim halo of light. This wasn't a simple collection call.

"Don't make this worse, Selene. Open the door," Ray called over the pouring of the rain.

A hoodie shrouded his eyes, but I could see his lips were tugged down into a frown. Adrenaline pumped through my body. They weren't just here to collect money: they were here to send a message.

Metal grinding against metal shattered my thoughts. They were attempting to pick the lock. Thankfully, the former

squatter hadn't taken the deadbolt. It would buy me a few minutes while I figured out what the hell to do.

I should've picked a more prominent neighborhood to squat in since I'd rather take a chance of arrest than a definite beat down from Ray's goons. I stared around the pitch black room, assessing my options for escape.

There were only two entrances to the house: front and back door. The lack of windows on the sides of the rowhouse were two fewer points of entry for attackers, but also two fewer points of exit for me. My only option was the back door. They likely had at least one person out back. I'd need to surprise him, and silently knock him out before he could say a word.

Then I could dash along the grassless backyard, and jump over the rusted chain link fence into the neighbor's backyard. This was an area where the locals were carrying guns, and they definitely wouldn't hesitate to use them. I'd need to be quiet, so I didn't draw the neighbor's and Ray's attention.

It wasn't an ideal plan, but it was the best option I had going for me at the moment. I ran a hand over my newly healed rib; I did not want to deal with that pain again.

I kept my gun in my hand as I approached the back of the house. My body relaxed as I ran my finger over the grip of the gun. Some people had security blankets, I had security guns.

Before I reached the door, I swung my duffel bag over my shoulder. It'd slow me down if I needed to run, but there was no way in hell I was leaving the money behind.

Using my free hand, I yanked open the back door. Four pairs of eyes stared back at me, and all four raised their handguns in my direction.

Shit.

I slammed the door shut before they could aim at my head. I slammed the lock in place and jumped away from the thin door. Ray brought eight men to deal with me? That was overkill even for him.

I stepped back into the living room. God, I was so screwed. Even if I wanted to fight my way through them, there was no

way I could take down eight armed men. They began kicking at the door, and the thin plywood creaked against their attacks.

I tried to make mental calculations, grasping for the calm sense of detachment I felt when I would run missions for my father.

Click. The front door unlocked and slammed against the weight of the deadbolt.

My window to come up with a plan was shrinking. I glanced up at the ceiling as the forced detachment slipped into fear. I hadn't been able to find a blueprint of the house on the Department of Building's website. However, there was the possibility I'd find ducts in the ceiling if I attempted to crawl through.

Although, with the current state of the house, I was more likely to have to have the ceiling collapse. And I didn't want to think about what vermin were living in the crevices of the ceiling.

I forced myself to take a breath, and push away the fear scratching at my insides. I didn't have time to check out the vents, but I needed to take back control of this situation.

"Stop," I called over the sound of the front and back door being kicked in with heavy boots. The kicking didn't stop.

"God damn it," I snarled, forcing the fear to manifest as anger. "I'm going to open the front door so stop kicking it!"

The cracking sound of plywood being forced apart dulled then stopped completely. I pulled out another gun, so I had one in each hand.

Using my elbow, I knocked the deadbolt out of place, and moved back. The door banged open. A blindingly bright flashlight seared into my vision, but I kept my guns pointed at Ray and the beefy man to his right. Four sets of guns lifted toward my head.

"Now that's no way to welcome someone." Ray's voice sounded darker than usual. His fingers kept twisting as he stepped into the house.

“Well, breaking into my house isn’t exactly what I’d call polite,” I responded, backing up as they stepped into the doorway. I hoped they slipped in piss.

“Your house?” he asked, with a lifted eyebrow. Ray surveyed the state of the house for a moment.

“At the moment it is, so I’d appreciate it if you would take off your shoes. You’re tracking in mud,” I said.

Ray’s hollowed nose wrinkled as he stared at a discarded needle on the ground.

“You’re not exactly in a position to be making demands,” he said.

The remaining four men entered through the front door. Unfortunately, it appeared none of the neighbors used a nine millimeter to narrow their ranks down for me when the men passed along the side of the building to reach the front door.

Nine hulking men formed a half circle around me. All but Ray were aiming a gun at my head. I kept my expression neutral, and my gun trained on Ray and his lackey to the right.

“This feels a bit like overkill,” I said.

Ray’s lips tightened into a firm line before he spoke, “How much money did you bring?”

He stepped forward, and his men along with them. I stood my ground, glaring back at him.

“See for yourself. Count the money and leave.”

Ray nodded at one of his men who approached me. I put one gun away and handed him the cash. Ray aimed his flashlight at the cash and began to count the money in the shadows. Each time he’d reach another hundred, I knew I was getting closer and closer to the inevitable beating. If he’d brought this many men, it wouldn’t matter if I’d brought twice as much cash.

Ray shook his head. “Not enough.”

I patted the duffel bag. “I have an outfit worth another 2 grand. Add it to my total.”

“Used clothing? Are you expecting me to go online, and try to resell your clothes?”

Ray jerked his chin at my duffel, and the thug nearest me shifted out of formation. I switched my target from Ray to the asshole going after my Chanel duffel.

“I’ll toss you the dress and shoes,” I said.

“Selene, give him the bag.”

I *really* wanted to tell him to fuck off. The contents of that bag were all that I had left in this world, but it wasn’t worth raising their ire when their attacks began.

With a sigh, I handed the thug the bag. When Ray had it in his hands, he began pulling out each and every item out of the duffel. He examined three decades out of fashion outfits that I’d stolen from houses I’d stayed in, those damned dress and shoes that I was going to be buried in, lacy underwear (he smirked at that), holey granny panties, my first aid kit, various sized knives, a lock picking set, a collection of guns and bullets, and a mishmash of cosmetics. Everything else I’d pawned off, or couldn’t access. For my only remaining possessions it was kind of pathetic.

When he finished, he set the bag down beside him.

“Selene, you *really* shouldn’t have fallen behind on your payments,” Ray said.

The formation pushed forward. I stepped back, moving deeper into the house. It had been stupid forgoing payment last time. But this time I’d brought cash. It was apparent there was no amount I could have given him tonight that would have prevented this. I’d still try though.

“I’ll get you more cash, just give me more time.”

My legs tensed, and I itched to sprint out the back door. But I was experienced enough to know that they could sink a bullet in my leg before I reached the door. The inevitable was about to occur. Numbness crawled up my skin.

“Give me another day,” I tried again, but I couldn’t force much emotion behind it.

“Times up.”

Chapter 13

Ray raised a finger. “But there is an alternative.”

I already knew I wouldn’t like this alternative.

They continued moving forward, and I continued moving back. But I was running out of room, and soon my back was pressed against the uneven drywall.

Ray stepped forward despite my gun still aimed at him. The gun was only a few inches from his chest, but he ignored it and ran a finger down my stomach. I pressed further into the wall, and rough bumps dug into my skin.

“There is another way for you to earn that money back,” he said.

Fear threatened to close my vision down, but I shoved it back into that corner of mind.

“I have someone who’ll give me the money,” I said.

He ignored that. There were no magic words to get me out of this scenario. My fate had been decided the second they’d knocked on this door. His hand tapped on my hip. If I could’ve flinched away I would’ve, but there was nowhere to go. The remaining men were closing in on my sides.

“There are certain *ways* that you could pay your debt back... I’m sure you know what I mean,” he said.

Unfortunately, I knew exactly what he meant. I’d been too stupid to do my research before I’d accepted the money. But as the threats had gotten harsher, I’d looked into exactly who I’d made a deal with. Some people who didn’t pay their debts were tortured and killed. For others, the loan sharks took their anger out on the debtor’s family members. But for some... I almost shuddered when I thought of the images I’d seen. Women beaten black and blue, forced to offer their services on the street. Barely making enough money each day to make a dent with the insane interest working against them. The unlucky ones became addicts to escape from their reality, pushing them further into debt. I thought back to the expressions of the women I’d seen and suppressed a shudder.

“Well?” he said, his fingers tapping on my hip again.

I shook my head. “I’ll get you more money, I promise.”

“I know you will, one way or the other. You have 24 hours to get me ten grand. If you don’t, you’ll start paying back your debt on *our* terms.”

My stomach knotted as those women’s faces sprang to my mind.

“But first, a reminder of what happens to people who are late with their payments,” he said.

Ray held out a hand for my gun. I knew that if I handed it to him, there was no way I could fight back against what was about to happen. But even if I used my gun, it wouldn’t stop what was about to occur. I couldn’t take this many men down on my own.

“Please,” I said, my voice quiet. “Don’t touch me... like that.”

He nodded, and the knot in my stomach relaxed. He was an asshole, but he was also always true to his word.

I released my grip on the gun, and he placed it in his too tight waistband.

He continued holding his hand out. I reached into my pocket and pulled out a knife. I dropped it in his hand hoping it accidentally impaled him.

Ray nodded towards the men surrounding me. “No bruises chest and up.”

Then he was gone. The punches came from all directions. I didn’t fight back, I just let the waves of pain wash over me. Soon, I was on the floor, and they kicked me further into the room. I tried to focus on the cold of the plywood digging in my spine, and ignore muddy boots smashing into every inch of my body.

A kick hit me in the fleshy part of my stomach, and I tried to curl up in a ball. Callused hands dragged my arms away, so my stomach was again exposed to their kicks.

This would pass. This wasn't my first time taking a hit. I could handle it.

Finally, the waves of kicks subsided, and the men stepped back. Ray approached me and kneeled on to the floor. He grabbed my jaw and forced me to look up at him. I stayed still while he swiveled my face side to side. Then his eyes lowered, and he nodded.

I guess they had listened to him about not damaging the selling points. He let go of me and started walking towards the front door.

I coughed trying to get breath back in my lungs.

"Give me my guns back," I finally managed.

He ignored me, his men following behind him.

I coughed again, and my lungs screamed at me in agony. "I need the guns to get the money," I said.

He continued walking, almost to the door.

"You can't expect me to go out there with no weapons!" Pain stabbed at me as the words left my mouth.

When he reached the door, he turned. "You have 24 hours to get me ten grand," he said.

The door slammed behind him, and I continued laying there. The pain was too great to move or sleep. I had no weapons, and even if I did, I couldn't have found the strength to use them.

I seriously hoped the former squatter didn't decide this was the perfect time to reclaim his house.

On the bright side, the spot they'd beat me up in didn't have vomit or piss on it. Although, since it was pitch black I had no idea if I was inches away from some vile bodily fluids. Another thought occurred to me and I groaned. They'd stolen my duffel, I wouldn't even be able to use it as a pillow. I'd probably end up rolling over into vomit in my sleep.

I squeezed my hands open and closed, checking for breaks. They screamed back at me, but nothing appeared to be broken.

I let my hands go still, even though I should check the rest of my body to make sure there was nothing urgent I needed to deal with. Not that I could've fixed anything even if I was injured. My first aid kit was in my duffel bag they'd taken. My cell phone was gone too, so I couldn't even shine a light in this damned pitch black house. At least the cell phone was a burner phone. There was nothing they could blackmail me with.

But even if I had a phone, who could I even call? Piper? Tell her I was squatting in a house, and been beaten up by loan sharks. That'd go over well.

I sighed. Who was I going to ask for the money? I couldn't just ask Piper for ten grand, or any of my friends from my former life. First, I doubt they'd even give it to me. And second, how could I even explain why I needed the money? And even if they gave it to me, what would I do next week when Ray asked for the next installment?

There *was* Ronan... No, he was too loyal to my father.

My friends were out; that left three options. None of which I liked.

I could go back to my father. Tell him I was sorry I had tried to live my own life and go back to doing exactly what he wanted. I frowned. I'd begged him to let me leave, to let me live my own life. To go to medical school. To live a life on my terms. I told him I *needed* it. And when he said no, I'd tried to do it anyway. And look where it left me. If I went back now, I'd never have any control again. Fuck that.

The second option was... I thought of Ray's hand on my hip and shook my head mentally, not wanting to actually move my head and potentially rub it into nearby vomit.

That left the third option of the terrible options. Sebastian's smiling face floated into my head. It was a terrible idea. Not only did his soft smile make me feel things I shouldn't, there was also the issue of my father. Conor cared about me in his own manipulative way, but there was a limit. And when he found out I'd betrayed him to go work for a rival family, it wouldn't end well.

Well, fuck him. I wasn't going back to him, and I sure as hell would not be empty handed when Ray arrived.

But the bigger problem was Sebastian's brother... An image started forming in my head, and the air cleaved from my lungs. I shook my head and the image away, forcing it to go back into its corner where I never dared shed a light on it.

I forced aside any lingering emotions, and analyzed the situation. The Amato family could get the information they wanted then turn around and kill me. Or they could start demanding more than just information.

But... Sebastian had promised to protect me if I gave him the information. I gritted my teeth, I'd gone softer than I realized if I actually believed that.

However, maybe I could make it work. I could do their dirty work, while trying not to get offed by my dad or Luca Amato, and maybe earn money beyond the debt. Maybe I could save up enough of a nest egg to fly off to a country far away from my problems. Maybe Argentina?

Yeah, I could go to medical school in Argentina, run a clinic, and forget about everything that happened in this city. Also, I bet I could get a new Chanel duffel bag for way cheaper there.

I closed my eyes, letting the images wash over me. The sweetness of the images overpowered the stinging pain of my body. The illusion lulled me to sleep.

Chapter 14

Sunlight snuck past the boarded up windows, and through the cracks in the plywood doors. I threw a hand over my face and groaned. I laid there, pain radiating through my entire body. All I wanted to do was sleep, and pretend like yesterday had never happened.

The aching shifted into pulsing, and I threw my hand off my face in frustration. My arm landed in sticky liquid. Oh, for fuck's sake. I lifted my bare arm into the air and watched the blood on my arm slowly join the pool of liquid on the floor.

Well, at least it was my blood. I watched it drip from my pale arm down to the cheap plywood flooring. Thankfully, I didn't have to feel guilty about ruining the flooring. That was the least of this house's issues.

I'd been coughing up blood while they'd beaten me last night. I hope it stained at least one of their shoes.

Drip.

Drip.

Pieces of blood were sticking to the blonde hairs on my arm. I continued sitting there, staring at it. Even if I'd been able to even find the energy to stand up, it's not like there was any running water in this damned house. And without looking I knew my outfit was a symphony of muddy footprints. I was almost glad the previous squatters had pawned the bathroom mirror; I knew I would not be a pretty sight.

I bent my elbow and circled my arm around looking for any signs of numbness or weakness. Other than the purple and black bruises coloring my arms, and the intense pain radiating off them, I was fine.

Fine? I almost laughed at the thought, then moved onto my next arm.

When I finished my examination, I rolled up into a sitting position while trying to ignore the burning pain in my stomach. With a grunt I stood up, thankful they hadn't targeted my knees. From my feet to my stomach, I was a swollen

purple and blue mess. From my chest up, I didn't feel any swelling, and from the even texture of the skin it felt as if they'd listen to Ray's request to keep those parts unblemished.

I needed to get out of here, and get that money. Ray had said 24 hours, and with no cell phone I had no idea what time it was. The question was should I actually go to Sebastian? Trusting him screamed against all my instincts, but the reminder of the safety I felt that night on the balcony seemed to overwhelm my self preservation. I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt safe. I stared down at the green bruise forming over my forearm: I didn't want to live like this anymore.

With a groan, I stood up. I couldn't believe I was actually willingly going to see Sebastian. Irritation pulsed through me that he'd actually been right. With a grimace, I inched towards the door, my joints aching and protesting but thankfully not collapsing.

Absentmindedly, I dug my nails into my palms, but at a hint of pain I immediately released it. The last thing I needed to be doing was adding to my injuries.

I sighed, I couldn't believe I was actually doing this. I was meeting Sebastian with no gun, no knife, and a short sleeve black shirt that showed off my collection of bruises. Looking like this, I couldn't demand anything from Sebastian. He'd smell my desperation, and low ball me. No, I needed to completely cover up the evidence, and make sure he thought I had the upper hand.

I weighed my options as I approached the front door. I needed a long sleeve shirt and gloves. My current sweatpants and sneakers had footprints caked on them, but they were doing their job of covering up the current color of my body. I'd figure out a way to get the dried footprints off later. My hand reached for the door, and I hesitated. What if Ray's men were outside and waiting to take me to that hell hole where I'd start repaying my debt?

No, he wouldn't do that. Ray always kept his word, and he had promised me 24 hours. I swiveled the cheap metal knob

and swung the door open. It had been really stupid of me not to engage the deadbolt when they'd left last night. The door had been completely unlocked. Anyone could have waltzed right in, but I had been too exhausted to even crawl to the door. Add it to the list of stupid things I'd been doing lately.

Bright light blinded me as I stepped outside. Blinking a few times I adjusted to the glare. Matching boarded up windows peppered the surrounding houses. A few hollow faced men were passed out on the sidewalk, a mishmash of belongings spread around them. At least they had any personal items left, I literally only had the clothes on my back.

I walked down the street, and a group of men slouched on a stoop in front of a decrepit apartment building glanced my way. Just as quickly, their eyes were back on each other. As if I didn't even exist. I stepped over melting dog shit, or what I hoped was dog shit, and assessed my options.

Where was I going to get new clothes? I had no cash to buy clothes, and I didn't have the strength to break into someone's house. God, I had no weapons either. Nothing except my bruised hands to defend myself with if I ended up having to fight.

I flicked my gaze back towards the men on the stoop. One was lighting a cigarette, and the bulge in his waistband made it obvious he was carrying. This entire neighborhood was armed. I'd be completely vulnerable if someone came at me in my current state.

The heat of the sun hammered overhead, causing the dried blood on my arm to dribble down in a stream of sweat and blood. I sniffed at my armpit. Surprisingly, the scent of freshly picked daisies greeted me. Shit, I could do a commercial for the deodorant I'd used yesterday.

Black and blue? Crawling through your own blood? Possibly dead in 24 hours? Don't worry, you'll go to your grave smelling like you just rolled in daisies!

The scent of twenty unshowered men and women roasting in the heat greeted me as I turned at the intersection. They were lined up in front of a shelter. I stopped and watched as a

man in a dirt encrusted shirt inched forward while a volunteer took an emaciated woman inside.

After sucking in a painful breath, I joined the line.



A half hour later I was heading down into the subway, sporting a black linen sweatshirt and matching gloves. They unfortunately hadn't provided me with any of my miraculous deodorant. I'd see how long this new version lasted against winter clothing during a heat wave.

After I jumped over the turnstile and hopped on an uptown train, I examined myself in the grimy windows. Black material completely covered everything below my collarbone. Good. No traces of the bruises were visible. And the painkillers they'd given me had already gone into effect. A man to my right mumbled to himself while I tried to convince myself this was a good plan.

With no cell phone I had no way to contact Sebastian and tell him where to meet me. And I didn't have time to check around the city in places he could potentially be. But I knew where a group of his men were scheduled to work.

Three stops later I jumped off the train, grimacing as I stepped back into the heat. I walked down four decrepit blocks and wandered towards a construction site. To the left stood a one story shanty house with boarded up windows. To the right, men in hardhats were laying support beams on a fifty foot long lot.

I wandered into the construction site and ignored the surprised looks. I kept walking along the sawdust floor until I found who I was looking for. A tall suited man stood next to a shifty eyed man with a clipboard. The balding man with the clipboard had a white polo shirt with black letters on his chest that read 'Department of Buildings.'

The suited man said something in a low voice, and Mr. D-O-B nodded quickly while scribbling on his clipboard. Before Ray had appeared last night, I'd done my homework on all the

nearby places Sebastian's family were working. This afternoon, this new construction was having their permits looked over by the city. The building's developers had hired an expeditor to make sure that all the permits came back without a single delay. And that expeditor worked for the Amato family.

I stepped forward and tapped a finger on the suited man's shoulder.

"What?" the expeditor growled.

"I need to talk to you," I said, unable to believe that was actually the case.

"And who the fuck are you?"

"Does it matter?" I said before turning my attention towards the confused man from the Department of Buildings. While holding his gaze, I pointed towards the empty backyard. Mr. D-O-B looked towards the expeditor for his cue.

The expeditor rolled his eyes and waved his hand towards the backyard.

"Don't leave," the expeditor warned as the man shuffled away from us.

The suited man swung his attention back towards me. "I don't know who the fu--"

"Shut up," I interrupted him, and I smiled as a vein started pulsing in his neck. "I need you to get Sebastian on the phone now."

"Sebastian?" he asked, his anger morphing into confusion.

"*Amato.*"

His brows creased together, but he said nothing.

"*Now,*" I growled.

"You call him, if you want to speak to him so badly," he said with an unfriendly smile. "*If* you even know him."

"Trust me," I said, stepping forward into his personal space, and glaring up at him. "*You* will regret it if I'm not on the

phone with him in the next five minutes.”

He reached into his suit jacket, and I spied the silver glint of a .22. Instead of reaching for his gun, he grabbed a black phone out of his pocket.

Shaking his head, he scrolled through his phone and tapped on his screen. He stepped away from me and placed the phone against his ear.

After a few moments he spoke into the phone, “There’s some bitch here, who’s insisting on speaking to Sebastian.” The expeditor remained silent for a few moments, and then rolled his eyes. “*That* Sebastian.” A few more seconds of silence, then he took the phone away from his ear.

He glared at me while covering the speaker with his hand. “He’s asking who the hell you are, and what the fuck you want,” he said.

I had no idea who was on the other line. Whether it was one of my father’s moles, or someone whose palms could be greased easily. I couldn’t say who I was without taking the chance of it getting back to my father. And the last thing I needed was a bullet in my head from my father while this moron was attempting to get a hold of Sebastian. So I racked my brain for something I could say that would make Sebastian understand he needed to speak to me. All without revealing my identity to the man on the line.

“Tell him...” I started. Then I sighed, unable to believe I was about to say this. “That I’m finally *begging* him to come home with me.”

Keeping his hand on the speaker he stepped towards me. “Are you seriously making me handle a body call for you?”

I rolled my eyes, although I couldn’t believe I had said it either.

“Just tell him to relay that message,” I said.

With an eye roll, he repeated what I said. There was a pause, and then he took the phone away from his ear and placed his hand over it. He realized there was a mute button, right?

“If I find out that you are messing with me. I’ll-”

“I know,” I said, mimicking the way he spoke with his hands. “You’ll threaten to find my family, torture them within an inch of their lives, *blah, blah, blah.*”

His eyes narrowed, but he remained silent.

Finally, a muffled noise sounded from his phone, and he placed the phone back to his ear.

“What does she look like?” he said, while turning towards me.

He glanced over my body as he assessed me. I guess I wasn’t the only potential girl who could be begging to go home with Sebastian. He began to describe me, none too favorably. He smirked when I began patting at my matted curls. So what if I was having a bad hair day? It’s not like I could exactly keep my hair from tangling when 8 men were beating the shit out of me last night.

Finally, he finished insulting me and hung up the phone.

“I have to give it to you. You have some balls approaching me to handle your booty call,” he said.

Unfortunately, this was the least ballsy thing I’d be doing today.

Chapter 15

After a few minutes of silence, the phone rang. The expeditor looked down at the screen, and his thick eyebrows raised towards his hairline. When he answered it, his tone transformed from harsh to overly polite. Sebastian was obviously on the other line.

The expeditor handed the phone to me. A warm, familiar voice echoed in my ear, “Selene?”

“Speaking,” I replied, waving the expeditor off. He shook his head, but wandered towards the backyard.

“I have to admit, I hadn’t expected you to start begging me *yet*.” God, his condescending tone set something off in me.

“Good thing I’m not begging you, I would *hate* to disappoint,” I paused for a moment remembering the urgency of my situation. “Although, I do need to see you. *Right now*.”

“That sounded a bit like begging.”

I rolled my eyes before I remembered he couldn’t see me.

“Send a car to pick me up, so we can speak somewhere in private,” I said.

He laughed, but there was an underlying darkness to it. “It’s sounds like you are begging me to fuck you.” His voice lowered. “It’s okay to admit it. I can make you come so many times that you won’t even be able to remember your own name.”

I could feel the redness spreading across my cheeks. Damn pale skin.

“Send the damn car,” I said, the embarrassment seeping into my voice against my will.

Dark laughter caressed my ear as I hung up on him.



An hour later, the town car Sebastian sent was moving into a significantly different neighborhood from the construction

site. As we passed by tall townhomes with ivy climbing up the white stones, I tried to keep my mind in neutral. Focus on the scattered skyscrapers towering above the brownstones, or the impeccably dressed doormen standing at attention. When the parked cars in the street morphed from Porsches into Lamborghinis, a blinker turned on. And the nerves began to kick in.

What was I thinking? I knew better than to go into enemy territory without a single weapon. My father could have an enforcer ready to mow me down the second I stepped out of the car.

I swallowed back my agitation, and focused my attention back on the enemy territory I was stupidly walking into. Men in suits milled in front of a six story brownstone. Underneath their ironed suit jackets, I spotted the bulges of guns.

Part of me was tempted to jump out of the car, but the driver was already pulling into a glistening white driveway without a hint of gum or grit stuck to the ground. When the men approached the car, the driver pressed a button. The divider rolled up between us, blocking our view of each other. Good. The fewer people who knew of my presence the better.

Before I'd gotten in the car, the driver had assured me that we could see out of the windows, but no one could see back in. Not trusting a word out of Sebastian's men, I'd obviously tested that statement myself. Although, I had wondered if it was shifting glass, and that with a push of a button the windows were as clear as a glass table. If I had a gun, I would have pressed it against the window in order to test that theory. Since my gun was currently in Ray's hands, I leaned back and studied the men speaking to the driver.

At this distance, the lines of their guns were obvious beneath the bulky men's crisp black suit jackets. I recognized the outlines of a few Glock 17s, and a Browning High Powered. When we got inside, I imagined I would see more machine guns than semi automatic handguns.

The windowless garage opened, and the car crept forward. Just the garage was larger than the entire house I'd been

squatting in yesterday. When the garage door closed behind us, five suited men marched past a bright red 1964 Ferrari, and raised their guns toward our car.

It was too late to back out now. I took a deep breath, and held it in for a moment. If they smelled weakness, I'd be walking out of this building in a worse position than I was currently in.

Time to get my head in the game. I let out a breath, and slowly lifted my lips into a cocky smile. *No one* was going to fuck me over.

"Pick me up in that next time," I said to the driver, pointing at the polished red 2 seater.

He ignored me and stepped out of our town car. The suited men approached the car, flanking it on each side.

The man closest to my door pointed his gun at me, and said, "Step out of the car with your hands in the air."

"How do I keep my hands in the air AND open the door?" I asked with a laugh.

His expression tightened and nodded at my driver.

The driver approached the black door and swung it open. The original man kept his sight trained on my head as I stepped out of the car with my hands up. The other men rushed towards me, so I now had five sets of machine guns pointed at me from only a few feet away.

A door silently opened at the back of the garage.

Sebastian wore a black Tom Ford suit. The slim fit pants strained against his muscular thighs as he strode towards us.

"Sir," the voice of the man who'd originally ordered me out of the car had suddenly become much more respectful. "We still need to search her."

"Go ahead," Sebastian said, leaning against a black Bentley.

"Hands up, and spread your legs," Sebastian's man ordered.

I did as I was told, while glaring at Sebastian. I managed to keep a flush off my face, even though the memory of him

teasing me about how much he would enjoy watching the cops search me came unbidden to my mind. From the hungry look in his eyes, he had the same line of thought.

I forced my mind to focus on the severity of the situation. If Sebastian said no to my request for money...

He wouldn't. He needed this information, or else he wouldn't have been hounding me down to take him up on his offer.

A hand squeezed my leg, and I held back any indication of the pain sweeping through me. Thankfully, I'd had the foresight to tuck my gloves into the hem of my shirt sleeves, and my black socks underneath my black workout pants. Thanks to my new wardrobe, courtesy of the shelter, it'd be impossible to see the mishmash of bruises from any angle. Now I just needed to make sure the pain didn't read on my face.

"Only five men to search me? I think you might be underestimating my abilities," I said.

Two rough hands began working their way up my thighs, and I continued to keep any hint of discomfort off my face.

"What abilities? The only one I've seen so far is your ability to beg." Sebastian smiled, leaning his corded arms across his chest. "And *that* could use some work."

"Good thing begging isn't a requirement for ripping your head off," I said.

The guard's pointed shoe kicked the fleshy back of my knee. Rough hands pushed my shoulders down and my knees slammed against the concrete. I tried to keep my expression relaxed. *Breathe*. This is nothing. The cold steel of a gun barrel dug into my cheek. Yesterday, I would've been able to resist the attempt to shove me to the ground. This pain was making me weak.

One moment, I was debating snapping the guards's wrist, consequences be damned. The next second, Sebastian grabbed the man by the suit jacket, and ripped him off me. My mouth dropped open as Sebastian tossed the bulky guard across the

room like a sack of potatoes. I'd been *seriously* underestimating his strength.

"You'll treat my guests better, or you'll be finding a new job," Sebastian growled at the slack jawed guard.

When the guard weakly nodded his assent from the concrete floor, Sebastian pointed at the door, silently ordering his dismissal.

After the door clicked closed Sebastian held out a hand. I rolled my eyes and stood up on my own. Achiness gripped at me, but I focused on keeping any indication of it off my face.

"Excellent hospitality," I said.

Sebastian's jaw clenched, and his eyes narrowed as they swung in the direction of another guard hesitantly approaching me to finish the search. This guard barely touched me before he declared, "I'm not detecting any weapons, sir."

"But," the guard continued hesitantly as if already regretting his next words, "I would typically recommend a more intensive search."

Instinctively, my jaw tightened. But I forced it into a relaxed position, not wanting Sebastian to sense my discomfort. If they took off any of my clothing, they'd see the bruises. I couldn't let Sebastian think I was desperate.

"No weapons? What happened to my knife?" Sebastian asked.

"I don't need it to kill you." I couldn't resist the jab, so I began stiffening my muscles in case the guards went for round two.

"Don't even think about it," Sebastian growled, his darkened expression turning towards the guard.

Sebastian grabbed my arm with a gentleness that belied his expression and guided me toward the door he'd entered from.

"From the way you're taunting my men, it sounds like you *want* a more invasive search." He leaned towards me, and whispered in my ear, "I can assist with that."

I elbowed him in the ribs, and he shot a glare behind his shoulder at an approaching guard.

“Are you trying to get yourself killed?” he asked.

“Nope, just you,” I whispered low enough so the guard wouldn’t hear.

He rolled his eyes.

We walked along polished concrete until we reached a marble platform. Sebastian swung open the ten foot oak door, and three sets of hardened faces blocked our view into the house. Sebastian nodded at them, and they stepped away, revealing twelve foot high ceilings, and marble veined floors. Before I could examine the house further, he guided me to a hallway on the right.

I couldn’t believe I was willingly inside Amato headquarters. My heartbeat sped up as a stiff guard eyed me.

“I would have preferred it if fewer people saw me,” I said, keeping my voice neutral despite my increased heart rate. The more people that saw us together, the higher the chances were that the word would get back to my father.

“You didn’t give me much of a heads up to arrange for that,” he said. We stopped in front of a reinforced elevator door, and he pressed the up button. “Besides you were the one who needed to see me *right now*,” he whispered the last two words in my ear.

His sinful tone sent a shiver down my spine. I ignored the feeling and stepped into the open elevator. I backed up from him into the corner of the elevator bank. He quirked an eyebrow, but didn’t decrease the distance between us.

When the elevator binged floor 5, the doors opened to reveal warm oak floors leading down a long hallway. I glanced down the white wood staircase to our left and noted four armed men leaning against the grey walls. If it came to it, this was going to be a tough fight getting out of here. Especially with no weapons currently at my disposal.

Sebastian stepped past a painting of a naked woman with her eyes rolled back in ecstasy.

“Interesting art choices,” I said, raising an eyebrow at the piece.

“I didn’t pick it out.” His eyes moved from the painting to me, and his voice lowered. “Although, I wouldn’t mind seeing that expression on *your* face.”

I tried to keep the blood from rushing to my face, but my body wasn’t intent on listening to me. He smirked and opened a door to his right. I shoved past him into the library, refusing to acknowledge his words. Tall bookshelves covered the walls, framing a black marble fireplace at the back of the room. I moved towards the unlit fireplace, hoping there was a sharpened fire poker beside it.

Sebastian followed behind me, and when we reached the fireplace he sat down in a black leather chair. Damn, no fire poker. I really needed to find some sort of weapon just in case.

“Chilly?” he asked, his eyes caught on my gloves. The amusement faded from his eyes. An assessing look passed over his face as he looked closer at my clothing.

“Nah, I just wanted to make sure my gloves covered up my fingerprints. Gotta make sure the cops can’t trace it back to me when they find your body.”

“Hilarious,” he said without a hint of hilarity in his voice. His eyes continued to search me.

I sat back in a matching leather chair that was opposite him. “See something you like?” I shot at him.

A small smirk spread across his lips as he turned his attention back to my face. Sebastian looked at me for a few more moments, and then his face changed back to neutral. None of the kindness from the night at Piper’s, or any of the teasing energy remained. Back to business.

“Why did you need to meet with me?” he asked, a steeliness in his voice.

I sat up straighter. He needed to have the perception that this information mattered more to him than anything I would ask of him.

“I’m considering working with you.” More like didn’t have any better options, and would not work with him under any other circumstance.

“Really?” he said, leaning back in his chair, expression unchanged.

“Possibly. If you give me a number that makes sense,” I said.

“I thought you weren’t interested in my offer. What changed?” he said.

We both knew that I needed to pay off my debt to the loan sharks. What he didn’t know was how urgently I needed the money. It was important to play it off casually, as if I’d just gotten bored with this lifestyle. I’d make him think if he didn’t pay me that it wasn’t a big deal, and I’d just find someone else who would. That I had all the time in the world to make a decision.

“I want to go back to living at the Plaza again. Also, I’m sick of not having blowouts.” I flicked my knotted hair.

His eyes narrowed. “A suite at the Plaza? How much do you think we’re going to pay you?”

Here it came. The part where we both pretended we needed the other less than we did. I leaned back in my chair and pretended to think about what I was going to say.

“Today, I’m not going to give you any information. As a sign of respect for our future working relationship, you’ll hand me ten grand before I leave this house,” I said.

A door opened, and my breath caught in my throat as I stared at the man in the doorway. All the images I’d been pushing further and further down threatened to swarm me. Pain ached at my chest, that had nothing to do with my beatdown from last night.

Green eyes glared at me. The same ones from my nightmares.

Chapter 16

My throat tightened, and it felt like my lungs were filling up with water.

No.

I couldn't afford to go down this route.

I was okay, I could breathe.

I repeated the words in my mind as Luca Amato strode up the room, tension evident in his tiny arms.

I swallowed some air and attempted to steady my thoughts. Numbness. That was an emotion I could handle.

Just focus on the present. You aren't there anymore. You're safe. *Focus.*

Two men with machine guns shadowed behind Luca. Their fingers were inches from the trigger. I wasn't sure if it was a good or bad thing I hadn't brought any weapons. If I had, there'd already be a bullet racing towards the don of the Amato family.

Okay, maybe not *completely* numb.

"What are you doing here?" Sebastian asked his older brother, confusion lacing his voice. Luca sat in the chair next to his brother, and I began to compare them. Comparison was a neutral and numb thought process. It wouldn't tilt me over the edge. Hopefully.

Luca stood a few inches shorter than Sebastian, and his muscles were nonexistent compared to his brother. He shared the same sharp jawline and cheekbones as Sebastian, but there was a hint of senseless cruelty in his face which I had never sensed within Sebastian. Although, maybe I was sensing cruelty since Luca looked like he wanted to rip my jaw from my face. The feeling was mutual.

Luca ignored his brother, his attention focused on me as he drew closer. "Ten grand? So that's what you owe today," Luca said.

Fuck. He knew about the debt collectors' deadline. Not only was I close to blacking out into a storm of nightmares, my leverage was also quickly evaporating.

"What are you talking about?" Sebastian asked, standing up from his chair and moving towards Luca.

Luca continued to ignore his brother, his green eyes narrowed as he spat, "What did they threaten you with? Are they going to force you to work on your knees in order to put a little dent in that debt you owe?"

"Fuck you," I ground out, wishing that there had been fire poker so I could stab it through his skeletal throat.

A cruel smile crawled across Luca's thin lips. "You'll be doing that soon if you don't get the money."

"*Luc,*" Sebastian growled in warning.

"I don't have to listen to this," I said standing up, my hands unable to keep from balling into a fist. "There are plenty of other people who will pay me for my information."

Luca's smile deepened. "Too bad you don't have time to arrange it. You only have a few more hours until Ray shows up, and drags you off to the local brothel. I wonder what your new nickname will be?"

"Shut the fuck up!" I yelled, pushing past his men.

"Grab her," Luca ordered.

Two rough hands grabbed me. I swung my head back and connected with the mafioso's face. Cold liquid seeped down into my hair.

"Fucking bitch!" a man growled in my ear, then I felt a gun biting into my cheek. The hands tightened on my arms.

"*Luc,* what the fuck are you doing?" Sebastian growled.

"Her father killed our dad. Don't fucking pity her." Luca turned his cruel eyes back on me. "This is how it's going to go. You are going to tell me every single secret I could possibly want to hear. If I've ever wondered something about your

father's business, you'll tell me. If you behave, I'll give you ten grand."

He stepped closer to me, and revulsion twisted around my stomach at his presence. Luca's angry eyes stared down at me as he said, "If I find out you are lying to me, or withholding anything you get nothing. Either way, I don't want to ever hear from you again."

Sebastian's chair scraped backwards as he jumped up from his seat, but I ignored him.

"Why the fuck would I do that?" I spat back at Luca. The totality of my information was worth way more than ten grand. That's not an offer I would ever take.

Luca shook his head, and I already knew I wouldn't like what he was going to say next. "I'll have Francesco," he nodded towards the man holding a gun against my head, "call up your friend Ray, and tell him exactly where you are. I wouldn't mind watching him drag you out of here."

Luca was bluffing; he had to be. But how did he know about Ray and the deadline? The pieces came together. Before Ray had even counted the money last night, it was obvious that it would end in a beating. Had Luca pushed Ray's boss into putting pressure on me, so he could low ball me?

"Luc, I'm fucking warning you," Sebastian snarled, his face darker than I'd ever seen it.

"Sebastian, you should go." Luca turned back to me.

Before Sebastian could respond I ordered, "Call him, I'm not telling you anything without a better deal."

Luca stepped closer to me, and brushed a hair out of my face. My entire body froze as if I'd just plunged into a -100 degree lake. I could hear a growl from Sebastian, but Luca didn't turn away from me. My mind ached to break the tiny hand that touched me, but I couldn't force my body to move. I was completely helpless.

"Fine, I'll call Ray," Luca said, "Then he'll take you away and teach you some manners. I'll come find you in a week,

and while I'm fucking you, you'll be begging to give me the information so you-"

Sebastian's fist connected with Luca's face, and Luca fell to the ground, blood dripping from his busted nose. The trance I'd been under seemed to break as my jaw dropped open.

What the fuck? Was this some kind of twisted good cop/bad cop strategy? With a ferocity that surprised me, Sebastian threw himself on top of Luca. The guard's grip on me loosened as he stared at the fight between his bosses. Luca's eyes narrowed, and he threw a punch back at Sebastian. I glanced to my left; the man holding the gun was too busy watching Sebastian dodge his brother's punch and pull Luca into a guillotine choke to be paying attention to me.

Before anyone could react, I grabbed the wrist of the guard to my left, and twisted. He screamed, and the gun fell out of his limp hand. I caught it and aimed it at Luca's head.

Another gun was already aimed at my face, but now I finally had some damn leverage.

Without loosening his arm around his brother's throat, Sebastian looked up at me.

"Put the gun down, Selene," Sebastian said. No way in hell was I doing that.

Sebastian raised his eyebrows expectantly, but I just stared back at him. In what universe would I put my gun down? I wasn't going down without a fight.

"Put the gun down Selene, and I'll have my men get you the ten grand. I promise," Sebastian said.

Did he think I was insane? After his brother had just threatened me like that, he seriously expected me to believe him? Like I could trust a word out of either of those men's mouths. I clicked the safety off the gun.

"Get me the ten grand now," I said.

Chapter 17

Luca tried to thrash against his brother's hold, but Sebastian dug his arm deeper into Luca's throat. Sebastian nodded at someone behind me.

"Get the money," Sebastian ordered.

A man behind me began whispering into his phone, but I kept my eyes and gun on Luca.

A few minutes later when telltale footsteps sounded behind me, Sebastian raised a hand up.

"Your money is here, Selene. Now just put down the gun," Sebastian said.

"Count it in front of me." It wouldn't surprise me if there was a remote trigger bomb hidden inside the bag of money.

Sebastian nodded at someone behind me. A suited man stepped into my peripheral vision holding a blue duffel bag. He slowly unzipped it and began counting out hundred dollar bills. When he finished counting, I took a step towards the brothers. My gun remained pointed at Luca, and I could sense there were multiple guns pointed at me. A plan was becoming cemented in my mind. A very bad plan, but the only plan I could think of that *might* get me out of here alive.

When I was three feet away, I said, "Luca, stand up slowly."

Sebastian released his grip on Luca's throat. Before Luca could even begin to recover, Sebastian jumped to his feet and stepped towards me. Reflexively, I aimed the gun at his head. Damn it, my plan was already going awry.

"Put down the gun," he said softly. And a small part of me was tempted to listen to him. To trust him. To let him handle all of this.

Behind him, Luca gurgled and clutched his throat. And I was reminded why I'd been an idiot to ever trust Sebastian. I shook my head, and Sebastian took another step forward. He was only two feet away from me. I lunged forward, and forced the gun barrel against his forehead.

“Try anything, and I’ll kill you,” I said.

Sebastian’s jaw clenched, but he said nothing.

His head remained still, but his eyes moved to the left. A safety clicked as it was turned off. And I’d be an idiot to think it’d be pointed at anyone other than me.

“Don’t,” he growled, his eyes glued to the person on our left. At least, he had some inkling of self-preservation. Well, that would make things easier. After he’d continued moving towards me while I had a gun pointed at his chest, I had wondered if he was the one with the very death wish he’d accused me of having earlier.

“Keep still. You move your head even an inch, and I swear to God I’ll shoot,” I said.

Slowly, I moved while keeping my gun trained on his head. Finally, I was behind him with my gun digging into the back of his skull. There were nine men in the library, all of whom had a gun pointed at me. If I hadn’t taken a hostage, I wouldn’t have liked my odds.

“This is how this is going to work-” I started. I caught movement in my peripheral vision. “Luca, if you fucking move again, I will shoot your brother, then you. *Don’t* fucking test me.”

The movement stopped.

“Luca,” I ordered, “you are going to walk towards the window on my left so slowly that everyone here will think you are a member of the walking dead. Then you are going to walk your ass out of this room. If you don’t, I swear I’ll kill you.”

Once Luca was out of the room, I spoke again. “Let’s try this again: we are all going to walk out of this room without shooting each other. Anyone even *thinks* about shooting me, *bam*, Sebastian dies.”

I nudged Sebastian with my gun, but he didn’t move.

“Walk,” I growled.

“I thought you said if I moved an inch, you’d shoot me,” Sebastian said, the sarcasm dripping from his voice. I had a

gun to his head, he *really* should take me seriously.

“Fucking move!” I dug the gun deeper into his skull, and he took a step forward. “Everyone else, too. Back the hell up!” I yelled.

The men stayed still. Unbelievable. Did they want Sebastian to die? Maybe Luca was pissed enough about his nose to let them shoot his brother. I might need a back up plan.

“You heard her. Move,” Sebastian ordered. The suited men began stepping backwards, their guns never leaving sight of my head. When we passed by the duffel bag of money, Sebastian slowly picked it up, and we continued on.

Once we reached the door to the hallway, I ordered everyone in front of me to get out of the doorway and move to the left side of the hallway. Again, they ignored me until Sebastian reiterated my command.

Sebastian and I stepped out of the doorway, and I moved backwards while feeling for the elevator button. The elevator dinged, and we stepped on.

The elevator door closed, leaving two of us alone. And for some fucking reason my shoulders relaxed. What the hell was wrong with me? There was an army of men waiting for the opportunity to put a cap in me, and I was fucking relaxing. There seemed to be something wrong with my body whenever I was in proximity to Sebastian. And if this situation was any indication, it'd end up killing me.

The lift started to move, and Sebastian glared at me in the reflection of the metal wall. Now, *that* was a rational response.

“Do you want to die?” he growled.

“I told you earlier, *you're* the one who's going to die,” I said, a reference to our banter earlier in the hallway. My heart twinged at the thought. Everything had seemed so much easier then. Ask for some money, give some information, and we all go our happy way. I had been so stupid to trust him before. Fuck, I should have known better.

I knew what Sebastian's brother was capable of and yet I had walked into their headquarters without a single weapon or

back up plan. And now the most likely result of my naïve optimism was my quick death before I even left this house.

The elevator opened on the first floor, and eight sets of guns were pointed at me.

“Back up,” I ordered. I didn’t have time to dwell on those regrets anymore.

Again no movement.

“Tell them,” I said with a sigh.

“Do it,” Sebastian said, with so much authority in his voice I almost stepped back out of reflex. His men stepped back, and we stepped forward before the elevator could close on us.

“Everyone go left,” I said. Everyone stood still. Was I fucking invisible? Why was no one listening to me? My momentary resignation to this pointless telephone game was quickly fading.

“Now,” I snarled. As the seconds stretched on with no movement, I felt like strangling someone. Was I speaking Irish? Why the hell did Sebastian keep having to translate everything for me?

“Just listen to whatever she says,” Sebastian said. They moved left down the hallway. Finally! They really did not want to piss off the person who was holding the Underboss’ life in her hands.

Finally, we reached the door to the garage. Predictably, when I had Sebastian open the door, another group of guns pointed my way.

Sebastian beat me to the punch. “Back up.”

We stepped over the marble onto the polished concrete, and I began assessing my options. I needed a fast car. One that could outrace the cars coming after me. Something near the front that wouldn’t be blocked in by anything.

My eyes landed on a black Bugatti.

When we got close to the front of the garage, I pointed my free hand at the sleek black race car, wondering if Sebastian

even had his driver's license. So many people in the city never learned how to drive.

"Someone put the keys in the car," I said.

One of the armed men shifted his gaze to another armed man.

"We don't have the keys," the shifty eyed man said.

"Bullshit. Put them in *now*, and I want you to show me where the tracker is," I said.

"Just do it," Sebastian said with a resigned sigh.

Finally, the key was in the car, and I had smashed the tracker. I prodded Sebastian into the passenger seat, and he dropped the duffel bag of cash at his feet. He leaned against the black leather passenger seat and raised an eyebrow at me.

"Keep going," I said, nodding at the center cockpit divider between the two seats.

A flash of amusement crossed his face for a moment. But he squeezed his long legs over the black leather console and ducked his head underneath the curved headliner. Once he was in the driver's seat, I followed behind him into the passenger seat. I didn't like the idea of not being in control of the car, but it'd be difficult to drive and insure he didn't regain control of the situation. When he was tapping his fingers against the thick steering wheel, I swung the door closed behind me.

"Turn the car on," I said, keeping the gun less than a foot from his face.

First, he pulled the race harness over him, and I mirrored him. I didn't trust him not to crash the car on purpose. Then he pressed the engine button. The race car roared to life, and I clicked the safety back on my gun. The last thing I wanted was to accidentally pop my leverage. Sebastian reached towards the 7 speed dual-clutch.

"Drive it in automatic," I ordered. I refused to have his hand close enough to grab my gun. I'd previously thrown caution to the wind with him. That ended now. Sebastian shook his head, but took his hand off the clutch.

“What’s your plan?” he asked, continuing to tap his fingers against the steering wheel.

“Drive,” I growled. My plan hadn’t evolved beyond that yet, but he didn’t need to know it. He reached for a button on the side of the dash. I tensed, but the garage door just opened.

Ten men stood on the driveway. Since we were out in public their guns weren’t out, but each had a hand in their suit jacket, waiting for an opportunity to rain down bullets. I pressed a button to my right, and the passenger window rolled down.

“Stay ten feet back,” I ordered. They actually listened to me without a reiteration from Sebastian. Once the men had flanked the sides of the driveway, Sebastian slowly eased the car forward. A vintage Ferrari and a black steel, military grade Hummer followed behind us. I knew there’d soon be more. When we reached the end of the driveway, Sebastian flicked a switch on his left.

“Did you just turn on your blinker?” I asked.

“Safety first.” He smirked while he turned left onto the one lane street.

This fucking asshole.

Chapter 18

The Ferrari and Hummer turned in behind us, and I saw more cars lining up in the driveway. The overly tinted windows of the pursuing cars obscured my view of the occupants, but I knew that the men inside had their machine guns trained on me. They were just waiting for an opening.

I didn't plan on giving them one.

The light ahead of us turned green, and Sebastian eased into the intersection.

"Where are we going?" he asked, glancing into the rearview window.

I didn't say anything, watching the cars inch up behind us. Where could I go? My father? I didn't want to go back to him, but I preferred that to certain death. The problem was it'd start a gang war if I showed up to the Regan family headquarters with Sebastian as a hostage. My father would immediately hand me over to Luca in order to maintain the fragile peace. We stopped at another red light, and watched a woman in head to toe Louis Vuitton carrying her mini Poodle across the street.

What about Piper? I almost laughed as I imagined the sheer confusion and panic that would cross her face if I walked into her apartment with a gun pointed at Sebastian's head. No, none of my friends from that part of my life could help me. Not a single one even owned a gun that they could lend me.

The light turned green, and we continued down the one lane road, the water beginning to come into view.

Ronan? Too loyal to my father, and even if I could convince him I'd just end up getting him killed. There was no way the two of us could take down the amount of people who would come for me.

I was on my own.

And just like last night, I had no good options. I thought I'd hit rock bottom last night. I never failed to surprise myself at the terrible situations I'd gotten into since I left my father's protection. And just like my decision to get a loan with Ray, I

couldn't blame anyone except for myself. I'd been stupid to trust Sebastian. To believe in some small part of mind that he was different.

For all I knew, he'd been the mastermind behind the plan to lowball me. But then why did he attack Luca? I shook the thought away as we continued towards the expressway.

"Give me your phone," I ordered. Keeping one hand on the steering wheel, he used his free hand to reach into his pocket. He tossed a black phone my way, and I caught it one handed.

After using Sebastian's face to unlock the phone, I debated my next move. An advertisement for cheap international flights flashed on the screen. Part of me was tempted to just book a flight to Argentina, just like I dreamed of last night. But I couldn't exactly keep a gun pressed against Sebastian's neck as we went through LaGuardia Airport. Not to mention that even if I somehow made it on a plane, I'd be killed the second I set foot in Argentina.

"Where are we going?" he asked as if reading my mind.

I sighed as I watched Sebastian ease towards the FDR. The second it'd occurred to me I knew Argentina was a terrible plan. But a part of me wanted to hold on to that dream from last night. To start fresh in a new country with no one controlling me.

I turned the power off on the phone. With the black screen, the dreamlike particles of starting a new life flickered away. Now I could only visualize a gunshot wound to the back of my head. My mind shifted back to reality.

"Get us out of the city," I answered.

I had no idea where we'd head if we actually made it out of the city. We were lucky that it was the weekend, and everyone was heading back from the Hamptons. The lanes going out of the city were practically clear, and it would allow us to speed ahead.

The five families had agreed to keep the highways of the city neutral. The Amato family technically weren't allowed to start a gunfight on the FDR. But they'd sure as hell try to force

me onto a side street where they could take care of me without repercussions.

I needed to convince Sebastian to outrun his own men. Although that was easier said than done. God, convincing him to do anything was difficult even though I had a gun pointed against him.

The light changed, and he turned left onto the expressway. When he flicked on his blinker, I had to resist the urge to smack him over the head.

Four souped up cars stayed right behind us as we moved further uptown.

“Go faster,” I growled, as two cars flanked us on either side.

Our car’s speed remained the same.

“We both know I can’t kill you, but I’ll shoot you in the fucking leg if you don’t speed up,” I said, watching as another car zoomed ahead, presumably to cut us off.

The speedometer didn’t inch up at all.

“Drive faster,” I said. It came out higher pitched than I meant to. If they managed to force me to exit the FDR it was all over.

Keeping the gun aimed at him, I swung my leg over the center console. I pressed my foot over his, digging his foot into the gas pedal. The car shot forward, and the race harness dug into my bruises. I ignored the pain and pushed my handgun into Sebastian’s side.

Sebastian’s muscular leg tensed under mine. He swerved around a Honda that was inches from our bumper.

“Fuck, you’re going to get us both killed,” he said, his jaw tight as he spoke.

I pressed down harder on his foot, and the car obliged. Sebastian cut left, the car effortlessly twisting past a middle aged man in a Porsche.

“Don’t even think about purposefully crashing the car. If you do, I’ll make sure you regret it,” I said.

The car ahead of us tapped its breaks, but I pressed my foot down harder. Sebastian cursed as he swung into another lane. Six of his men's cars matched our speed behind us. Great, two more cars to add to the group chasing us. We sped past a cop car on the side of the road, but thankfully it didn't turn its flashers on. The last thing I needed was a police chase on top of everything else.

My foot remained hard on the pedal as we zipped past the Bronx, and finally into Westchester County. Throughout the ride all six of the souped up cars stayed hot on our tail.

"Get off here," I said, nodding towards the fast approaching exit.

Sebastian actually listened without protesting. Although he used his turn signal. Trees blocked our view of the water as we sped down the road. I wished I had a better sense of where we should go. Maybe a remote farm where I could hide?

"You know, if you really want to give me a lap dance that badly, you don't have to hold me at gunpoint," he said.

I glanced down, my butt was inching towards his crotch. I wiggled my left butt cheek against his muscled right leg mockingly. "Deal with it," I said.

"Are you sure you want to distract me when I'm driving this fast?" he asked.

"I think you can handle it," I said.

Sebastian smiled. "I can handle a lot more than that."

"I doubt that. I don't think you can handle me any better than you can handle this car."

His smile deepened, and he ran a finger down the inside of my leg. I tried to ignore the heat triggering within me.

"Trying to make me go faster?" he asked.

"Did it work?" I glanced pointedly at the Speed Key attached to the driver's door, but he made no movement to reach for it. It needed to be inserted in order to reach top speeds. I checked the rearview window. His men were keeping pace behind us.

Suddenly, a line of cars came into view ahead of us. They were lined up perpendicular to our fast approaching car. There wasn't an inch between any of the cars, and they were completely cutting off our path. *Shit.*

This was the end. The Bugatti was a race car, not a tank. We couldn't exactly ram the blockade.

"Do me a favor," I said as we approached the cars.

"You're seriously asking me for a favor after taking me hostage?" he said with a snort.

"Please shoot me if I can't talk my way out of this," I said.

He looked at me, but didn't say anything. There was no way I could talk my way out of this. At least he was being kind enough to spare me that reminder.

I grabbed the steering wheel and yanked it to the right while slamming my foot on the brake. He swore as I punched the car into manual and hit the clutch. With a growl, Sebastian ripped the steering wheel towards the trees. I shifted my foot back to the gas, and we spun in a 180. Before, any of the other cars could turn around, we were racing in the opposite direction.

"Next time, let me handle that," he growled as we raced away from the blockade.

I shook my head, while grabbing the clutch in order to shift it back into automatic. "Like you would have actually done it if I asked."

He sighed, but remained silent for a moment.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

It was my turn to remain silent as we raced up the emergency lane.

"Are you just planning on driving around until we run out of gas?" he asked.

I cut my eyes to the tank: it was half empty.

Sebastian sighed again. "You have absolutely no plan," he said.

“I didn’t exactly plan for any of this to happen when I walked into your house,” I said, then instantly regretted it. Great, now I was revealing to my hostage that I had no idea what I was doing. I was losing control of this situation. Although, let’s be honest, I’d never had any control. Each moment, my only plan was to keep myself alive for a few more minutes.

“What my brother said about that debt collector,” he paused, then continued, “is it true?”

At the mention of his brother, pain tightened around my chest. My lungs threatened to stop working as I fought the images swimming behind my eyes. Finally, the pain faded back to the general achiness I’d been feeling since yesterday.

“Don’t play dumb with me, Sebastian. I know you and your brother put pressure on Ray, so you could low ball me.”

“What are you talking about?” he said.

“It’s so obvious now this was all a ploy to lowball me for information. Fuck, I bet you’ve been planning this ever since you walked in my door and pretended like you would protect me if I accepted your offer,” I said.

“You’re wrong Selene. Just pull over, and let me fix this.” His eyes seemed so sincere, that I doubted he’d been in on his brother’s plan. But it didn’t matter. Everything was beyond fixing.

I laughed harshly at the thought of him trying to fix this. The only way I was getting out of this was in a body bag. Still, if I could just outrun them...

“If you want to help, then lose the cars behind us,” I said.

The lead we’d gotten from the J-turn was disappearing. They were gaining on us.

Chapter 19

Despite my prompt Sebastian's speed remained consistent. I needed to take over.

I unhooked my harness and threw my other leg over the console, settling my hips over him. He grunted, but before he could react further, I dropped my grip on the gun and elbowed his arm off the steering wheel.

"If you touch my gun, I'll crash us into a tree. If I'm going to die anyway, I'll take you with me," I said. But it was hard to sound threatening when I was straddling his lap. Especially since he was the only one currently wearing a seat belt.

I glanced down at the gun lying in the passenger seat, waiting for him to call my bluff. Instead he just laughed.

"You're going to be the death of me," he said.

With my left hand, I reached down and grabbed the Speed Key. I popped the key open and twisted it into place. The car responded, and the momentum smacked me back into the hard planes of Sebastian's chest.

"Your lap dance could use some work," he grunted.

"Don't lie, it's the best one of your life." I grabbed the gun back with my free hand and dug it into his side.

I pressed further down on his enormous foot, and the cars receded behind us. His finger traced the curve of my hip.

"Hands off," I growled, and immediately his hand was off my skin.

He leaned in closer, so his mouth was only an inch from my ear. "Are you sure you want me to do that?"

My lower body tensed, and he laughed softly in my ear. He tapped his fingers against the console, while I tried to ignore the loss of his touch.

Past the trees the sun began to set. Even though I'd outrun them, I needed a plan. Eventually, I'd run out of gas. And every moment that passed increased the likelihood that

Sebastian would smack my head against the steering wheel, and knock me out. Or grab for the gun.

Moving into the driver's seat had been stupid, but I hoped that the knowledge that I had nothing to lose would keep him at bay for now. Plus, he knew if he didn't push me he was surviving this incident. I didn't have that luxury.

There was one place I *could* go. A place that would be completely empty. When the sun set behind the oak trees, I took an exit. The trees grew thicker on each side as we passed by oversized mansions and views of a crystalline lake. When we reached a long gravel driveway with trees bracketing it, I slowed down. After checking my mirrors, I swung the car into the driveway.

The trees grew denser as we approached an iron gate. I eased the car towards a metal keypad, and typed in 0623. A feeling of sadness washed over me, but like all the other emotions swirling through me I pushed it away.

“You know there's probably cameras everywhere,” he said.

I shook my head, but remained silent as we passed through the gate and approached the pine two story home. Eighteen years ago there hadn't been cameras, and there hadn't been any additions to the house since that time.

Beyond the oak trees, the orange fingers of the sunset were reaching for the gabled house. Soon the gravel transitioned into white concrete, and I turned left towards the detached garage. After I shifted into park, I slipped the key in my pocket in case he hit the launch control button as soon as I stepped on the gravel.

Adjusting my grip on the gun, I said, “Don't try anything.”

Slowly, I swung open the car door, and set my foot on the ground.

Keeping my gun pointed at him, I moved fully out of the seat. My body instantly missed the heat of his hard body underneath mine, but I ignored it.

“Out,” I said, nodding my head toward a black garage door opener affixed to the side of the garage.

“Whose house is this?” he asked, raising his arms sarcastically into the air.

“Type in 1105,” I said.

Sebastian remained still for a moment, his grey eyes searching mine. Finally, he flipped open the black keypad and typed in the numbers. The white garage groaned into life, and opened to reveal an empty spot next to a late 90s cream BMW. I stepped back into the car, keeping my gun pointed at Sebastian.

We silently walked over the recently mown grass, and were soon standing in front of the rustic pine front door. I picked up the fading turtle statue and grabbed the silver keys hidden underneath.

I kept my gun trained on Sebastian as I opened the door, not too concerned about anyone being inside. A housekeeper came to check on the house every Thursday, so it'd be fine to hide here for a few days while I figured out a plan.

The scent of muskiness and a plug-in air freshener overwhelmed my nose. Breathing in the exact same smell I had eighteen years ago, I stepped into the house with Sebastian in tow.

Despite my gun aimed in his direction, he stepped towards a wooden console table framed by damask wallpaper. He reached past the many silver picture frames and picked up the frame with a red heart on it. I stepped closer, recognizing the picture immediately.

An eight year old wispy haired blonde was sitting on the broad shoulders of her redheaded father. A twinkle of a smile glimmered in her father's normally serious eyes. Beside them a blonde woman in her thirties stood with her hands over a large bump protruding from her stomach.

“You were a cute kid,” Sebastian said, placing the picture back on the table.

I leaned forward to look at the photo. I was missing my front tooth, but my smile was so wide it threatened to overwhelm my round face.

I kicked off my shoes, making sure that my socks stayed firmly tucked into my sweatpants. Once Sebastian took off his shoes, I turned on the lights and we followed the wall-to-wall cream carpet into the living room.

He plopped down on a white and black striped couch, completely at ease even though my gun was still trained on him.

“Could you put that away? I don’t want you to accidentally shoot me, and ruin the carpet. It looks like it’s basically an antique at this point,” he said with a glance at the shag carpet.

I ran my thumb over the grip of the gun. Should I take the chance of putting my gun away? He was completely unarmed, so I didn’t have to worry about him shooting me while I had my guard down. And he knew better than to try to rush me, and risk getting shot. We both knew he was getting out of this alive as long as he cooperated.

I sighed and placed the gun in my waistband. I’d turned the safety on when we got into the car earlier, so there was never a danger of accidentally shooting him. Maybe it was too risky, but it would be nice to not have to spend my last hours on this earth with a gun in my hand. I’d done enough of that in my lifetime.

“Don’t try anything. I’m really not in the mood to get bloodstains out of the carpet,” I said.

He leaned back into the oversized couch and stared at the arched windows. Black velvet drapes completely blocked out any remnants of the sun. I settled into a matching chair across from him.

“So what’s your plan?” he asked.

What I needed to do was go into my father’s gun safe, and arm myself for when Luca’s men eventually arrived. But the room I needed to go through to reach it...

I glanced towards the doorway to the kitchen. I just needed to drown out the impact of the memories that would overwhelm me when I walked in *that room*.

“Do you know how to make margaritas?” I asked. Again, another unnecessary risk. But I really needed a drink after this day.

Sebastian groaned. “I don’t know how you survived this long.”

Honestly, I was surprised too. It’d been sheer luck that not only had I made it out of a house full of hostile mafiosos unscathed, but had also outraced them once I’d gotten in the car.

While we’d been driving here, I’d gone through the potential scenarios, and concluded there was no way I could make it out of this alive. Sure, I planned to arm myself to the teeth. After all, I had to make my last stand difficult for Luca’s men. But let’s be real, this wasn’t a movie where the heroine takes out 30 men with sheer grit alone.

I nodded towards the doorway, and he followed ahead of me. When we were in the kitchen, I flicked on the track lighting and leaned against the granite countertop. I opened up a blonde wood cabinet, and pulled out a white and blue triangular shaped bottle, and a plastic bottle of margarita mix. Usually, I was more of a cosmo girl, but I knew there weren’t any fresh ingredients in the house.

I unscrewed the bottle of margarita mix. Eighteen years in a dark cabinet wouldn’t have much of an effect on the Clase Azul Tequila, but I was skeptical if the same could be said for the cocktail mix. I placed the green plastic bottle near my nose and sniffed. Sourness wafted in the air, and I scrunched my nose up.

Sebastian shook his head and leaned down into the bottom cabinet. He came back up with triple sec, agave syrup, a strainer, and a shaker.

While he began shaking up the drink, I opened up the cabinet above my head. Tumblers and wine glasses stared back at me. I smiled when I spied a familiar neon colored children’s cup.

When Sebastian finished with the cocktail shaker, I sat two crystal tumblers in front of him.

He snorted and reached back into the liquor cabinet, pulling out of a bottle of Macallan 1926 whiskey.

“Want to give me a house tour?” he asked, leaning against the counter while sipping on his tumbler of whiskey.

This was such a bizarre situation. Twenty minutes ago, I had a gun pressed against him, and now I was sharing a drink with him in my childhood summer cottage.

I shrugged and padded past a plastic ficus tree in the living room. It was only a matter of time before his people discovered where we were located, yet I couldn't force myself to walk into the gun safe. I took a large sip of my margarita. Surprisingly good.

We wandered into my old playroom. Sebastian settled himself on a blue inflatable kids chair. Not even a bit of air was gone. It was exactly as I'd left it eighteen years ago. As I'd suspected the housekeeper had been keeping everything precisely as it was.

I opened up the closet, there were enough toys in there to entertain an orphanage. I pulled out a long plastic toy with an oversized button in the middle. Absently I ran my finger over the section that said 'Twist It.' As I pulled on the knob on the opposite end, I thought back to how excited I'd been when my father had gifted it to me after his trip to Ireland. Things had been so much simpler back then.

“Let me try,” Sebastian said, his inflatable chair squeaking as he leaned back.

He set his drink down, and I tossed it to him. Without taking his eyes off me he twisted, pulled, and flicked the plastic toy. My legs squeezed together involuntarily. His nimble fingers pressing against that children's toy should not have had such an effect on me.

Chapter 20

When the toy called to pass it, Sebastian tossed it to me with a knowing smirk. Relief blew over me that I didn't have to watch him any longer. When the electronic voice told me 'you lose' I remembered why I'd found it tucked in the closet.

Five minutes later, we were sitting on the carpeted floor of the playroom setting up a board game. I'd been delighted when my father had given it to me when I was five. Three years later, some of that childhood wonder had faded when I learned he'd beaten the board game's previous owner black and blue for falling behind on his payments. Although I guess it was sweet that my father had been thinking of me when he snatched some board games that he knew I'd like.

I looked at the board for a moment and realized what it was missing.

"When I was a kid, my dad used to put candies on all the spaces. Whichever one you landed on you got to eat," I said, reaching into the closet.

"Hard to imagine," Sebastian said.

Ignoring that statement, I reached into the overstuffed closet, and found my candy stash.

I ripped open a bag of rainbow colored candy and began placing the pieces on the game board.

"Hmm, how should we do this... What's your favorite color?" I asked.

"Blue," he said, leaning forward to tap a finger by my eye. My legs tightened together at his touch.

"Pick either red, orange, yellow or pink."

"Red," he said.

"Okay, if you land on a red candy you drink," I said, nodding at his whiskey. "And if I land on a pink one I drink," I said while raising my glass.

I couldn't believe I was actually sitting around playing board games with my enemy. A small part of me screamed that I should tie Sebastian up, and stand guard at the door. But a larger part of my brain ignored that. That tempting voice urged me to roll the dice, and ignore the creeping dread filling my stomach.

After I finished my drink, I pulled out another board game.

"Can you make me another drink?" I asked. I still wasn't feeling brave enough to venture into *that* room. Maybe a drink would help.

Sebastian shook his head. "If you want to keep *playing* with me then you won't have any more alcohol."

My body tensed at the way the word rolled off his tongue. Was he talking about board games or something else?

A smirk came into his eyes as he continued, "I'll make you a mocktail if that makes you feel better."

Before I could respond he left the room. I was the one with the gun; I was the one who had taken him hostage. So how had he taken back control? And why the hell was I allowing it?

Five minutes later, I was sipping on my non-alcoholic margarita while moving my miniature car onto the board.

"I didn't have any siblings, so I always made the guards play with me," I said while placing my plastic sedan on the 'START SCHOOL' space. "Did you play this game with your boarding school buddies?"

Sebastian laughed before he said chidingly, "You and your obsession with my time at boarding school." He placed his car on the 'START SCHOOL' space. "My activities in boarding school were a little less *tame*."

I felt the beginning of a flush on my neck, so I tilted the drink in front of my face before he could notice. When I set my drink down on the carpet, the corner of his lip quirked into a smirk.

Trying to ignore him, I grabbed \$40,000 dollars in play money, and deposited it next to my drink. God, if only it were

that easy.

A few minutes later, Sebastian was handing me three career cards to choose from.

“Yes!” I yelled, showing him the doctor card.

Sebastian leaned back against the yellow wallpaper. “Why did you want to go to medical school?”

I shrugged, debating if I should tell him. Eh, when his men found me, I was dead either way. At this point, there was no risk in revealing too much information.

“You were right before when you guessed that those medical shows influenced my decision. The characters’ lives just seemed so normal to me. It was the complete opposite of my own life,” I said.

I took a long sip of my drink, wishing it contained tequila so I could kill the nagging thoughts of what my future might have looked like if I had gotten into medical school.

“You know those tv shows are about as realistic as the shows they make about gangsters. Unfortunately, in real life most doctors don’t spend their entire shift banging in the closet,” he said.

“How would you know?” I shot back and immediately regretted it when his eyes lit up.

Before he could respond, I changed the subject, “What about you? If you hadn’t become a gangster, what would you have done?”

His smile turned pained. “I was finishing up my MBA program when my brother... called.”

“At least you made it into grad school,” I offered while spinning the plastic game wheel.

I squeezed the car with my gloved hand and inched it towards the ‘Get Hitched’ square.

“Think you’d ever get married?” I mused as I moved my car.

Sebastian brushed his fingers along my thigh and whispered into my ear, “Are you propositioning me?”

I should be more concerned with him reaching for the gun in my waistband, but all I could focus on was the scorching heat his hand had left. And how I wanted to grab his hand, and place it higher on my leg. I couldn’t even blame my reaction on alcohol since I was completely sober now.

Eventually, we grew tired of board games and moved onto more typical drinking games. Although, I felt a little silly suggesting it since there was no alcohol in my drink.

When I was in high school, I’d listen with rapt attention to the stories of Piper snatching vintage cabernets from her parent’s wine cellar. She’d tell me about how they would giggle as they snuck up to their rooftop, and chugged the wine down while playing drinking games like Never Have I Ever. I’d rarely been able to join them since my nights were more likely to be filled with checking on our money laundering business, or threatening people who dared put a hold on our real estate permits.

I leaned back against the wall, only a few inches between Sebastian and I.

“What about two truths and a lie? And with your *almost* MBA, I’m sure you can guess the rules,” I said. I brushed my hand against my neck, and slick sweat clung to my gloves. I didn’t want to turn up the A/C in the off chance my father was monitoring it. But my winter clothing wasn’t exactly helping the situation.

“I’ve played before. If I guess the lie, you drink. If I’m wrong, I drink,” he said with an amused smile.

“Bingo! I’ll start.” Then I paused before saying, “Actually, let’s make it high school themed.”

Sebastian raised an eyebrow. But he didn’t have to communicate for me to know what he was thinking: he was convinced that I was obsessed with his experience at boarding school. I wasn’t *obsessed*, but I’ll admit I was a little curious. The idea of boarding school was so foreign to me. I couldn’t

imagine what it would have been like to go back to a dorm after classes instead having to deal with dealers skimming off the top. To focus on homework, instead of doing research on the person I needed to kill that night.

He tapped his fingers on the shag carpet. I tried to keep my leg still when I noticed how close his long fingers were to my leg.

Instead, I held up a finger to emphasize this would be my first statement in our game, “First fact: I was an honor roll student throughout high school.” That was a fact.

“Second fact: I was the homecoming queen my senior year,” I said. That was the lie.

“Third fact: Every year the track team tried to convince me to join, but I never had the time,” I said. That was another truth. There was no way I would have been able to participate in any extracurricular activities on top of my commitments to the Regan family.

“It’s the second one, you little brainiac,” he said. His hand inched closer to my leg. Some perverse part of me wanted to shift my leg closer.

“How’d you know?” I asked instead of acting on that impulse.

Sebastian shrugged. “I did my research. If it makes you feel better, I would have voted for you to be homecoming queen.”

“Cheater.” I jabbed a finger into his broad chest to emphasize my point, but it took everything in me not to run my hand down the hard planes of his chest.

“I’m surprised your dad didn’t force everyone to vote for you,” he said.

“I wouldn’t have let him. I always tried to keep that part of my life separate. And it’s your turn, cheater,” I said.

“I know I’m not the only one who did research on the other person in this room,” he said with a raise of an eyebrow before mockingly holding up a finger. “First fact: in high school I got

threatened with suspension when the dorm supervisor caught two girls in my closet.”

My toes curled together at the thought. Maybe a lie? Although, the way his piercing eyes seemed to tempt my soul forced me to admit that it wasn't outside the realm of possibility.

“Second fact: I'm also an honor roll student,” he said.

“Third fact, you want to fuck me,” he growled, his voice leaving no room for question.

I felt my entire body go red, and I was glad everything below my neck was covered. “Third fact is the lie?” I said, my voice squeaking higher than a chipmunk.

“I'm *not* an honor roll student,” he said, his eyes smoldering.

Sebastian leaned forward and captured my lips in a kiss.

Chapter 21

A finger teased down my spine as Sebastian's lips met mine. When he hit a sensitive spot on my lower back, his tongue flicked across my lips. My mouth opened up with a moan, and his tongue darted into mine. Not tentatively exploring, as so many men before him had. His tongue was forceful, claiming the caves of my mouth. Whenever I fought for dominance with my tongue he pushed harder, trying to force me to submit.

He gripped my hips almost hard enough to bruise and dragged my body against his. But the gun in my waistband wouldn't allow his hips to be flush against me. I tossed the gun to my side and rocked my hips into him. Sebastian broke the kiss with a groan, but he was still so close I could feel each of his warm breaths.

"If anything I say or do is too much, then you need to use the word 'red'. If you say it, then I promise I'll stop," Sebastian said. "And if you can't speak, just snap your fingers to make everything stop."

"Can't speak? What are you planning on doing to me?" I asked while trying to get my breathing under control.

He chuckled darkly. "Among other things, I want to make you orgasm so hard, you forget how to speak."

My lower body clenched. No man had ever made me orgasm.

"But I need to know if you have any hard limits I should know about," he said.

"Hard limits?" I asked.

"Anything off limits."

God everything about what was happening should be off limits. He was a member of the Amato family for fuck's sake. But my body didn't seem to care. And if I was going to die soon I at least deserved an orgasm.

"Just shut up and continue," I said.

“That’s not the way this works.” The way his voice darkened, made the hairs on my neck stand up. “Now nod if you understand what I said about your safewords.”

Sebastian waited for my assent before he spoke again, “I saw the way you were looking at me earlier when I was twisting, and turning that toy. Admit that’s what you want. If I’m feeling generous, I’ll do the same thing to you.”

His eyes were condescending. They said they already knew how badly I wanted him, and now he was just toying with me just like the toy from earlier.

The feeling of it forced the fantasy into my mind: he was reaching for my breast, pinching my nipple between his fingers. Squeezing, and pulling just like I was a toy for him to play with.

All I had to do was admit that I wanted that, and he could make that fantasy into a reality. But his expression was so sure, that I refused to admit it. Instead I glared at him.

In a flash, my back was on the carpeted floor. He was straddling me, just watching me with narrowed eyes. Then his powerful hands grabbed my hands that had been running down the hard planes of his sides only moments ago. He yanked them upwards and brought them together in a vice grip.

“Admit how much you want me,” he said.

“You make me dry as the Sahara.” It was a lie, but there was no way I was admitting anything to him.

He gripped both my wrists in the palm of his oversized hand. With his free hand, he teased a finger down my stomach.

Sebastian laughed roughly. “This is going to be fun,” he said.

“Too bad I’m not having any-” His hand slid under my shirt, and all thoughts fled my mind.

Sebastian’s grip on my breast was punishing. Instinctively, my hips arched upwards. Those long fingers snaked underneath my bra, and my entire body clenched in anticipation.

“Time for you to beg,” he said.

His expression left no room for questions, but I simultaneously wanted to take him down a notch, and plead for him to continue. Instead, I bit down on my cheek in an attempt to restrain any noises from coming out.

“*Beg,*” he growled, his eyes darkening.

His fingers squeezed hard against my nipple. Pain and pleasure flooded through me. I moaned embarrassingly loud.

Gravel crunched behind the window.

“Quiet,” he growled into my ear. And for once, I didn’t fight his command.

A flashlight beamed through the velvet blinds, and all the pleasurable tension that had been building inside me shifted.

Sebastian released his grip on my wrists, and in a flash I dove for the gun. I didn’t know if I should aim it at him or the window. Deciding I needed information on what I was dealing with, I crawled towards the window while keeping any eye on him. How had his men found us so quickly? I’d killed the tracker on the car and had made sure no one was following us before I headed this way.

A feminine giggle carried through the window, “Is there really a ghost here?”

What the actual fuck?

“There is. I dare you to get closer.” A male voice this time, the words cracking on the last word.

My eyebrows furrowed, and I shot a glance at Sebastian. He shook his head. His body was tense, his crouching legs tightened like a spring that was ready to pop off. But his eyes reflected the confusion I felt.

Gravel crunched closer to the window. Then there was a third voice, feminine and slightly lower pitched. “I don’t believe in ghosts.”

I pressed myself against the wall, debating if I should check behind the curtain. Was this some weird attempt to get me to

let down my guard?

The crackly masculine voice spoke up again. “They say that a pregnant woman haunts this house. And after she was *murdered*...” he emphasized the last word dramatically.

I withdrew my ear from the glass while tightening my grip on the gun. If Sebastian’s men were attempting to make me lower my guard, they were having the opposite effect. I was ready to pop off bullets.

I crawled out of the playroom, motioning for Sebastian to follow me. When we reached the living room, I crept along the carpet towards an arched window. Steadying my gun, I inched back the blinds.

Three gangly teenagers were standing in front of the playroom window. Each of them held a bottle of beer in their hand. I dropped the curtain, then a moment later I checked again. No mafiosos in sight, but that didn’t mean they weren’t hiding behind the trees.

Using my free hand I motioned Sebastian over. When he was less than a foot away from me, I trained my gun on his head.

“Recognize them?” I asked in a low voice.

He shook his head. I watched him for a moment, waiting for a telltale clench of his jaw, or a tightening of his hand. When he remained still, I checked the window again. The two girls were sipping on beers while the boy regaled them with his story. I could hear the whispers echoing from here, but I couldn’t discern the exact words.

I moved back to the playroom with Sebastian ahead of me. I leaned against the window, and listened, “...Fiona’s spirit returned to ensure no one ever disturbed her home again.”

At the mention of my mother’s name, I could feel my control slipping. I tried to remind myself that they were stupid, drunk high schoolers.

It wasn’t helping. If those kids didn’t leave soon, I might actually shoot them. Keeping myself visually hidden, I rapped my hand against the window.

Three high-pitched screams echoed off the glass.

“It’s the ghost!” one of them yelled in a crackly falsetto. Shoes crunched against gravel. A few pebbles clacked against the siding of the house. I waited for the sounds to fade before I checked again. The teenagers were gone, probably running back home. I wasn’t surprised that I didn’t spy any men coming out from the trees. Sebastian’s family could be brutal, but this was a line I didn’t think even they would cross.

I turned back to Sebastian. His eyes were soft as he surveyed me, but I didn’t want to see his pity.

I glanced towards the hallway. It was time to do the thing I’d been avoiding all night.

Chapter 22

I stood on the threshold of my parent's bedroom. Memories flickered into my mind from the last time I'd been there... An uneven trail of blood leading towards the bathroom. A beige heel lying discarded on the floor, spotted with trickles of red. And then...

I blinked, and the carpet was back to its pristine cream color. My mother wasn't lying on the floor with her swollen hand clutching the bump on her stomach. No, the maid had scrubbed out any reminders of that scene from eighteen years ago.

"You okay?" I hated the softness in Sebastian's voice.

God, I wished I had someone in my life who could handle this for me. Go into the room of my nightmares, so I wouldn't have to face them. Instead, the person standing next to me would be more apt to turn the very guns he'd collect in my direction.

So I ignored him and finally stepped into the room. My eyes caught on the baby blanket my mother had been crocheting for... I shook my head, and continued towards the door at the back of the room. I came here to grab weapons, not confront the memories of the past. I had enough nightmares I dealt with on a day-to-day basis.

"I'm sorry," Sebastian said as he padded behind me. Of course, he'd known about what had occurred, there hadn't been a single person unaware when my father gutted anyone who might have been involved in my mother's murder. An apology was ironic coming from Sebastian, because my father was still convinced the Amato family was behind it. However, facts had proven that it hadn't been a hit. Just a random act of violence.

Trying not to think about the implication too hard, I typed my mother's birthday into the gun safe's panel. The door swung open and revealed wall-to-wall guns. I really should grab a duffel bag so I could grab more, but I couldn't bear to open my mother's closet and look at the dresses she'd never

wear again. Instead, I opted for a brown leather holster hanging nearby.

After I grabbed an Uzi and tucked a Draco into my waistband, I fled the room as quickly as I could. Sebastian was smart enough to keep his mouth shut until I was ready to speak again.

“Time for bed,” I said.

He nodded. I shoved the machine gun into the holster while heading down the hallway. At the third door, I turned the silver handle and headed in.

A painted white metal bed leaned against the wall. I moved towards the mirrored armoire and pulled out a black men’s V-neck t-shirt and matching sweatpants. After tossing them to Sebastian, I nodded my head towards the en-suite bathroom.

“If you even *think* about attacking me when you come out, I’ll shoot you,” I said.

“Attack you?” he scoffed. “What do you think I’m going to do? Strangle you with a landline?” Sebastian nodded his head towards a transparent corded phone sitting on a dark wood night stand.

I inclined my head towards the bathroom, and he went in wordlessly. When I heard the water turn on, I moved back towards the guest room’s armoire. Nothing in my old bedroom would fit me. All of the clothing in my bedroom was sized for an eight year old.

I pulled out long black cotton socks, and a grey sweatsuit combo. There weren’t any gloves in there, so I’d have to re-use the ones I’d been wearing all day. I glanced back towards the bathroom. I couldn’t take a chance Sebastian would call his brother the second I fell asleep. So how was I going to make sure that he didn’t go for my guns and the phone in the middle of the night?

As I listened to the water sprinkling inside, a plan formed in my mind.

A few minutes later, he stepped out of the bathroom. Dark hair glistened on his face, and water dripped onto his tight

black shirt. His arm muscles strained against the short sleeves of the v-neck. My fingers itched to feel his corded muscles-

I shoved that thought away. I needed to stay focused. I'd been too impulsive earlier: throwing my gun away, allowing him to get physically and emotionally close. He could have snapped my neck or used my gun against me.

When we reached the door at the end of the hallway, I nodded at him to open it. Sebastian flicked on the lights, and hot pink walls stared back at me.

"Nice decor," he said, nodding at the butterfly stencils circling along my plastic kitchen set. I rolled my eyes and motioned him further into the room.

"Lay there," I said, pointing at the floor near the bedpost of my canopy bed. The bed still looked exactly the same as the last time I'd been there. There were four white metal legs, and at the headboard the metal twisted from multiple places, forming the shape of a wide triangle. Above it, a purple mesh canopy encircled the bed. Thankfully, my parents had given me a queen sized bed. I wouldn't have been in the mood to attempt to fit into a child-sized bed frame.

Sebastian snorted as he laid down on the neon green rug beside the bed. I kneeled next to him and dropped my pajamas near a hot pink stuffed animal.

"Put your hands together," I said while picking up a black silk scarf I'd found in the guest bedroom.

He laughed, his face breaking out into a large smile that showed off dimples.

"Are you seriously tying *me* up?" His entire body was shaking with laughter.

"Put your hands together, near the leg of the bed," I said.

The laughter continued. "I can't wait to see this."

With the mirth never leaving his eyes, he sarcastically put his hands together near the painted white metal leg of the bed.

I looped the scarf around his wrists and tied a knot like I was tying my shoes. Laughter escaped from his mouth again,

and I glared at him.

He just smirked back. “You could at least let me sleep on the bed,” he said.

I finished the knot and dropped the ends of the scarf. “I don’t trust you.”

I picked up a second scarf and moved towards his feet. I yanked his enormous feet towards the bedpost at the foot of the bed. He was so tall he had to curl his knees up.

“What are you worried about? I’m the one tied up,” he said, amusement in his eyes as he watched me tie his ankles together with the scarf.

While I finished up the knot, he said, “Or maybe you’re worried you can’t resist me.”

I felt the blush creeping up my neck. Damn it, some twisted part of me wished the roles were reversed right now.

“Shut up,” I growled, partially towards my traitorous mind. I stood up and assessed my work. Hopefully the knot stayed better than my shoelaces did. I continued, picking up my clothes from the floor, “I’m going to take a shower. Don’t even try to escape.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to join you?”

I flicked him off, and his laughter followed me until I slammed the bathroom door. I glanced in the mirror and checked to make sure none of my bruises were showing. My shirt had gotten untucked, but it was long so I was still completely covered.

Good, he hadn’t seen.

Grimacing, I began pulling the clothes off my body. From my chest up, my skin was pale and unmarred. Underneath that, my body was etched with scratches and lacerations. There were barely any hints of pale skin. Nearly every inch had some sort of mark or bruise. On the bright side, some of the blue spots had faded to green. I ran my hand over my tender legs, flinching slightly. Large bumps spread across my entire body.

Aesthetically unattractive, but at least there were no serious injuries.

Hopefully when Sebastian had been feeling me up, he just thought I had naturally lumpy skin.

I turned on the shower and reached for the tangle free shampoo. I yanked the tangles out of my hair with a hot pink wet brush. It was one thing that hadn't gone out of style in the last eighteen years. I ran the soap bar over my cuts, clenching my teeth to keep from gasping out.

When I was done, I wrapped a towel around my body. The beady eyes of my favorite childhood cartoon stared back at me from the towel. I opened up the blond wood cabinets. Of course, there was no medical equipment in here. When my mother was still alive, I hadn't been involved in that life. There was no reason to have a medical kit in a normal elementary school student's bedroom. Sure, there'd been guards making sure I was safe, and I heard the whispers of conversations about my father's work. But she had shielded me from that life. I wondered where I'd be now if she was still alive...

I tried to drown out that thought with the roar of the blow dryer. As I worked a brush through my wavy hair, I could already imagine how frizzy my hair would end up with no product. The last time the cabinets had been restocked was in the 90s, so I didn't even bother to check if there was heat protectant spray.

When I finished, I gingerly eased on the sweatshirt and matching sweatpants from the guest bedroom. I slipped the long dark socks over the sweatpants, and begrudgingly put the gloves from earlier back on. After I put my guns back in my waistband, I looked in the mirror. Good. There was no evidence of a single bruise or injury. No hint of weakness.

I stepped back outside and found Sebastian still laying in the same position.

"Cold?" he asked, his eyes on my gloved hands.

I shrugged. "I prefer to strangle you with these on."

I caught an eye roll from Sebastian before I turned the lights off. Ignoring him, I placed all of my guns on the nightstand opposite him. Just like I had done eighteen years ago, I moved the purple mesh canopy fabric to the side and climbed into bed. I laid there, staring up at the glow-in-the-dark ceiling decals, and faded away into sleep.

Chapter 23

Light streamed in through the windows, and with a grunt I tried to reach for a pillow to block it. When my hand didn't move, my eyes shot open.

My feet were tied to opposite ends of the metal footboard with what appeared to be pink silky pillowcases. I kicked my still clothed legs out, but they stayed strapped into place.

I looked up, two familiar black scarves restrained my gloved hands. Both my arms were stretched out as if they were about to reach for the nightstands on either end of the bed. I tried moving my wrists, so that I could bring them closer to my head. The scarf stayed firmly in place.

With a grunt I tried yanking my hands as hard as I could, but again neither budged from place. I turned my head left; the guns were no longer on the nightstand. Not that I could have reached it even if it had been there.

The door to the bathroom clicked open, and Sebastian strode towards me with a smirk on his face.

"Untie me," I ordered. I tried to force my body into a sitting position. My shoulders stayed flush against the mattress, and my chest moved less than an inch.

He shook his head and sat on the edge of the mattress. I thrashed my body, trying to detangle myself from the restraints.

"Relax, I'm just repaying the favor from last night," he said.

"How did you get out of the scarves? I double knotted it!"

He snorted. "Your knot tying skills could use some work. As soon as you started snoring, I had them untied."

"I *do not* snore."

Sebastian raised an eyebrow. "If you say so."

His tone shifted lower as he leaned towards me. "Although my restraints were tied so badly, I wondered if you did it on

purpose. Maybe, you hoped I would escape so I could tie *you* up.”

“If you don’t untie me, I’ll kill you,” I growled. It didn’t sound so threatening when my legs were spread a foot apart from each other.

He shook his head again, but didn’t move any closer towards me. “Be patient. We need to talk, and the second I loosen the knots you’ll try to kill me.”

I couldn’t argue with his logic, we both knew it was true. I yanked on my right hand that was tied to a knot in the metal headboard. Again, it stayed firmly in place.

“Stop pulling on it, it’ll just make your injuries worse,” he said.

My entire body stiffened.

“How do you know about that?” I asked in a low voice, checking to make sure my clothing was still tucked into place. Not a single bruise was showing. My clothes hadn’t been touched.

His jaw clenched before he spoke, “I noticed the second the guards started searching you at my family’s house. You couldn’t handle the slightest bit of pressure.”

I blinked. “You’re more perceptive than I would’ve guessed.”

Sebastian smirked before leaning in towards me. “You have no idea how perceptive I am. I notice every time you quiver under my touch. How you bite down on your lip when you think about me fucking you.”

Damn it, those words should not have sounded so arousing when I was this vulnerable.

“You’re fucking delusional,” I growled, and tried to move against the restraints again. Pain echoed up my arm.

His eyes narrowed as he stared down at my arm.

“How bad is it?” he asked, a hint of gentleness seeping into his voice.

I tried to shrug, but my position made it difficult. “I’ll live. But I can’t say the same for you if you don’t untie me.”

Sebastian stood up from the bed and walked out of the room. I tried to reach my mouth towards the knots near my hand. Maybe if I bit into the silk scarf, it would come apart? My head barely moved an inch before I slumped back into the bed in resignation. I had to give it to him: he did have certain talents.

Sebastian walked back into the room with a large white box in his hand. My heart started racing.

He shook his head. “Relax, it’s a medical kit.” He stepped towards the bed, but stopped a few feet away. He pulled out some ointments.

“I won’t touch you if you don’t give me permission. But I should really check on your injuries,” he said, still maintaining his distance.

I thrashed my body. My hips bucked up, but my feet stayed firmly rooted in place.

“If I wanted to kill or harm you I would’ve done it last night,” he said. Sebastian patted the gun in his waistband, and a small smile emerged on his lips. “You gave me plenty of opportunities.”

I sighed and stared up at the purple mesh fabric hanging from the popcorn ceiling. He was right of course. When we’d been kissing, he hadn’t even bothered to reach for the gun I’d thrown to my side. I felt a small blush working its way up my skin as I visualized him straddling me last night. I pushed the thought away and hoped the heat on my skin would disappear just as quickly.

I’d be a hypocrite if I got upset over him tying me up. After all, I did the exact same thing to him. Plus, he could have done whatever he wanted without my permission. Instead, he was keeping a respectful distance, seemingly waiting for my assent.

As much as I didn’t want to admit it, he had a point. I should really check on my injuries. Things that seemed benign

at first glance could easily become something deadly when left unchecked. And it was obvious he wasn't letting me out of the restraints anytime soon. We both knew the second he untied me, I'd be diving for the gun.

However, I didn't understand *why* he was helping me. The second his men arrived, my current injuries would be the least of my worries. It seemed pointless to check me for injuries before his men shot multiple rounds into my chest.

With a sigh I finally spoke, "Fine. But if you try anything, I'll kill you."

He nodded, finally moving towards the bed. "Remember your safeword is 'red' if you want me to stop. Now or in the future, if you ever use it I promise I'll stop. And I won't just stop touching you, I'll also stop teasing you with my words."

It was completely irrational, but part of me yearned to trust him. Although, that was the whole reason I'd gotten into this mess in the first place. So I shoved that part of me away, and waited for him to inevitably screw me over.

Sebastian stood above me and reached towards the left sleeve of my sweatsuit. He made eye contact with me, and his hand hovered above the sleeve until I nodded at him.

Gently, he pulled down the sleeve, and revealed the mishmash of bruises and cuts. He cursed.

"It's not that bad," I offered. And it really wasn't. It could have been a lot worse. Unlike last time, there were no broken ribs, and no cuts that desperately needed stitches.

His eyes darkened. "Did Ray do this to you?"

What was the point in hiding it at this point? So I shrugged, or at least attempted to. "It's not as bad as last time. It's obvious that this time they were more concerned with not damaging the merchandise."

A visual of a woman from my research into Ray's loan shark operation appeared in my mind. She was leaning against the wall of a decrepit alley with her bruised arms crossed over her low cut crop top. There was a deadness in her eyes that sent a shiver down my spine.

Sebastian remained silent, but his jaw clenched when he dipped his fingers into some ointment. His index finger caressed a cut on my forearm. At first, a shiver of pain inched up the spot. But it was quickly replaced by a cold, soothing feeling spreading beneath his fingertip. His touch was confident. He was touching assuredly, but he was also careful not to apply any pressure.

“You should have come to me sooner,” he said, inching the sleeve back into place.

“I shouldn’t have come to you at all. Look where it landed me.” I watched him work on my other arm.

Sebastian shook his head, but he didn’t say anything. How could he? As soon as his brother had found out how dire my circumstances were, he used it against me. Trying to force me to take peanuts, because I didn’t have any other choice. Sebastian twisted my wrist around gently, watching for my reaction. I nodded, it wasn’t an unbearable amount of pain. Just a general achiness. It was odd to think that he was related to Luca. The gentle look in Sebastian’s eyes was nothing like I’d ever seen from his brother. Internally I shook the thought away, refusing to allow any further visuals to come over me at this moment.

Sebastian’s warm fingers tugged my shirt up my stomach. A fiery anger burned in his eyes, darker than I’d ever seen from him. I didn’t need to look down. I already knew what he was seeing.

Chapter 24

“It could be worse,” I said. “At least this time they didn’t have steel tipped boots.”

Last time my ribs had taken a long time to heal after the beat down from Ray’s men. Sebastian’s finger slid along a long, narrow cut above my belly button. The sliver of pain quickly shifted into the familiar soothing feeling. It was almost trancelike, a hint of pain then the immediate warmth of relief.

“Why did you do it?” he asked, caressing a large bump along my hip bone.

Do what? Take him hostage, leave my father’s safety behind, choose to bring him to a house with memories I would rather not think about?

“You’re going to have to be more specific,” I said. Then I bit back a gasp. His hand was pressing into a bump on my stomach.

His large hand lifted. “It’s just tender. Nothing serious.”

Sebastian’s fingers continued their inspection as he spoke, “I was asking why you took the money from those loan sharks.”

“I don’t exactly have great impulse control.”

He laughed at that and pulled my shirt back down before moving towards my legs. I wasn’t sure why I was telling him any of this.

“How much money do you owe now?” he asked, his fingers working into a spot below my left knee.

I thought back to the shopping sprees at Chanel, the bottle service at Tao, and the months staying in the presidential suite at the Plaza. Logically, I knew I shouldn’t say anything. But an odd feeling of relaxation had settled over me. I shouldn’t be feeling this way while completely vulnerable under his touch. Yet somehow, I felt as relaxed as if we were sitting on a couch watching tv.

“Honestly, I’m not sure. They aren’t exactly like a typical bank who sends out monthly statements. And I don’t want to think about the interest I’ve accrued.”

Strong fingers massaged around the edges of a bump near my ankle. Despite the fact that I should try to kick at his touch, I felt myself melt into his hands.

“You enjoy being tied up,” he said, with a hint of a smile replacing his previously tightened jaw. I tried to kick at his hand, but my foot stayed firmly in place. Immediately, his warm fingers left my skin, and I felt my body straining to reach for his touch. Failing of course, since he had tied me up so firmly. I just missed having massages. That was *all* there was to it.

Sebastian smirked, crossing his arms.

“Just admit that you enjoy being out of control,” he said.

I tried to kick my foot out again, but it had the same result as last time.

Sebastian’s hands dropped on the mattress, a few inches from me. His tan, muscular arms flexed as he slowly lowered his upper body towards me. When he was inches from my face, his breath crested across my skin. “You can deny it all you want, but if you really hated it, you know the word that ends it,” he whispered darkly.

He raised an eyebrow, challenging me with his eyes to say the word I knew would stop his touches. I remained silent, because damn it, I didn’t want him to stop.

With a smirk, his hands moved back to my black socks. He pulled the fabric back and revealed my purple and black left foot. He began rolling it around in circles, watching my face the entire time.

“I’m curious. If I hadn’t tied you up last night, what was your plan going to be?” he asked, now moving my foot from side to side.

There was no sense in hiding it from him now. I wasn’t sure why he bothered checking on my injuries. Soon he would call his men, and after that...

“Argentina,” I said, leaning back into the fantasy, rather than the reality of what my future held once his men got their hands on me. Maybe I’d go into the mountains, away from the buzz of the city. Or maybe, I’d head to the Mendoza region, and try the wine from each of the vineyards there. While I preferred a cosmo, I wouldn’t turn down a glass of Malbec.

“You’d never make it. You only have ten thousand dollars, and too many men looking to kill you. They would have found you before you even set foot on a plane,” he said.

At the brutal reminder of reality, the vision of sitting in a vineyard while grazing on cheeses and sipping on wines vanished from my mind. Then an idea occurred to me, and the imagined scent of the vineyard returned. I knew it would never work, but why not go to my death with hope?

“Why not let me try?” I asked, while his hands stripped off my other sock. “I’ll answer any questions you have, and you won’t even have to give me any extra cash. Just give me an hour’s head start before you call your men. It’s a good deal. You have nothing to lose.”

He shook his head and rubbed ointment on my foot.

“Then why are you doing this?” I said, frustration lacing into my voice. “We both know as soon your men arrive, they’ll torture,” my mind started to short circuit at the word but I forced myself to continue, “me until they get the information they want. Then they’ll kill me.”

I wondered if they’d give me a clean death when they were done extracting their information. I didn’t want to think what would happen if they turned me over to Ray.

Sebastian’s jaw tightened, but he remained silent while running his finger over a deep bruise near my big toe.

I sighed, the fight going out of me. It was pointless. I couldn’t escape these restraints, and there was nothing I could do to avoid the fate that would soon come to pass.

“Why didn’t you go to your dad yesterday?” he asked, massaging at a deep ache in the arch of my foot.

“You mean after I kidnapped you?” I asked.

He shrugged, adding pressure to the spot. I let out a moan, and his fingers responded to my voice. They focused in, alternatively pulsing and kneading at the spot. I pushed through the haze of pleasure to respond to him.

“He would’ve handed me over to your brother. Tensions have been high ever since your father’s death,” I said.

“You mean since Conor had him killed.”

“There’s no proof of that.” And there wasn’t. Everyone had immediately suspected my father had him assassinated, and it had grown close to an all out war. However, no definitive facts had come out to prove that we had anything to do with his murder. The Amato family still had their suspicions revolving around our role in the death, but we had narrowly avoided a war.

Yesterday, if I had gone to my father with a gun pointed at Sebastian’s head, and he had allowed me in his house then a very bloody war would have broken out between the two families.

Sebastian raised his eyebrows, but remained silent. Finally, he placed my sock back on my foot, and I immediately missed the pleasure of his hands. He stared at me for a minute, studying my face. I met his gaze and immediately felt embarrassed by my response to him. The hint of euphoria shifted into anger. It was a safer feeling.

I glared up at him. Did he want me to thank him for preparing me like a prize cow right before it was slaughtered?

“I couldn’t get you to Argentina without my brother finding out,” he said.

I couldn’t keep the confusion off my face.

Sebastian continued, “I’d need to make phone calls in order to arrange it. And it would only take one disloyal man to call my brother and let him in on the plan.”

I’d already offered him an easier plan. Just let me leave, and he didn’t have to worry about whether or not I made it.

“*However*, I do have a way to get you out of this alive,” he said.

Chapter 25

Was this some form of mental torture, let me think I had a sliver of a chance to live, and drag the rug out from under me?

I narrowed my eyes. I could see it now: I'd start trusting him and let my guard down. Then I'd slowly give him all the information he wanted. Then they wouldn't have to worry about me giving them false info.

"Don't fuck with me," I growled.

"I need you to trust me," he said, massaging a spot above his eyebrow.

"Trust you?" I laughed bitterly. "You're the last person I should trust. I bet you *also* want revenge for what you think my father did to your family."

He frowned, but stayed silent for a moment.

"You understand what will happen if my brother takes you, right?" he asked.

Of course, I knew what would happen. I'd already experienced it once.

"What's the alternative?" I eyed him suspiciously. But my heart rate skyrocketed at the thought of his brother torturing me again.

"Let Luc think you're my new toy, and I'll take you home with me."

"I'm not your toy," I growled, feeling a blush spread up my chest even as my lower body tightened at the word.

Sebastian smiled, but there was an underlying darkness in his eyes. "I think you want to be my toy."

"Fuck you," I growled.

"Don't tempt me," he said, gazing down at my ropes. And that irrational part of me wanted that: he'd never given me the promised orgasm last night.

His voice interrupted my thoughts, "I'm trying to make sure you don't get hurt."

“Like I believe that,” I snorted.

He shook his head. “You can believe what you want. But do we have a deal?”

I swallowed as I thought through his proposition. It would be beyond stupid to trust him, but any solution he offered would probably be better than Luca torturing me. My stomach curled at that thought. *Anything* was better than that.

“Fine,” I said.

He nodded at me before standing up from the bed.

“Okay, I’ll go over your options in a moment. But remember, if anything becomes too much, you know the word. It’s a complicated situation, but I’ll do everything in my power to make you feel safe.”

Safe. What a funny word to be coming out of his mouth. And despite all the reasons it shouldn’t, the tension relaxed in my shoulders. My mind flashed back to being in the car with him yesterday. I’d told him to stop touching me, and he’d immediately listened to me.

Sebastian reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. Although I’d just vowed to listen to him, I thrashed against the bed while trying to reach for it.

He shook his head. “I can’t put this off any longer. Those kids from last night might tell someone that the lights were on inside the house. I need to control the situation,” he said.

Sebastian pressed the silver button on the side of his phone, and it beeped into life. Despite the optimistic tone of the beep, to me it sounded more like the beginnings of a funeral dirge. My body went limp on the bed. This was it. Soon his men would swarm the cottage.

“I’d prefer not to have you like this when the men arrive,” he said.

Before I could respond, he walked out of the room. A few minutes later he returned with a knife and a long piece of black rope. He set the knife on top of the armoire by the door.

“If Luc’s men come inside, and you aren’t tied up they’ll use that as an excuse to shoot you. For your own safety, I need you restrained when they arrive,” he said.

Yeah, I’m sure having me restrained was *just* for my own safety. He approached me with the long rope in his hand.

“Now we can do this fun way, or the boring way. If you choose the boring option, you’ll meekly let me tie you up without fighting back. And I’ll be the perfect gentleman,” he said.

It was odd that he was in complete control of the situation, yet he was placing decisions in my hands. It was bizarre to feel so vulnerable yet somehow in control.

“And what’s the other option?” I asked.

Dark intensity crept into his eyes. “You act like the brat that you are. And I put you into your place.”

My thighs clenched together. “Aren’t you scared I’m going to take you hostage again?” I asked.

His lips curved into a cruel smile. “No.”

“What do you get out of it? It’s more of a risk for you than me,” I said.

“Let me give you a taste of what I have in mind.” After I nodded my assent, he stroked a finger down the curve of my neck. “I want to see you scratch and claw with all your strength. I want you to fight as hard as you can and still lose to me.”

His hand snaked into my hair and pulled hard. Pain melded into pleasure and raced towards my pussy. “I want you forced to give up every semblance of control. I want to break you, and then put you back together,” he said.

Sebastian stepped away from me, his eyes roving over my face as he said, “You can fight me as hard as you want until Luc’s men arrive. Then I need you to pretend to be meek and submissive. The choice is yours, either way I swear to do everything in my power to keep you safe.”

His words got me so wound up that all I wanted to do was get lost in the sensuality of it. But he was staring down at me, waiting for me to decide.

I tried to see the downside of the second option, but couldn't find one. If I somehow managed to break free of his restraints, I could grab his gun and take off before Luca arrived.

"We'll do the second option. But if I change my mind, we do it the boring way," I said.

"Just use your safeword if that happens. Are you ready?" he asked.

"Do you usually ask this many questions to the women you tie up?"

He smiled, baring his long white teeth. "I'll ask you as many questions as I want."

His free hand gripped my hair and yanked on it. "Now answer me when I speak to you, are you ready?" he growled.

Pain pulsed through my scalp, but just as quickly he massaged at the tendrils of pain. I fought against the instinct to lean into his hand.

"I'm ready," I said, glaring up at him.

With his free hand, he nimbly untied the knot that had kept my left hand locked in place. Instinctively, I reached for his throat, but his fingers dug into a tender spot below my wrist. Pain forced a gasp out of my throat. Before I could react, he forced my momentarily free hand against my other wrist, and wrapped the surrounding rope around both.

"You okay?" he asked.

I nodded. I wouldn't admit it out loud, but it was almost fun, and I preferred focusing on this rather than where my future lay. The idea of escaping from him was tantalizing, but I was pragmatic enough to know it was unrealistic.

When he released my wrist, I struggled against the new restraints binding both of my hands together. Once again, there

was no give. I tried to yank against the scarf that was still attaching my right hand to the bed. No luck.

He moved away from the bed and picked up the knife. I had no desire to use my safeword, but the rational part of me said I should test him. Make sure he would respect the confines of the rules.

“Red,” I said.

He immediately set down the knife, and didn’t move an inch closer to me.

“Are you okay?” he asked, concern lacing his voice.

“Just making sure you’ll actually stop.”

Sebastian nodded. “That’s fair. Are you okay with restarting now, or do you want to stop? Like I said before, this is entirely your choice.”

“You can begin,” I said.

Sebastian picked up the knife, but kept his distance from me. “I’m curious though, how would you feel if I used this knife on you?”

“You touch me with that knife, and I’ll gut you.”

He smirked. “Sounds like knife play is off the table in the future.”

“Is that even a thing?”

His grin became wicked. “Oh, it *definitely* is.”

“I can’t imagine that’s very fun.”

Sebastian ran his finger over the dull end of the knife, “I can make anything fun. A wine bottle, chopsticks, chip clips.” He shrugged. “You name it, I can make it your new favorite toy. But, I’ll *never* push you to do something you don’t want. I prefer you begging for it.”

My nipples tensed. Just imagining what he could do with a chip clip should not have gotten me so aroused. Slowly, he walked towards me, and picked up the free end of the rope that had settled on the floor. He pulled the rope taut and assessed it

for a moment. Then he raised the knife and began cutting into a spot about eight feet from where my hands were bound. When he finished cutting through the rope, he set down the knife on the bedside table. After watching my face for a moment, he walked toward my feet with the cutoff section of rope still in his hand.

This time he didn't touch the restraints on my feet. I tried to kick at him, but he wrapped the rope around my foot, knotting it in a way I'd never seen before. He pulled the rest of the rope to my other foot, and after looping the rope around my foot he began knotting it in the same manner.

He looked out the window, even though the pink frilly blinds were covering up any view of the outside.

"After I untie the scarf, you're going to put your hands against your neck like a good girl," he said.

"Why the hell would I do that?"

Sebastian bared his teeth. "Because I'll punish you if you don't."

He was expecting me to fight him the second he detached my wrists from the bed. And in this situation, I'd be at a disadvantage since my wrist would still be attached to the rope. I wanted to hit when he was least expecting it.

Sebastian's hand skimmed over the inside of my arm, leaving waves of heat behind. When he reached my wrist, he deftly untied the scarf. Going against every self survival instinct, I laid my bound hands on the back of my neck obediently. A look of amusement shone in his eyes.

I laid still while he stepped towards my feet. He untied the silky sheets from my feet. Then he stepped back up to the head of the bed and picked up the long rope binding my hands together. He tugged on it lightly, like it was a leash.

"Be a good girl and sit up," he said.

Begrudgingly, I engaged my abdominal muscles and slowly sat up on the bed. All the while I kept my hands pressed against the back of my neck. When I was sitting up, I glanced

down at my feet. There was a foot of slack rope between one bound foot and the other.

“Now stand up from the bed. Don’t move your hands from your neck, or I’ll punish you,” he said.

Heat flared into my cheeks. I wanted to wrap my bound hands around his neck, and squeeze. I pushed that thought away and inched my bound feet towards the side of the bed. Soon, I’d fight back. I kicked my feet past the mesh canopy and set them on the ground. I dragged my legs apart as far as they could go and slowly stood up.

“We’re going to head to the foyer. The men will be here soon,” he said.

I glanced down at my bound feet: I wouldn’t be able to kick out very far. My only option would be to jam my knee up.

Sebastian tugged on the leash and began walking backwards. Damn it, I’d been hoping he’d turn his back on me. His eyes retained that amused glint as he watched me take a small step forward. My progress was slowed by how little I could stretch my legs. Getting irritated with my progress, I tried to take a larger step and my shifted weight tipped me forward.

Before I could break my fall, his powerful hands caught onto the dips above my hips.

I jerked in his grip and reached for the gun in his waistband. The amusement in his eyes morphed into hunger. His fingers gripped onto the underside of my wrists. He yanked my hands away from his gun.

Keeping his grasp firm on my wrists, he growled, “There she is. I was wondering when my little fighter would come out to play.”

Before I could even process what I was doing, I spat in his face.

Chapter 26

Sebastian bared his teeth as my spit slowly dripped towards his lips. A long pink tongue poked out and swiped away the residue. “You can fight me as much as you want. But I’ll give it back to you two-fold,” he said.

“Bring it on,” I growled.

He smirked before dropping his grip on my arms. I collapsed to the floor, glaring up at him.

Sebastian shrugged, grip still tight on my leash. He stepped ahead of me, while continuing to keep a close eye on me. He twisted the rope around a five foot high stone sculpture that’d required two men to carry inside the house. Realization hit me.

I lunged from my sprawled position towards the rope. His oversized hand caught my neck and pressed my face into the carpet. Scents of clean linen overpowered my nose.

A moment later the pressure was released from my neck, and I moved my head up from the thankfully clean carpet. The rope was now knotted around the statue, and if the intricate work of the knot was any indication I wouldn’t get it undone easily.

“Say the safeword, if you want to stop,” he said.

Sebastian’s arms were crossed, and he stared down at me. The hunger in his eyes told me he wanted to continue, but I knew from his reaction to my safeword earlier that he’d stop immediately if I said it.

“I’m not a fucking dog. You can’t just-” I started.

“Are you sure about that? Because right now, you seem like my bitch.”

My mouth gaped open. No man had ever spoken to me like that. But my mouth wasn’t the only thing close to drooling.

Sebastian nodded at me. “Get on your feet. It’s time to take responsibility for how you acted earlier,” he said.

I thought back to his words about giving it to me two-fold. What did he have in mind? I tested the give on the rope. There was less than a foot of space between my hands and the statue.

“You idiot, I can’t exactly stand up straight like this.”

His eyes flashed. “Who said anything about standing up straight? You should keep your head bowed in front of your superiors.”

I should have been thinking of all the ways I could gut him. Instead, my traitorous pussy was tightening and beginning to drip.

Each of his large hands gripped my ankles and pushed them back. Once they were firmly planted on the ground, he grabbed the waistband on my pants and yanked upwards. My ass was hanging in the air, and I glared between my ankles at him. Suddenly, I realized what was coming, but for some reason I didn’t want to stop it.

His large feet moved into my line of vision. Then a sharp sensation went up my hip, and the sound of the smack echoed through the room. It wasn’t painful, more shocking than anything.

“Was that supposed to hurt?” I growled.

Why was I pushing him?

“No, this isn’t about pain. It’s a reminder of who you are: a bratty little slut who likes to get punished.”

“Fuck off.”

“Don’t you feel a little embarrassed? You could’ve just walked into the living room, and pretended to be meek when my men arrived. Instead you allowed me to bend you over, and spank you. Allowed me to tie you in place like a dog. How does it feel to know that’s what you desire?”

My thighs tightened together. Damn it, I shouldn’t feel so turned on by that.

Another smack hit against my other butt cheek.

“So shame turns you on,” he said.

“Fuck you,” I spit back.

“Would you be more turned on if there were cameras here watching you squirm?”

“There are no cameras.”

“But you wish there were. You wish your former underlings could see you getting put in your place.” He smacked my butt again.

“No, I don’t,” I gritted out.

Sebastian let go of his hold on my waistband. My knees buckled, and I fell face first onto the carpet. The scent of detergent dug into my nose. I rolled over, but the ropes kept my arms strained up above me.

He crossed his arms and smirked down at me.

“To punish you for lying to me, I’m not going to continue spanking you,” he said.

“Doesn’t sound like much of a punishment,” I growled back from my spot on the ground.

Sebastian raised an eyebrow. “Look me in the eye, and tell me you aren’t wet.”

“Dry as the Sahara,” I shot back.

His smile turned cruel. “You’re about to find out what happens to liars.”

Sebastian untied the ropes attaching me to the stone and yanked me forward. I kept my hands behind my neck as he’d instructed, but part of me wanted to wrap it around his neck to see how’d he react.

When we were standing in my living room, my punishment arrived in the form of a word, “Kneel.”

“Fuck that.”

“Now,” he said, his eyes flashing.

And damn it if the authority in his voice didn’t leave my inner walls clenching together. I tightened my grip on my

neck, and stayed standing. His eyes darkened, as he stepped closer to me.

“Don’t make me do it myself,” he said.

“I’d like to see you try.” And damn it, I actually did.

“With one word, you could make all this stop. I’d step away from you, and be the perfect gentleman,” he said, his tone turning condescending. “Go on, say it if you hate this so much.”

I didn’t say a word.

Sebastian laughed. “Just admit you want me to put you in your place,” he said.

I felt the blush deepen, so I forced out my own laugh. I was aiming for haughty, but it came out unsteady.

“I bet no man has ever spoken to you the way I do. All your former underlings pretend you are better than them. That you are someone that should be put on a pedestal. But I know the truth,” he said, his voice dark. He was so close to me I had to tip my chin up to look at him. “The truth is that the place you belong is on your knees.”

His hands dug into my shoulders, and pushed downward with more force than I thought he was capable of. I collapsed on my knees, and glared up at him.

Sebastian brushed a hand into my hair. “Awww, you look so pissed. It’s cute.”

“I hate you.”

His grip increased on my hair. “No you don’t. You’re just pissed that this turns you on. I already know tonight you’ll be getting yourself off to the thought of this.”

Keeping my hands firmly on my neck, I flicked my middle finger up from my right hand.

His smile deepened as he laughed. “Maybe later.”

Before I could respond, an engine sounded outside.

As the roar of the car crept closer, my heart started thumping faster. The haziness that had filled my brain since he'd forced me to the ground disappeared.

I heard more engines approaching the house, but couldn't see outside because of the covered windows. I couldn't afford to be less than alert with the men approaching me. From the tightened shift in Sebastian's posture, I wasn't the only one who'd felt the change come over them.

"They'll be here in a moment. So if there's anything you need, tell me now," he said, his face tense.

"I'm fine." And surprisingly I was fine. Even though I was tied up and kneeling at his feet, I felt safer than when I pressed a gun against his head.

"Even when my men arrive, I want to make sure nothing goes outside your limits. If anything gets to be too much, promise me you'll use your safeword."

"I will."

"Good girl," he said, and for some reason those words made me melt.

"Stay, I'll be right back," he continued, before dropping the rope on the ground.

I stayed kneeling while he went into the foyer. There was the click of the front door unlocking, and then Sebastian marched back over to me.

"Good girl. Now I just need you to stay quiet while I handle everything. The only word I should hear from you is a safeword if you need it."

I remained silent while he picked up the leash again. Gravel crunched outside, and moments later muffled footsteps approached us.

Men with AK-40s marched forward. They stopped a few feet away from us with their guns trained on my face. My fingers further tightened on my neck, and I could feel my fingernails cutting in my skin. But I kept my hands in place as Sebastian had instructed.

“Clear,” one man yelled. “Target neutralized.”

The men stared down at me as more footsteps sounded behind them. Most of their faces were expressionless, but I noticed a few hints of amusement at my predicament. A warm feeling shot into my lower belly. Maybe, Sebastian had been right before. Having people witness my shameful state was turning me on. I hoped the grey sweatpants I was wearing wouldn't give me away.

More men with AK-40s walked in, keeping their guns trained on me. I was almost flattered they thought they needed this many men to take me down. The men in the middle stepped aside, and Luca appeared. All fluttery feelings instantly disappeared. Luca glanced between Sebastian and I, a cruel smile growing on his lips. I bit down on the flesh inside my cheek, attempting to keep my growing anger in check.

“It seems your *hobby* came in handy,” Luca said while stepping closer to Sebastian.

Chapter 27

Sebastian's expression remained neutral, keeping his eyes firmly on his brother.

Luca's eyes were less than neutral. A glimmer was rising in them as his eyes swept over the ropes around my wrists and ankles.

An odd feeling swam through me. Although I usually was swimming towards nightmares when Luca was around, I felt safe with Sebastian's ropes around my wrists.

"We'll handle the rest, Sebastian," Luca said while stepping towards me.

I glared back up at him. God, I was so tempted to strangle Luca with the rope.

"No," Sebastian said, his voice firm.

Luca's eyebrows crinkled together.

"What?" Luca said, turning to face his brother.

"She's not going with you."

Luca stepped closer to his brother, and lowered his voice, "What are you talking about? We need to get all the information out of her."

"Selene's coming with me." Sebastian said, his grip tightening on the rope.

Luca's eyebrows shot up, a look of understanding in his eyes. "Oh, you want to play with her some more." He looked down at me, kneeling on the ground. My eyes were shooting daggers at him, but I somehow kept silent. Luca turned back to Sebastian, his voice softening.

"I'll find you another plaything. We can't take a chance of her trying to attack you again," Luca said.

"No."

Luca's mouth tightened, and he turned towards his men. "I want everyone out except these men," he said pointing at four

men aiming a gun at my head. “If you hear any sort of gunshot, everyone come back in.”

The four men nodded, and the remaining men walked out of the house.

When the door clicked close, Luca spoke again, “You’re my Underboss. You can’t act like that in front of the men.”

Sebastian silently stared down at his brother.

Luca threw his hands up in the air. “She has valuable information about the Regan family’s organization. I can’t wait until you are done with... whatever the hell it is you do,” Luca said.

“Let me handle her. She’ll tell us everything we want,” Sebastian said.

Luca’s eyes narrowed, and the brothers silently glared at each other.

Finally Luca broke the silence, “No. I know you, and you’ll go easy on her. The bottom line is she tried to kill the Underboss of the Amato family. I need to make an example of her.”

“She’s coming with me.”

Luca’s glare turned on me.

“Luc,” Sebastian warned, and Luca’s head snapped back to him.

“Absolutely not. You may be my brother, but you can’t overrule me. I’m in charge of this family.”

Sebastian’s face darkened. “You keep telling me I need to take on more responsibilities, and now I’m doing it.”

Luca shook his head before inclining his head towards one of his men. I tensed my body, ready to jump into action. I’d take a one way ticket to hell before I ever willingly left a room with Luca.

Sebastian thundered, “You need me more than I need you. You wanted me to come into the fold after dad died, and I did. *Don’t forget* who needs who.”

A growl came out of Luca's throat. Was Sebastian threatening his brother for my sake? Why?

Finally, Luca turned face away from his brother's glare.

"You can take her to your house, but my men will escort her. That's all I'll promise you right now," Luca said roughly.

Luca stepped towards me, the anger still flashing in his eyes.

"You," Luca said the word like I was a bug he wanted to squash. His fist tightened before he continued his sentence, "even *accidentally* scratch Sebastian, and I'll have you sold to a private collector who specializes in pain."

He glanced at Sebastian before continuing, "And it will not be the fun kind of pain."

I glared up at Luca, but remained silent.

"Stand her up," Luca said, motioning at two of his men.

Before they could step towards me, Sebastian grabbed my waist. His fingers gently dug into my skin as he lifted me to my feet.

Luca's face darkened. "If she makes any sign that she'll attack you it won't end well for her."

Four guns stayed trained on me as we walked through the hallway.

When we reached the doorframe, Sebastian whispered into my ear, "What's your favorite color?"

What the fuck was he talking about? Then it dawned on me. He was reminding me to use my safeword if I needed it. Despite the danger surrounding us, he was making sure I was okay.

"Blue." I was okay, I didn't need to use the safeword.

He moved ahead of me, the leash dangling behind him.

When I stepped from the house into the gravel driveway, the stones cut into my feet. Laughter rang around me as he led me across the driveway. I spied 6 cars lined up along the pristine

driveway, and I knew that this wouldn't escape the attention of my father.

Sure enough, there was a man I recognized near the back of the driveway. Sean leaned against his vintage BMW, his eyes combing the space. His eyebrows rose as he took in the ropes binding my ankles and wrists. Great, now the entire Regan family was going to hear about how I was practically being walked on a leash like a dog.

Even though I could feel a flush moving up my face again, I tried to force my expression to remain neutral. Sebastian guided me towards a black military grade truck that I'd outrun yesterday.

Sean stepped towards us. Guns immediately pointed in his direction.

His Irish accent carried across the space, "*Relax*. Conor just wanted to know why there are Amato men at his property."

From behind us Luca yelled, "Ask him why his bitch of a daughter kidnapped my brother."

Sean raised an eyebrow. "Anything else you'd like me to add?"

"Tell him he's lucky we haven't started a war over this," Luca said.

"Let me call him," Sean said.

Sean sat in his BMW with guns still trained on him while I remained frozen in place with my hands pinned to my neck. It mortified me to think he was relaying this to my father. While Sean was speaking to my father on the phone, Luca moved closer to Sebastian.

"Think he's calling in reinforcements?" Luca said with an excitement I didn't like in his voice. No boss should be this keen to go to war. Sean stepped out of his car before I could tell Luca how ill fitting he was to be running a crime family.

"I spoke to Conor, and he wanted to emphasize to you that he did not send Selene after your brother," Sean said.

Luca remained silent for a moment, that glimmer of excitement fading from his eyes. Then he jerked his head in my direction. “Is this going to be a problem?”

Sean didn’t even look at me when he responded, “No, it isn’t.”

His answer wasn’t surprising, but a hint of pain still clawed at me. I’d known that my father wouldn’t be coming to rescue me. Not only did he not want to start a gang war, but he’d always emphasized to me that we needed to stand behind our actions. I made the decision to take Sebastian hostage, and I would have to deal with the consequences.

A nearby guard stroked his MPS, just waiting for the opportunity for me to look wrong at Sebastian, so he had an excuse to gun me down. Sean turned away from me and stepped back into his car.

I was on my own.



Once Sean’s car sped away, the door to the truck opened. Once we reached the car, I tried to step up into the backseat, but I only had a foot of leeway between my ankles.

“Get inside,” Sebastian ordered.

“I can’t,” I said, showing him that my foot wouldn’t go high enough.

Sebastian’s powerful arms deadlifted my stomach and the front of my thighs. Before I could react, he tossed me into the backseat like a rag doll. My face was pressed against the leather seat. The scent of conditioned leather stung at my nose. I wanted to sit up, but I also didn’t want to make a sudden movement and have them shoot me.

“Can I sit up?” I asked, mortified that I even had to be asking the question.

“Go ahead, but do it slowly,” Sebastian said.

I slowly dragged my legs towards the floor and twisted my body into a seated position. I kept my eyes trained on the

empty front seat, thankful I didn't have to see anyone's reaction. When I was finally sitting up, two beefy guards moved to the seats beside me. They immediately pressed their guns against my head.

"Put your guns away," Sebastian growled.

"But sir..."

"You *heard* me."

The men put their guns in their suit jackets.

Another beefy man squeezed into the driver's seat. For a moment he watched me in the rear view mirror.

"Don't fucking move," the driver said while Sebastian circled around to the front of the car.

I wanted to nod, but that would mean moving. Their guns might be put away, but there was no reason to set them off. I'd been in this business long enough to know when the odds were against me, and this was definitely one of those times. Sebastian settled into the passenger seat and calmly glanced at me. And against my better judgment, the tension in my body relaxed.

The car roared to life, and we headed out of the driveway in silence. Without moving my head, I checked the rearview mirror. The entire line of cars followed behind us. Just as they had been yesterday, the windows were too tinted to see who was inside.

A few minutes later we turned off the tree-lined streets, and onto the freeway. Two cars bracketed us on either side, matching our speed perfectly. In front and behind us, another two sports cars stayed only a few feet away. They were obviously blocking my car in. Just in case I overtook control of the car.

"Where are we going?" I asked when the water and skyline came into view.

The muscles of the men next to me tensed. Seriously? Was I not allowed to talk on top of not moving?

"My apartment," Sebastian said.

What did he have planned for me once we got there?

Chapter 28

I glanced down at the ropes tying my ankles together. Was he planning on walking me through the lobby of his condo like this? A blush spread across my cheeks.

I could just imagine it: Sebastian tugging on my rope as I walked past women with this season's YSL dresses. The doorman actually showing a hint of emotion as I attempted to walk with only a foot of leeway between my bound feet.

"What is it?" Sebastian asked, his eyes surveying me in the rearview window.

"Um... Are you planning to untie me before we go in?"

He smiled. "No."

I could feel my cheeks turning as red as an Aperol Spritz. I hoped none of my high school friends lived in that building. Or worse, took any pictures.

"Is there a back entrance we can take? Maybe," my voice climbed higher than I liked, and I fought to steady it, "a service elevator?"

Hopefully the maintenance men were used to the weirdness of the city, and wouldn't even notice me standing there with bound arms glued to my neck.

"Are you worried about someone seeing you tied up?" He didn't seem concerned, his grin had only grown bigger.

"Obviously!"

The guard next to me dug his meaty hand into my arm. My jaw tightened as the pain pulsed. Sebastian turned around and shot a look at the guard. His hand immediately left my skin.

"There's a car elevator that goes directly into my apartment," Sebastian said.

I felt the heat ease from my cheeks. That made sense. He wouldn't want to draw attention to the current circumstances.

“Although, we can go through the main entrance if you prefer,” he said, the smile returning to his face.

Keeping my hands firmly on my neck, I lifted the middle finger of my right hand. He laughed, his smile shifting into a smirk.

Twenty minutes later we were inside the private car lift. Ten men were flanked around the truck with machine guns pointed at the car. Again, I was almost flattered they thought that many men were necessary. On the other hand, it meant they weren't underestimating me, so that any escape attempt I made would be more difficult.

The oversized elevator hummed as it traveled up. “Don't move unless I tell you to move,” Sebastian said.

I rolled my eyes. I knew the drill at this point.

Finally, the elevator stopped, and one man inserted a code into the garage door. The door eased open and revealed a garage with three cars sitting in it. An Aston Martin, Lamborghini Diablo, and a vintage Porsche were glinting on the polished concrete. More men were standing beside the cars with machine guns also pointed at us. We eased into the remaining space in the garage before Sebastian stepped out of the car. Immediately, the doors were thrown open, and more guns pointed in my direction. I heard the garage door slide close behind us.

“Get out of the car,” Sebastian ordered. He was standing a few feet away from me, and he was tapping his Gucci loafer against the concrete floor.

Slowly, I kicked my feet to the side, and kept my hands on my neck as I inched my way across the now empty seat. I hopped to the ground, and guns swarmed me on all sides.

“Take her inside,” Sebastian said. I couldn't even see him past all the men surrounding me on all sides.

We slowly inched towards the front door. When the door creaked open, the lights flashed to life. I couldn't see much beyond the men circling around me, but I noticed the trendy long plank flooring that told me Sebastian had recently

renovated the place. The grey walls around me opened up as we marched along. I caught hints of details beyond the men swarming me: light oak kitchen cabinets, post modern artwork, and then a long glass table that we stopped in front of.

“Wait there,” I heard Sebastian’s deep voice, but again I couldn’t see him. I wanted to look around the room, but I didn’t want to move my head and give them an excuse to kill me. Ahead of me was a nine foot long glass table with eight heavy iron chairs arranged along it. Floor-to-ceiling windows wrapped around the room with what I estimated was ballistic glass.

Through the windows ahead of me, I could see that the sun was sitting high above the glassy water. In my peripheral vision I could see a plush white rug that must have been terrible for getting blood stains out of, and a sitting area filled with oversized black furniture.

Footsteps approached from behind me.

“Put the guns away,” Sebastian ordered. The men didn’t move their guns. Sebastian turned his icy gaze towards them. Immediately, the men hurried to stuff their guns in their suit jackets.

“Sit,” Sebastian said, turning his attention to me.

The men shifted out of my way, so I could slowly squat onto the heavy iron dining chair with a white cushion on top. Sebastian stepped forward, holding black leather handcuffs.

“Think I can write these off as a business expense?” He smirked at his own joke as he kneeled down by my feet.

“Asshole,” I muttered.

Sebastian glared at the surrounding men. “If any of you do anything to hurt her, you’ll regret it.”

After glaring at the men to get his point across, he leaned towards me, and whispered softly in my ear, “Anything you want to say?”

“No.”

“If that changes let me know.”

Sebastian moved the cuff towards my ankle. The fabric was velvety and soft on the inside of the cuff. Sebastian clicked the cuff closed around my left ankle, and attached it to the iron chair leg. He cuffed my other ankle, but didn't attach it to anything for a moment. He stared at my face for a moment, his own unreadable.

Finally, Sebastian deftly unknotted the rope binding my ankles together, and yanked my legs further apart before attaching my ankle to the chair leg. The fact that all of his men were witnessing this was humiliating, yet my body didn't seem to get the memo.

Sebastian's hands moved up above my knee. He wrapped a larger cuff around the bottom of my right thigh and buckled it stiffly. A short chain was dangling from it. He forced my knee towards the corner of the chair, and attached the chain to a divot in the leg of the iron chair. Sebastian circled another cuff around my left thigh.

Despite the situation, all I could focus on was whether my liquid heat was going to darken the seat cushion, and all these men would witness it. There was something seriously wrong with me.

Once the cuff was buckled in place, he jerked my knee towards the corner of the chair. He chained that leg into place, forcing me to keep my legs opened. I tried to yank my knees closed, but they stayed spread open. Fuck, I wish I'd picked black sweatpants. I forced myself not to check to see if there was a darkening spot.

“What's my favorite color?” he whispered into my ear.

Another opportunity to use my safeword.

“Blue,” I replied.

Sebastian smiled and tapped his finger right above my eye. “You're right.”

When his finger left my face, I almost felt disappointed.

“I'm going to untie this hand. Be a good girl,” he said.

The rope went slack around my wrist, and before I could react he roughly yanked both of my arms behind my back. My chest arched forward, and my shoulders felt like they were going to pop. With his free hand, he pushed on my back forcing my chest towards the glass table.

“Is that all you got?” I growled. Despite the discomfort, I wanted him to push harder.

His hand pressed against my back, and he leaned in close enough for his breath to whip the wispy hairs around my cheek. “This is nothing compared to what I’ll do to you later.”

So much for that white cushion.

Sebastian leaned back while keeping his hand firmly in place. With the other hand I felt him force my arms to criss-cross over each other. Each of my hands was pressed against the opposite elbow, and my shoulders were still screaming at me.

I felt soft fabric press over my entire upper arms. The binding tightened, and then metal clinked against metal multiple times. Suddenly, the hand on my back was gone, and I yanked myself back into a sitting position. The pain from my shoulders disappeared when I was fully upright, but my entire forearm was locked against something.

“Leave,” Sebastian said, his face expressionless as he looked at the guards surrounding me.

“Luca said-” one of them started.

Sebastian interrupted with a growl, “He said to accompany me home, not watch me play with her. Don’t make me repeat myself.”

At his words, I instinctively yanked my arms against the restraint. My bound arms barely moved an inch, the restraint seemed to be attached to something.

“Sir-” another man started saying, uneasily.

“She’s not going anywhere. *Get out.*”

Sebastian stepped towards the man and hurried footsteps smacked against the sturdy wood floor.

When the sound of the door closing echoed through the house, Sebastian moved away from me. I strained my neck so I could view behind me. He walked towards an open kitchen with a large marble island encircled by white barstools.

“Disappointed they’re gone?” he asked.

“Why would I be?”

Sebastian pulled open a light wood cabinet. “Because you love being humiliated in front of a crowd.”

“Yeah right.”

“If you say so,” he said with a pointed stare at the white cushion. I couldn’t even come up with a comeback for that as he set a bottle of Cointreau and vodka on the white marble counter.

“You like cosmos right?” he asked.

Why was he asking me about my drink preferences?

“*Where* are you planning on putting that vodka?” I asked, trying to force my legs closed. No luck.

He opened another cabinet and pulled out a cocktail jigger and shaker. Another smirk and glance at my crotch. My nipples tightened.

“Into a cup. I’m making you a drink,” he said.

I blinked, almost disappointed. He opened up an oversized Sub-Zero refrigerator. My mouth watered when I spotted a plastic tub of raviolis. I hadn’t eaten since the homeless shelter. Well, technically since the candy I gobbled down during last night’s board games.

“Are you hungry?” he asked while pulling out bottles of lime juice and cranberry juice.

“No,” I lied.

He shook his head and opened the freezer. He dumped ice into the cocktail shaker then began pouring the vodka into the metal jigger.

“What are you planning to do to me?” I asked.

“I thought it was pretty obvious: I’m making you a drink.” He picked up the jigger and poured the measured vodka into the cocktail shaker. I stared down at the cuffs holding my thighs and ankles in place.

He poured another jigger full of liquid into the shaker. “They are better than the ropes, right? No matter how much you pull against them, you won’t further exacerbate your injuries,” Sebastian said.

“That’s one way of putting it,” I said.

“Something tells me you wouldn’t mind if I kept you tied up the entire night.”

“You’re delusional,” I growled back. But the growing heat on my cheeks likely diminished the effect.

He laughed, then turned on the filtered water. Once he was done pouring it into a glass, he approached me with both drinks in his hand. He set the water a few inches in front of me. As for the cosmo, he set it in the middle of the table. It was completely out of my reach even if my hands hadn’t been tied.

“How do you expect me to drink like this?” I asked.

A smirk grew on his face.

“I wouldn’t mind watching you attempt to sip your water while your arms are restrained.” His eyes became half lidded as he drunk in the image. “Unable to use your hands to pick up the cup. Forced to wrap your sweet little lips around the cup, and swallow everything.”

“You’re such a pervert,” I said.

His eyes became sharp and predatory. “I’m not the only one.”

Chapter 29

“As much as I’d like to continue this conversation,” Sebastian’s eyes flicked to my crotch again before continuing, “we need to establish some ground rules for next time.”

“What makes you think I’d want to do this again?”

He slowly circled around me. “I notice every shiver up your spine, every clench of your teeth. I know your panties are soaked by the thought of the things I’ll do to you.”

I strained my neck to see him. “You’re fucking delusional.”

“Keep up that tone with me, and I’ll put you in something *much* more restrictive.”

“I don’t think that’s possible,” I said.

A wolfish smile came across his face, threatening to devour me whole. “Do you want to find out?”

“Not at all.” Although my lower body disagreed with my statement.

His long pointer finger caressed my jaw while he stared down at me. I jerked my head away from his hand, and his smile deepened.

“Let’s go over some ground rules. First, you need to be sober if you want me to play with you-”

“I’d need to be drunk to want to fuck you.”

“You were sober last night, and you were ten seconds away from begging,” he chuckled.

“No, I wasn’t.”

“I wish we wouldn’t have been interrupted. I had so many plans for *those*.” His eyes locked on my nipples, and they hardened painfully.

“Know that,” he said, saving me from replying, “I won’t ever touch you unless you are completely sober. You are not allowed to dampen the feelings of my nails digging into your skin, or forget in the morning the humiliating things I whispered in your ear.”

“It won’t be a problem, because I won’t let you touch me again.”

“If you say so,” he said with that damned amusement in his eyes. “My second rule is that anything you do while we’re playing will have no effect on our business relationship. So if you don’t feel like participating or need to use your safeword, there’ll never be repercussions.”

He looked at me for a moment, and I glared back at him.

“Okay, I think that’s enough fun for today,” he said.

Sebastian moved behind me, and I strained my neck to look down at the arm restraints. My arms were criss-crossed over each other. A long piece of leather was covering my hands, wrists, and upper arms. No skin was visible from elbow down. Three metal buckles secured the leather in place. Two of those metal buckles were attached to the back of the iron chair.

“After I untie you, promise you’ll be a good girl. My brother wants any excuse he can take you away, and if you try to escape you’ll play right into his plan.”

He stopped a foot away, watching me.

“Promise me,” he ordered. That authoritative voice was back. The one that made me yearn to simultaneously obey and disobey him. The voice that made me want to know how he’d react if I fought back. I pushed those thoughts away.

“Fine,” I said begrudgingly. As much as I hated to admit it, he had a point. And the last thing I wanted was to get tortured by Luca. *For now*, I’d play nice.

Sebastian unhooked the first belt holding my arms in place, and I felt some of the pressure release. He waited for a moment, probably waiting to see if I’d try to attack him. When I stayed still he unlocked the second and third belt. The leather fell limp against the chair. He pulled a small metal key out of his pocket, and he unlocked the chains attaching the leather to the chair. Then he tossed the entire thing towards a black sofa.

Sebastian stepped far enough away that I couldn’t grab at him, and crossed his arms. Now that my hands were free, I also mimicked his pose and glared up at him.

“It’s so tempting you keep your legs open for the rest of the day. But it’s time we talked business,” he said.

I flicked him off. That was so much more satisfying when my hands weren’t restrained.

“I hate to disappoint, but you haven’t earned that right yet,” he said.

A warm shiver ran up my spine.

Sebastian kneeled down and pulled the key out of his pocket. In a flash, the cuffs were off my ankles. He moved to my thighs. The second they were released from their restraints, I crossed my legs so tightly I could have crushed a walnut between them.

Sebastian laughed, his eyes fixed on my newly crossed legs. After a moment, he jerked his attention towards the living room, and tossed the restraints towards the black sofa.

“Playtime’s over. Is there anything you need, or any pain I should know about?” He ran a finger along my wrist, and for some reason, my body didn’t seem ready for whatever the hell this was to end.

“I’m fine,” I said, and immediately regretted admitting that.

I jerked my hand away from him and attempted to jerk my mind away from thoughts of wanting to continue this. Despite the fact that I no longer was completely immobilized, I suddenly felt tenser than I had earlier. God this whole thing was messing with my brain, I seriously should not allow this to happen again.

“Anything I should know for next time?” he asked.

“There won’t be a next time,” I growled.

He smirked, and I was sorely tempted to wipe that cocky look off his face. Before I could come up with a reply, he nodded at the cosmo glass sitting in front of me.

“Try the drink,” he said.

“How do I know it’s not poisoned?”

He rolled his eyes and stared up at the double height ceiling for a few moments. “Do you really think I would poison you after all I went through to get you here?”

I raised an eyebrow. “You take a sip then.”

Sebastian sighed and grabbed the drink in front of me. He took a small sip, and his lip curled up in disgust.

“I don’t know how you drink this shit,” he said.

He sat the drink down in front of me and immediately reached for his tumbler of whiskey. He took a long drink, and his face returned to neutral.

I tentatively picked up my drink and took a sip. A mix of orange sweetness and tart cranberry greeted me. I set the drink back down. Surprisingly good. Although I’d never admit it.

Sebastian sat down at the opposite end of the 8 foot long table. He took another swig of his whiskey, his eyes never leaving my face. I took another sip of my drink. Okay, it wasn’t just good. It was a really great drink.

“What happens now?” I asked.

He mockingly raised his whiskey glass towards me. “I thought we were having drinks.”

I couldn’t keep back the eyeroll. Fine, I’d take a different tactic. “Why am I here?”

“Why do you think you’re here?” he asked, leaning back into his chair. Could he just answer my question without asking another question?

“Just answer the fucking question,” I growled.

His jaw tightened as he stared down at the table for a moment.

“Yesterday, when we were at my family’s house, you asked me for my help. I didn’t agree with *how*,” his jaw twitched when he said the word, “my brother handled the situation. But then you aimed a gun at me right in the middle of my family’s headquarters. Had you lost your fucking mind?”

“First off, I initially aimed it at Luca, not you. Second, I didn’t ask you for *your help*. I asked you to pay an appropriate fee for my valuable information,” I said.

He opened his mouth, but I pointedly threw my index finger up to silence him. Surprisingly, he didn’t interrupt me.

“I would have been insane *not* to pull a gun on Luca after the shit he tried,” I said.

Sebastian shook his head before speaking, “You should’ve given me the gun when I asked you to. You’re fucking lucky you even survived.”

I threw my hands up in the air. What had he expected me to do? Trust his word, and hand him back the gun? And again, he hadn’t answered my initial question: what the hell was he planning on doing with me?

“Oh, I’m sorry I didn’t *trust* you,” I growled, “after your brother threatened to have me sold into a brothel.”

His fist clenched. “I was handling it.”

I laughed derisively. “You *really* seemed to have it under control.”

“Stop being a brat. I saved your fucking life. Would a bit of gratitude kill you?”

“Gratitude?” I fluttered my eyelashes like a 1920s movie star. “Oh I’m *so* grateful you tied me up, and kidnapped me.”

He leaned back, and crossed his muscular arms across his broad chest. “I can guarantee you being in this house is *far* better than being tied up in my brother’s basement.”

A shiver ran up my spine, and all the fight in me fled. No, I couldn’t end up there again.

Sebastian sighed and stood up from his chair. “I’m going to fix us some lunch. You were lying earlier when you said you weren’t hungry,” he said.

I stared at his back, unable to believe what I was seeing. He was turning his back on the very person who had held him at gunpoint and taken him hostage. Someone who was very capable of doing the exact same thing again. I had promised

him to be good, but come on. He hadn't stayed alive in the underworld by being this trusting.

Despite the temptation of taking back control of this situation, I remained in my seat. I shouldn't push my luck. I wasn't being tortured, and I was still alive. And he'd listened whenever I told him to stop. I'd refrain from stealing his gun. For now.

"I can heat up some leftover pasta," he called from the kitchen.

"Whatever," I said with an eye roll. But I was secretly grateful.

He was right: I was starving.



A half hour later Sebastian was placing the dishes in the Miele dishwasher. We somehow got through the meal without me throwing a ceramic plate at him, or attempting to jump for the gun hidden in his suit jacket.

When he was done with the dishes, he stepped back into the hallway and motioned for me to follow him. He opened a door near the kitchen and I followed him in.

It was an oversized bedroom with open views of the city. There was a large king sized bed facing the windows.

I raised an eyebrow at him.

"This'll be your bedroom while you're staying here-" he started saying.

"*Staying here?*" I shook my head. "Stop acting like I'm your guest. We both know I'm your hostage."

Chapter 30

“Hostage?” Sebastian snorted. “More like pain in my ass. In order to be a hostage, you’d have to actually serve a purpose.”

“If I’m such a pain in the ass then let me walk out that door, and never bother you again,” I said.

“Sure, walk right out that door and into my brother’s arms. I’m sure that’ll end well for you.”

I sucked some saliva down my throat at the mention of his brother. He had a point, but I didn’t have to admit it.

After a few moments of silence he continued his speech from earlier with a little more sarcasm laid in. “Make use of whatever you’d like. If you don’t like the clothes in the drawers,” he inclined his head towards the glossy built-in drawers along the left side of the room, “then let me know, and I’ll have my men get you other pieces. There are healing ointments in the bathroom. You should use them.”

Sebastian stepped back into the hallway. “I’ll be in my office. I have a lot of work to catch up on,” he said.

Did he expect me to feel guilty because he was behind on work due to me? Not happening.

But there was one question that I needed the answer to before he left. “How long am I ‘staying’ for?” I couldn’t resist using air quotes.

“Once I figure this mess out, you can go back squatting in shacks.”

“The sooner the better,” I growled.

He mockingly waved goodbye before closing the door behind him. I immediately locked the door.

Pressing my back against the door, I surveyed the room. No weapons in sight. Although I doubted he would leave them in view of the woman who’d held him at gunpoint yesterday.

I stepped over the fluffy white rug in the center of the room and checked for a latch on the floor-to-ceiling windows. It was impossible to test my theory without a gun, but from the

thickness of the glass I was pretty sure the windows were bulletproof. And there didn't appear to be any mechanisms to open the window.

My gaze moved towards the cars speeding hundreds of feet below us. Not that it would do me any good even if I could open the windows. I doubted Sebastian's guards would be very welcoming to someone climbing down the side of the building.

I turned around and rifled through the drawers. As suspected, no weapons were hidden inside them. The first few drawers were filled with lingerie, all different colors and sizes. With a shake of my head, I moved onto another drawer. This time I finally found what I'd been looking for: workout clothes.

My entire body ached from the beating that Ray's men had given me. But I couldn't allow myself to fall out of shape. Sebastian could pretend we were playing house right now, but I knew it wouldn't be indefinite. When the time came, I needed to strike hard and fast.



Later that evening I was lying in bed underneath a fluffy white comforter. In the darkness, I watched a light turn off in a nearby apartment building. I should really get some sleep. My body was still aching from a combination of the workout and previous injuries. But my eyes stayed open. I'd been hoping that my exercise earlier would release some of that pent-up tension inside of me. But reminders of Sebastian's earlier words kept springing into my mind, and it only made the arousal stronger.

Just thinking about him tying me up and toying with me should not have had such an effect on me. After my workout earlier, I'd tried to use the shower head to take the edge off. But all I could see were his condescending eyes. And I knew if I got off with *that* visual it'd become a habit.

His words meant nothing.

Nothing.

As I laid in bed, I tried mentally repeating the words, but it didn't have the intended effect. With a groan, I gave up on sleep and stepped out of bed. I moved towards the door and pressed my ear against it. The low whirl of the air conditioner was the only sound that greeted me.

All I'd seen of the penthouse was the dining room during our surprisingly well-cooked meals along with the inside of my bedroom. If Sebastian was asleep, I needed to search his house for potential weapons. Despite our deal for me to stay here and play nice, there would come a time I'd need a gun. Hopefully, I wouldn't need to point a gun at him.

Last time hadn't ended so well for me.

I continued to listen for any signs of movement in the hallway while thinking through where Sebastian would hide his guns. Was he the type to keep them locked in a safe inside his office, or to keep them holstered for easy access underneath his bed? From the way he gripped his gun, it was obvious his training was all-encompassing. But from the skillful way he'd taken down his brother, it was obvious that he was the type that would prefer to take a man down with his fists than a FMK. I'd start with his office.

When I was satisfied with the lack of sounds outside, I slowly eased the door open and stepped out into the hallway.

"Yes?" Sebastian called.

Damn it.

"I'm just getting some water," I huffed back while heading towards the kitchen.

Sebastian was lying on a black couch in the living room. He watched an oversized television that was large enough to block out part of the floor-to-ceiling window behind it. The sound was on mute, that's why I hadn't heard anything. The tv must've come out of the ground, because I hadn't seen it earlier. Maybe that was how some of their weapons were stored.

He raised an eyebrow at my comment about water. Probably since he'd already given me a glass to bring to my room after dinner. But he just turned back to the tv, and ignored me. Good, I don't think I could handle a heated look from him right now. I checked out the show he was watching.

He knew what I watched during my free time. I was curious what type of show he picked. The camera panned over cathedral ceilings then silver lockers underneath them.

"That's my high school," I blurted out.

"What?" he said, turning back to me.

I mentally smacked myself for engaging with him. All night I'd been attempting not to think about him, and now I was forcing his awareness on me.

When I remained silent he raised an eyebrow. Whatever, one off hand comment about my life wouldn't kill me.

"Years ago, they filmed that scene at my high school. I remember it was such a big deal." God, how my life had changed since then.

"You can join me if you want," he said.

Definitely not. I ignored him and moved into the kitchen. I glanced down at the silverware drawer. Even though I was tempted, I resisted slipping a kitchen knife behind my back. He would definitely notice if one of his Miyabi Black knives went missing. Nothing seemed to slip his attention.

After I got my water, I paused. It was a scene in the movie where the main characters were walking through the cafeteria. Most of my classmates had applied to be an extra in that scene. I had wanted to join them. But of course there had been 'security risks,' and I was 'too busy' to be a part of filming.

"Are you planning to watch the entire movie from the kitchen? You can come sit down." He patted the cushion next to him. "I'm not going to bite... unless you want me to."

I glanced towards my bedroom. If I went back to bed, I'd just be tossing and turning while I thought about all the ways I

was going to end up dead. The camera zoomed in on my old classmate Emma. God, she was a terrible actress.

With a groan, I wandered past the dining room into the open concept living room. I plopped down on the complete opposite end of the couch from Sebastian and crossed my arms.

Just five minutes. You could glimpse the back of Piper's head in one of the long shots. After that I'd head back to my room and try counting sheep.

"You in the movie?" Sebastian asked while unmuting the tv.

"No, but you'll see Piper in a second."

A few minutes later, I was pointing at the screen, and he was pausing the movie.

"Are you sure that's her?" he asked, skeptical.

"Piper insists it's her. At the time she told everyone who would listen that it was the beginning of her career as an actress."

He cocked his head. "All you can see is dark hair in a bun. It could be anyone."

Sebastian unpaused the movie, and I propped my legs on the metal coffee table in front of us. I really shouldn't be making myself comfortable, I *should* go back to the safety of my room. When it came to Sebastian, my self preservation seemed to be overridden.

"Did they ever film anything at your school?" I asked. Might as well get some info out of him.

He shot me an amused look, and I knew what he was thinking. Me and my obsession with what happened at boarding school.

"I think someone might have shot a porno," he said.

"Was it you?" I asked, genuinely curious when I shouldn't have cared at all.

He smiled. "No, but we could still make one."

I shook my head, feeling the blush creep up my face.

Thankfully, the room was dark other than the dim light of the screen, and he didn't pursue the subject. We lapsed back into comfortable silence.

A half hour later, I had thrown my legs up on the couch, and my head was propped up on a red velvety pillow. I should really find out some information that I could use against him. But I was so cozy. I didn't want to start a fight, and have to storm back into my bedroom. Or maybe I just wanted to pretend that this was a normal movie night. My eyes blinked close.

I really shouldn't feel this comfy beside him.

Chapter 31

I groaned and yanked a blanket over my face, trying to block out the light.

“You need to get up,” a deep voice called behind me.

Immediately I was sitting up, taking in my surroundings. A fuzzy black blanket was covering my body. I peeked underneath, I still had my pajamas on from last night. The tv was back under the floor, and there were no divots in the oak floor to prove that it had ever been there.

Sebastian was in the kitchen, sprinkling something into a coffee cup. The playful glint in his eye from last night was gone. Why did I keep falling asleep when he was near? I was beginning to believe what he loved saying about me: that I had a death wish.

Sebastian grabbed the coffee cup, and walked towards me. He wore a black suit. It fit him like a glove, accentuating his muscular body.

He held out the coffee cup to me. “They’ll be here in fifteen minutes. I need you to stay in your room,” he said.

My body tensed. “Who’ll be here in fifteen minutes?”

He looked at the coffee pointedly, and I took it.

I sniffed at the cup. Hints of cinnamon and cloves wafted from the mug.

“Did you put something in the coffee?” I asked.

“Milk, cinnamon, and cardamon.” His attention was directed at the door to the garage.

I rolled my eyes. “I meant, did you spike the drink?”

His eyes swiveled back to me and hardened. “No.”

I took a small sip of the coffee. Once again he’d nailed mixing me another drink. If being a gangster didn’t work out, he should be a barista.

“Who’s going to be here in fifteen minutes?” I repeated.

He glanced down at his platinum Rolex. “12 minutes now. Luc and Antonio.”

Antonio. Sebastian was likely referring to Luca’s Consigliere. For the last twenty years Antonio had acted as Luca’s father’s right-hand man, and a thorn in the Regan family’s side. To my understanding when Vincenzo Amato had died, Antonio had resumed his role as an advisor to Luca. With that combination of men I doubted this was a casual happy hour.

I adjusted my grip on my coffee cup, and the radiating heat threatened to singe my skin.

“Why are they coming here?” I asked.

“To talk to me. You need to stay in your room and not come out.”

Sebastian pointed at the door to my room. Based on his tense expression, this definitely wasn’t a casual happy hour.

For once, I didn’t fight back. While continuing to sip on my coffee, I walked towards my room. I had no interest in being in the same room as all of them. Once I closed the bedroom door, I heard a grunt then a heavy clattering in front of my door.

“Did you trip?” I asked.

“I wedged the chair against the door handle. Don’t come out.”

“I think you’re overestimating how much I want to see your brother.”

Footsteps faded away, and I turned back to my task at hand. Despite the barricaded door and gruff insistence that I not come out of the room, I didn’t trust Luca to not drag me out there.

I rifled through the glossy white drawers. I refused to be dragged into the streets of the city in fuzzy flannel pajamas. Ignoring a tight red lace dress, and a willowy silken romper, I pulled on black yoga pants, and a long sleeve workout top

without even a hint of cleavage. If today was the day I left this world, it wouldn't happen without a fight.

I crept towards the door and pressed my ear against it.

A few minutes later I heard heavy footsteps move in my direction. I wished there was a peephole I could look through. The footsteps continued past my door. On second thought, I was glad there wasn't. I was not in the mood to be looking at either of those men today.

"Whiskey?" a voice called in the hallway. I immediately recognized Sebastian's voice, but the tone was different from what I was used to. None of the teasing humor remained. An angry undertone had replaced it.

I presumed they nodded yes, as I heard the soft click of the cabinet door opening and closing. Moments later, heavy iron chairs scraped against the wood floor, and I tried to guess where they'd all be sitting in the dining room.

Presumably, Luca grabbed the head of the table in order to remind everyone of the hierarchy of power. Antonio would pick the right side, and Sebastian would sit at Luca's left after he finished handing out the drinks.

"Is she here?" Luca spoke for the first time.

"Yes," Sebastian said.

"Has she attacked you since I last saw you?" Luca asked.

"No."

"And the information?"

"I'm working on it."

Fingernails tapped against the glass for a moment then Luca spoke, "I need that information."

"I'll get it," Sebastian's voice was basically a growl.

"Antonio, have you heard anything from her father regarding a ransom?"

"Nothing." The silky voice was slightly higher pitched than Sebastian's baritone.

I wasn't surprised my father hadn't reached out. Honestly, I'd have been shocked if he showed any sort of weakness to his enemies. It wasn't his style.

"Then what should we do with her?" Luca asked.

I held my breath. That was the question I'd been wondering since I'd gotten dragged out of my family's summer house. What was going to happen to me?

"We can use her," Sebastian cut in.

"I meant after we extract the information from her," Luca said.

"We should have her come work for us." Sebastian's voice was hard as steel.

Those were the last words I'd been expecting to hear.

Luca started laughing, but there was a bitter undertone to it. "You have to be fucking kidding me! She took you hostage, and now you want her to work for us?"

"Selene was trained by the best. We can use her skills on top of the information," Sebastian said.

He was right of course: I was one of the best. My father had made sure I was an expert in every single department we ran. And failure hadn't been an option. There was one obvious flaw in his plan though. Not that any of them would ask for my opinion on the matter.

"Her skills *are* the problem: she tried to kill you!" Luca said.

"We can make her do what we want. She's more scared of those debt collectors than anything," Sebastian said. "Plus, she's so well trained that torture might not even work on her."

If I'd been in the room, I'd be glaring at Sebastian. Instead I just glared at the white oak door. As I'd suspected, allowing me to stay here hadn't been altruistic. Just like everyone else in this world, he was just waiting for the opportunity to use me.

"I'm *sure* we can make the torture work on her," Luca said.

Nausea built up inside of me.

“*Luc*,” Sebastian growled.

“Boys,” Antonio cut in with a chiding tone, “before we decide what to ultimately do with her we need to see if Conor Regan offers a ransom. Selene is his only child, and we all know how he reacted when his wife was murdered. We will wait a few days before deciding her fate.”

I sighed. The fear that had been dredged up inside of me diminished into resignation. Although I appreciated the extension of my life, I doubted my father would come to save me. It was true that when my mother was murdered, blood had spilled across the streets of the city until they found the culprit.

But the men who killed her had broken the ultimate taboo: not to go after a Mob Boss’ family. The very same taboo I had broken when I’d taken Sebastian hostage. No, my father wouldn’t be helping me out of this situation. I’d have to deal with the repercussions of my actions on my own.

“She’s staying here until then.” Sebastian’s voice left no room for question.

“Marc, handle it,” Luca said.

A chair scraped against the wood. “What the hell does that mean?” Sebastian snarled.

“We’re not taking a chance that she attacks you again,” Luca said. At the same time Antonio said, “Sit down, Sebastian.”

I backed away from the door. Fuck, I should’ve stolen that kitchen knife last night.

Footsteps approached the door. I sprinted towards the drawers and threw the last one on the left open. Shouts echoed outside, but I ignored them as I picked up a bottle of hairspray and a six inch chunky wooden heel. I’d gathered these makeshift weapons in preparation for this inevitable moment.

Wood creaked as the iron chair dislodged from the door. I sprinted towards the door and positioned myself near the

threshold. The door swung open. A bulky man raised his gun towards my temple.

Before he could properly aim, I squeezed down on the top of the hairspray bottle. The extra hold liquid sprayed straight from the nozzle into his alert eyes.

His eyes turned bright red, and I released my grip on the spray bottle. With my now free hand I reached for his gun. At the same time, his meaty hand clenched around my throat. His hand tightened as he raised me up in the air.

I tried to grasp for the gun, but he tucked it into his waistband just out of my reach. Instead of flailing for it, I smashed the heavy heel against his head.

“Fucking bitch,” he spit.

I started to bring the heel down again, but he slammed the side of my head against the doorframe. Stars sprung up in front of my eyes, but I still swung the heel down blindly.

It connected, and his hand released my throat. Unable to see anything, I chucked the shoe in his general direction as my body dropped to the floor. A meaty thunk sounded. But I wasn't able to celebrate before my head thudded against the wood floor. I tried to blink through the stars overwhelming my vision.

His calloused hand gripped my ankle, and I tried to kick my other leg in that direction. My free foot connected against hard muscles, and I heard him grunt.

I blinked, and my vision finally cleared.

He was snapping some sort of metal bracelet around my ankle. I struggled against his grip, but his hand was firm around my ankle.

I tried kicking his hand again. But before it could connect, the bracelet clicked into place. He immediately released me and jumped to his feet.

“Don't move, or I'll shoot you.” He glared at me, his gun now in his hand. With his free hand, he massaged a lump forming on his shaved head.

I stayed sprawled on the floor, but uncurled my middle finger slowly.

“Is that too much movement?” I smirked. He responded by clicking the safety off.

Maybe, I could kick him in the balls before he could get the shot off. But what was that bracelet snapped on my ankle? I seriously doubted he had gone through all that trouble to give me a piece of jewelry.

“It’s handled,” he called over his shoulder. Or maybe I could goad him into shooting me if it looked like Luca was about to take me to his basement.

Footsteps sounded down the hallway, and three angry faces appeared behind him. Luca was sporting a darkening bruise on his throat. His eyes seared onto me. An older man with slicked back, receding grey hair had a tight grip on Sebastian’s shoulder.

“What the fuck is this thing?” I growled, straightening my shoulders despite my crumpled place on the ground.

Luca stepped forward, rubbing at the purple bruise on his neck.

“The only thing you need to know is that if you disobey me, I will hurt you,” he said.

Luca’s finger tightened on something in his pocket. I felt a stinging pain around my ankle. “What-“

Their faces became blurry. I tried to force out the words, “What did-“

Everything went black.

Chapter 32

When I came to, everything was fuzzy. A fuzzy shadow of a person standing over me. A fuzzy shadow of a fan spinning overhead.

I blinked until the world came back into focus. The memories of what occurred before I blacked out arrived along with my clear vision.

Sebastian leaned against the door. His arms were crossed casually across his chest, but his stiffened muscles revealed his tension. I looked around for the other men, but the room was empty save for Sebastian.

“What the fuck did you do to me?” I asked.

He took a step towards me. “How are you feeling?”

“What did you *do* to me?” I growled, glaring up at him from the ground.

His movements stopped, and I reached down for the bracelet around my ankle. It was a thin silver bracelet that was tight against the top of my ankle. I ran my finger around the outside of it. It was completely smooth, and there wasn't a latch on it. Whatever had happened before, it had something to do with this ankle bracelet.

I yanked on it.

“Stop.” Sebastian's tone was tense, but I ignored him.

I yanked again, and his hand was on my wrist, pulling it away. With my free hand I swung at his leg, and his hold released from my wrist. My motions felt a little delayed, and he stepped back before my punch could connect.

“Damn it, Selene, I'm trying to help you. Please just listen to me.”

“Help me?” I tried to make it sound derisive, but some of my fear crept in.

My body felt like it was moving in slow motion, but I slowly stood up. He moved forward with a hand outreached.

“Don’t fucking touch me,” I growled. This time the anger overruled the fear.

Never taking my eyes off him, I moved backwards towards the window. He remained still in the middle of the room, making no movement to cover the distance between us. When my shoulders were pressed up against the cold window, he spoke again.

“I’m trying to make sure you don’t get yourself killed. If you manage to get that bracelet off, it’ll automatically deliver a lethal injection.”

My entire body tensed.

“What is this thing?” I asked.

I wasn’t sure why I even bothered asking him. It’d be stupid to trust anything that came out of his mouth. The ‘lethal injection’ could be a lie in order to encourage me not to take the bracelet off. However, I was pretty sure the ankle bracelet had been what had knocked me out. If it could inject me with a strong sedative, it wasn’t outside the realm of possibility it could also sting me with something more lethal.

Sebastian rubbed a large hand against one of his eyes. “I’m not sure. I just need you to leave the bracelet alone.”

I searched his face for the lie, but he appeared exhausted rather than deceitful. Purple circles were forming underneath his eyes. It made me wonder if he’d slept the night before. Yet looks could lie. “How did it knock me out?” I asked.

“My brother said that with a press of a button on his phone he can remotely knock you out, and also deliver a lethal injection. That’s all I got out of him,” he said with a sigh.

Great. I could say something to piss off Luca, and he could arbitrarily decide to kill me. Again, I wondered if the lethal injection was a lie to keep me in line... No. Luca wasn’t the type to threaten people without following through. And given the chance Luca would love the opportunity to press that button.

“Luc wanted to make sure you didn’t try to take me hostage again. I made him promise me he wouldn’t trigger it as long as

my life wasn't in danger," Sebastian said.

Oh great, a promise from Luca. I'd definitely believe that.

"Why should I believe anything *you* say?" I asked. Not that I was in any position to be making demands.

"Can you give me some credit? I haven't killed you, or turned you over to be tortured despite you taking me hostage before."

I laughed darkly. "Do you want me to give you a gold star? You haven't tortured or killed me *yet*. We should nominate you as Person of the Year."

Sebastian stared down at me for a moment, his face expressionless. Finally he broke the tense silence, "Are you feeling any pain? I can get you some painkillers."

My head was killing me, but that likely had more to do with the doorframe that it'd smacked into. Other than the general achiness I felt from my previous injuries I was fine. I swallowed. Okay, maybe a dry mouth on top of everything else.

"Our deal's off," I said. God, I can't believe I ever agreed to stay here with him. I pushed off the wall and moved towards the door. "Since I'm leaving, you can stop pretending like you care."

Sebastian's eyes narrowed. "If you walk out that door you'll be at the mercy of an entire family who wants you dead. Not to mention the debt collectors. The only thing keeping you alive is *me*."

My stomach dropped at the reminder of Ray. He warned me what would happen if I didn't pay within 24 hours.... And on top of that Sebastian had informed his brother that I was more terrified of the debt collectors than anything. How could I have been so delusional yesterday? I'd stupidly started to let my guard down around him.

I wouldn't be making that mistake again.

But Sebastian was right. The second I stepped outside his protection, his brother would torture me within an inch of my

life. And I couldn't exactly fight anyone when my movements were this delayed.

For one more night, I'd stay.



Sebastian set down a large pizza box that read Julianna's.

"Do you think ordering my favorite pizza will make up for the fact that your brother put a death bracelet on me?" I asked, sitting down in the seat furthest away from him.

He rolled his eyes, but didn't say anything.

I might complain, but that didn't mean I wouldn't eat it. There was a reason it was my favorite.

When I was on my second slice, he wiped his hands off with a napkin, and folded his arms across his broad chest.

"Jared asked if he could have a pre-game here. He mentioned Piper was invited," Sebastian said.

I set my slice down and focused my gaze on him.

"Are you telling me, or asking me?"

He shrugged. "I figured you couldn't leave the house, so instead I'd bring the party to you."

I glared at him. "What are you planning?"

"Can't I just be trying to do a nice thing?"

"The Amato family isn't exactly known for nice deeds."

"Neither is your family," he shot back, then he sighed before continuing in an exasperated voice, "Do you want to have them come or not?"

I tried to figure out what he could get out of this. From what he'd said to me at Piper's party, he didn't want any of his high school friends knowing his business. And he knew Piper was the last person I wanted to know about my connections to the mob. I couldn't figure out his angle, but that didn't mean I could trust him.

On the other hand, I missed Piper and my old life. I'd gone into more debt than I wanted to think about in order to try to live my life like hers.

After the whiplash of the last few days I needed some normalcy. Plus, this was probably my last chance to see her before I received a bullet to the head.

"No mention of work," I demanded.

He rolled his eyes. "Obviously."

Chapter 33

Fifteen minutes before the pregame started, I took a last look at my appearance in the mirror. I'd ignored the miniskirts and crop tops in my bedroom closet, and settled on a silken black jumper that would cover up the bruises on my legs and arms. I glanced down at my feet and tugged up the black cotton socks underneath my jumper. If my outfit rode up the marks wouldn't be visible.

Despite my insistent digs through the drawers I had no luck finding winter gloves. I stepped towards the door with a sigh. I guess I'd have to spin some story about how I'd been drunk and somehow bruised the entirety of both of my hands.

Sebastian was reclining on a plush black chair adjacent to the couch while sipping on some whiskey. He'd traded his tailored suit for a black cotton v-neck, and dark jeans. I didn't even need to touch the material of his shirt to know how soft it felt.

"I made you a cosmo," he said while nodding his head towards the coffee table.

I didn't respond as I moved towards the couch. Did he really think that fixing me a drink and allowing me to see my friends would somehow make me forgive him? I slumped onto the couch and snatched the drink off the table.

I nodded towards the green Gucci box sitting on the coffee table.

"What's that?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Open it."

Hesitantly, I reached towards the bag, and pushed past the green tissue paper until I felt delicate lace. They were black lace gloves with the signature G of Gucci interlocked throughout the fabric. I tried one on and flexed my fingers. It was light enough that I wouldn't be sweating, but also thick enough that it covered any bruises.

"Does this present come with an injection attached as well?" I asked as I tugged on the other one.

Sebastian inclined his head towards the bag. “I can return it if you don’t like it.”

Part of me wanted to rip the gloves off and throw them in his face. But I didn’t want to have to explain to Piper why my hands looked like they’d been smashed inside a door frame over and over again. Tonight, I just wanted to pretend that my other life didn’t exist.

Instead, I shifted my attention back to the raindrops slapping against the floor-to-ceiling windows. I leaned back into the couch while Sebastian stood up. In my peripheral vision, I watched him grab the empty Gucci bag, and toss it into a drawer on his way to the front door. The staccato of the rain against the windows almost drowned out the sound of the door opening.

“Was that really necessary?” Jared’s voice carried from the front door.

“It’s not the end of the world. My father’s bodyguards always pat guests down when they come into our house,” an unfamiliar deep voice replied.

“Yeah, but your dad’s a senator. Why the hell do you need bodyguards, Sebastian?” Jared asked.

And there was another reminder that I wasn’t living in a normal world. Outside, were bodyguards that’d love to shoot me if I looked at Sebastian the wrong way. I took another sip of my drink as their footsteps echoed towards me.

“Business has been good,” Sebastian said, his tone leaving no room for discussion.

The three guys walked into the living room, and I shifted my attention away from the angry sky. I took a sip of my cosmo as I examined the new addition. The third guy had close shaven brown hair, and matching eyes. His physique was muscular, but the way he carried his bulky body told me he didn’t know how to actually use that strength.

“Selene, right?” Jared called to me, while walking towards a black leather chair next to me.

I nodded, but kept my attention on the other guy. He looked familiar, but all the guys in our circles tended to have the same look. Strong noses, angular cheekbones, and clean shaven. There was always a hint of rebellion. Whether that was a tattoo on their arm, or slightly longer hair than they should have had. It was a superficial rebellion, though. They could easily cut their hair, or wear a long sleeve shirt to cover their tattoo.

The guy strode towards the couch and sat in the middle. I bet it was a tattoo. Probably a tribal tattoo circled around his upper arm.

“Selene, like the moon goddess?” the guy asked, a small smirk on his thin lips. I’m sure he was using the only bit of knowledge he retained from Intro to Mythology.

“Yep, and what perfectly boring name did your parents give you?” I asked before taking another sip of my drink.

“Micah. It means ‘who is like God’,” he said, his smirk deepening before continuing, “It sounds like we’re a match.”

When someone compared themselves to God, it was always a sign of an over-inflated ego. I glanced towards Sebastian, curious about his response to Micah’s come ons. Would he even care? Since we’d gotten to the penthouse, Sebastian hadn’t made a move on me.

Sebastian’s broad back was to me as he poured some whiskey into his glass in the kitchen. When he turned around his expression was completely neutral. I almost felt disappointed.

Why the hell would I feel disappointed? The moment I’d felt something akin to safety at Sebastian’s house, his brother had stuck me with a death bracelet. The last thing I wanted from Sebastian was his presence, let alone his jealousy.

My eyes narrowed into a glare as Sebastian turned his attention to his guests.

“What do you guys want to drink?” he called to them, ignoring my look.

“Whiskey,” Micah replied, predictably.

“Same,” Jared echoed.

Sebastian grabbed two crystal tumblers and poured the whiskey into them.

The doorbell rang again, and Sebastian set down the bottle of whiskey he’d been holding.

“You can grab the drinks over here,” Sebastian said, as he moved towards the front door.

Micah stood up from the couch, his eyes appraising me as he headed towards the kitchen.

Piper’s high-pitched voice echoed across the hallway, “Hi Sebastian, it’s so good to see you again!”

An alto voice spoke next. “And I’m Emma, it’s a pleasure to meet you,”

I sat up a little straighter, recognizing that voice. Was that Emma Williams? She was the prom queen at my high school. Not that it was much of an achievement compared to most schools. Our graduating class was under a 100.

I heard Sebastian’s warm introduction, and then they all came into the room.

“Selene!” Piper squealed when she caught sight of me. “I had no idea you were going to be here!”

Sebastian and I had begrudgingly agreed to a story. I couldn’t exactly tell them I’d kidnapped him, and as a result I couldn’t leave his house in case his brother’s family tried to kill me. So we’d settled on: he’d seen me in the neighborhood, and invited me to come. Later that night, I could sneak into my room, and he’d tell them I’d left.

Part of me wanted to sneak out of the house at the end of the night, and get the hell away from Sebastian. But even as I moved my cup up to my lips, I noticed the slight shakiness of my movements. Unfortunately, I was in no position to re-enter the real world tonight.

“Good to see you Piper,” I said, standing up and pulling her into a hug.

“Wow Selene, it’s been years,” Emma said, walking over to us.

I gave her the expected cheek kisses while Sebastian began working on their drink requests. When I asked Emma about what she’d been up to, she swung back her flawless chocolate brown hair and launched into a speech about her racquetball career.

“It’s insane that they won’t make racquetball part of the olympics,” she ranted.

Yeah, at my high school the prom queen wasn’t the head cheerleader. She was the star racquetball player. Typical Upper West Side stuff.

“I know what you mean,” Sebastian cut in, setting a martini in front of Emma. “It doesn’t look like we’re going to see jiu jitsu at the Olympics this cycle.”

My attention shifted to Sebastian, who sat in the black seat next to Emma.

From my Instagram stalking, I’d come across some pictures of Sebastian participating in some jiu jitsu tournaments. He’d seemed to have won quite a few, but it’s possible the organizers were too terrified to let him lose.

I thought back to him placing his brother in a guillotine choke. Okay, maybe he had some natural talent.

Jared leaned forward. “I remember going to one of your tournaments. That was some intense shit. Are you still thinking of opening a studio?”

Sebastian shot him a look. “No. I’m too busy with my current work.”

Now that I thought about it, I couldn’t remember seeing any social media posts in the last year mentioning jiu jitsu.

I shook my head. Why was I still paying attention to their conversation?

While I tried to tune out Sebastian and Emma’s debate around Olympic sport inclusions, I turned my attention back to

Piper. Maybe, I'd ask her if I could crash at her house tomorrow night.

Before I could broach the subject, the doorbell rang again. This time, it wasn't anyone I recognized. From the guys' navy vests, I was sure they were some of Jared's Wall Street Bros. My suspicions were solidified when one guy whispered to Jared about coke.

Piper followed them into an empty room before I could ask her about crashing at her place.

I sighed and leaned back into the couch. And at that exact moment, Micah wordlessly moved onto the couch cushion beside me.

Fantastic, my only options for conversation were an egomaniac who compared himself to God, or the reason I was in this mess.

Rolling my eyes, I chose the lesser of two evils.

"So how do you know everyone?" Micah asked, shifting forward in his seat. Sebastian glanced in our direction, but re-directed his attention to Emma.

I pointed at Emma. "High school."

Then I pointed at Sebastian. "I met him recently," I said.

It was weird to think that I'd only recently met Sebastian. My entire life had been a mess long before I met him, but the chaos seemed to grow the longer we stayed together.

Micah smiled. "I went to Connecticut Prep with Jared and Sebastian."

I wondered how much he actually knew about Sebastian.

I glanced towards Sebastian. He was still in an in-depth conversation with Emma about the Olympics.

"So where'd you go to school?" Micah asked.

"In the city," I replied, my drink holding more interest than him. God, what was taking Piper so long?

“I would have preferred to go to school in the city. The quality of girls was better.”

In my peripheral vision, I noticed Sebastian’s jaw tighten. Oh? So, Micah’s flirtations *were* irritating him.

Just to piss Sebastian off, I leaned towards Micah and finally focused my attention on him. “Why didn’t you go to school in the city then?”

Micah’s posture straightened. “My dad thought I’d get in too much trouble. Can’t have a senator’s son having any scandals.”

Just gag me. From the proud expression on his face, it was obvious that Micah wormed his father’s status into every conversation that he had. Probably because being a senator’s son was the only remarkable thing about him.

“Did you?” I asked, even though a part of me would rather chug my drink than continue this conversation.

“Did I what?” he asked, likely surprised I didn’t ask him about his father.

“Have any scandals,” I wasn’t even interested enough to force it to sound like a question.

“None that ever reached the press,” he replied, leaning in closer.

Was he the guy that had recorded a sex tape at Sebastian’s boarding school? Recognition passed through me as I looked into his brown eyes. Not from a sex tape, but from a serious headshot of him I’d seen online.

“Who’s your father?” I asked. Although, I didn’t really need to. There were only two senators per state.

“Senator Matthews,” his chest puffing up as he said it. As if he’d been the one who’d won the re-election.

I smirked inside. I wondered if he knew his father was involved with half the mobsters in town. Senator Matthews liked to preach that he was tough on crime, but he made sure no one dared touch the mob.

Before I could reply, Piper and the Wall Street Bros finally returned from the bedroom. Her pupils were significantly more dilated.

“Are you coming with us tonight?” she asked, sitting in the chair to my right.

“You going to 1Oak?” I asked, remembering her old routine.

“I got us a table at a new place in Meatpacking,” Micah said. “You should come.”

Piper’s eyebrows raised at his reply.

“Hey, Micah, could you grab us a refill?” she asked.

He shrugged, looking slightly annoyed. “What do you want?”

“Can you make us cosmos?” she said, handing him an empty glass.

He rolled his eyes and grabbed both our glasses before heading towards the kitchen. Piper stole his seat beside me on the couch and leaned close.

“What’s up with you and Sebastian?” she whispered to me.

“What do you mean?”

She smirked. “You can’t stop looking at him. Whenever Micah tries to flirt with you, you glance at Sebastian before replying.”

I couldn’t exactly explain my current situation. She didn’t even know that Sebastian was head of a rival mob. Let alone that we’d alternatively kidnapped each other.

“You’ve got the wrong idea,” I said, forcing myself not to look into Sebastian’s direction, and see if he’d overheard us.

Her eyes glittered. “If you say so. But you might want to worry about Emma. She seems to have her sights set on Sebastian.”

Piper tilted her head slightly, and I followed her gaze. Emma giggled at something Sebastian said and poked a

manicured finger against his broad chest. As if sensing my gaze, Sebastian's head turned towards me. He raised an eyebrow in my direction.

I snapped my attention back to Piper, and whispered, "She can do whatever she wants. I don't care."

Piper snorted. "Then why did you look so pissed off when you saw her flirting with him?"

I was not pissed about that. I was pissed that his brother had forced a death bracelet on my ankle, and that Sebastian was possibly behind it. I was pissed that I couldn't leave his house, because everyone wanted to kill me. But more than anything I was pissed at myself that last night I'd begun to let my guard down with him.

Before I could come up with a retort, I heard Micah's voice. "I couldn't figure out how to make cosmos, so I just mixed vodka and cranberry."

Vodka and cranberry juice? Was he planning on giving me a UTI? His soft, uncalloused hand met mine as he handed me the glass.

I wasn't seventeen and so desperate to get drunk that I chugged down whatever was in front of me. If I was going to drink, it was going to be exactly what I wanted or nothing at all. I set the drink down on the table in front of me.

Micah exchanged a look with Piper and then stared pointedly at his former seat. When she didn't move he sat down in the chair beside us with an irritated look on his face.

"So are you planning on coming with us?" Micah asked.

Sebastian had made it very clear why I shouldn't leave the house. And the rational part of me knew he was right. But I was so sick of listening to others. I'd listened to Sebastian, and stupidly trusted him to exchange information for money.

Look where that got me.

Tomorrow, I'd have to go back to reality. I would begin squatting in houses, and figuring out a way to extract this death bracelet without accidentally killing myself. For just one

night I just wanted to pretend I had a normal life. Pretend I was normal.

“I’m in.”

Chapter 34

An hour later, everyone was heading towards the front door. Emma's eyes stayed fixated on Sebastian as she laced up her high heels. When I slid on the heeled booties I'd stealthily brought from my bedroom, Sebastian grabbed my arm.

"What are you doing?" he whispered into my ear, his voice low and deadly.

"Going clubbing," I said, with a large fuck you smile.

"Selene," he growled into my ear.

"What are you going to do? Tie me to a chair so I can't leave?" I whispered back.

I yanked my arm away and finished working on the clasp of my suede heel. With that material, these heels would not survive the night.

"Piper," I called to her. "This is going to be so much fun!"

I shot a smirk at Sebastian, knowing he was furious that he had to keep his mouth shut in front of his friends. Couldn't let on that he was a big, bad gangster whose men were dying to shoot me in the head. That thought should have made me nervous, but tonight all I cared about was pretending my life was normal.

Sebastian's shoulders tightened before he turned to Jared. "We can use my cars to get there," Sebastian said.

Emma's face brightened. "You're coming now?"

Sebastian nodded, before pulling out his phone. He typed something into it, then opened the door to the garage. We milled in behind him, and his men immediately stood at attention.

One of his men moved towards me, but Sebastian shot him a warning glance. The man stopped in his tracks. Sebastian stepped towards the military grade truck that had brought me to the house. His eyes narrowed in my direction before he slid into the passenger seat.

I glanced towards the vintage Porsche behind it. I wondered how he'd react if I refused to even get in the same car as him.

Before I could decide, Piper winked at me and slid into the truck. Micah and the Wall Street Bros were moving towards the Porsche. Well, that made my decision. The last thing I felt like doing was listening to them drone on about gains in the market, and the inflation on coke. Ignoring Micah's meaningful glance, I followed behind Emma into the black truck.

As the car sped into the rainy night, Emma chattered happily to Sebastian. He nodded along politely, but glared at me in the rearview window. I ignored him and turned my attention to the one person I was happy to see.

After ten minutes of fighting through the rainy traffic, we pulled up to the entrance of the club. The line extended down the block even though the wood paneled awning barely covered the bouncer. Women were trying to protect the time investment they'd spent on their hair by huddling under miniature umbrellas or wallets on a chain.

"Don't forget your purse," Piper said as our driver stepped out of the car, brandishing an oversized umbrella.

Shit, I didn't have an ID. My stomach turned as I stepped out underneath the driver's umbrella. Piper huddled closer inside the umbrella, refusing to allow a hint of her makeup to come off her face before she sweated it off inside.

Was the bouncer even going to let me in? I hadn't planned on going clubbing when I'd done my makeup that evening. I'd found some foundation in my bathroom that had surprisingly matched my overly pale skin. Beyond a bit of blush and bronzer, my appearance was basically the same as it'd been since I'd arrived at Sebastian's penthouse.

As we slowly made our way to the bouncer, I looked closer at Piper's impeccable makeup. Fake eyelashes that blended perfectly into her own dark eyelashes. Winged eyeliner with such precision it'd make Sebastian's general contractor cry. And her staple blood red lipstick.

In between my lack of ID and makeup, I might as well ask the driver to keep the car running depending on how much of a power trip the bouncer was on. Under an umbrella, Emma squeezed in next to Sebastian. Her tiny figure was inches away from his broad chest, but his narrowed eyes remained focused on me.

Soon after, Micah and the Wall Street Bros appeared behind us. Micah strutted right up to the bouncer, and fist bumped him.

“You got our table ready, man?” Micah asked, moving close to me despite the fact that I hadn’t ridden with him here. From the look he was giving me, he’d interpreted it as hard to get.

“I got you, Micah.” The bouncer glanced at our group before continuing, “I need to see IDs.”

Sebastian smirked at the bouncer’s words. He knew I didn’t have an ID since Ray had stolen all of my belongings. And I knew he sure as hell wouldn’t help me get in. While Piper got her ID out of her Chanel boy bag, I leaned in closer to Micah.

“Hey Micah, I forgot my ID,” I whispered into his ear.

“She’s good,” Micah said with a jerk of his head.

The bouncer nodded back, and I smirked as I stepped towards the door.

Micah pulled on the handle, and I followed him into the pounding music. He nodded at a woman in a short, white body con dress. He whispered something in her ear, and she pointed towards an empty booth at the back of the club.

Micah grabbed my wrist and began tugging me towards the booth. His grip was possessive, as if he thought he’d be taking me home tonight just because he’d gotten me access to the club. Rolling my eyes, I allowed his touch for one reason only. The last thing I felt like doing was jostling drunk dancers to get out of the way. If he wanted to clear the crowd for me, I’d let him.

I grabbed Piper’s wrist with my free hand as we were swept into a sea of bodies dancing beneath the slat wood ceiling. I

could barely make out the red and black chevron floors underneath the gyrating bodies.

We pushed past women in tight dresses that skimmed their butts, and men with Rolexes that they hoped would help convince those women that they were someone they should go home with. Sweat pooled on my back as we pushed across the room. As tempted as I was, I didn't pull off the gloves. It was dark enough that I doubted anyone would see them, but I didn't want to deal with any comments when the flashing neon lights landed on us.

We jostled our way along the edge of the bar, trying to avoid knocking any plastic cups out of people's hands while making our way to a booth in the back. I was glad I was wearing black when we passed by a guy gesturing wildly at his friend, and he accidentally splashed a bit of whiskey on my stomach.

Why had I gone into debt getting bottle service? It didn't seem worth it to pay for drunken assholes to spill their drinks on me.

Micah tugged me forward, too consumed in surging through the crowd to notice. I didn't bother saying anything to the dumbass who'd spilled his drink on me; I was just grateful to approach our elevated booth and get out of the chaos.

When we finally stopped in front of the booth, a man with dilated eyes bumped into me, and I fell backwards onto a drunken dancer. I apologized to the dancer and righted myself with my usual speed. Thankfully, my reaction times were finally back to normal. It appeared whatever I'd been injected with had completely left my bloodstream.

While I internally celebrated the much needed win, Micah stepped towards the man who'd bumped into me.

"What the fuck, man? You need to apologize to her," Micah yelled at the man.

You had to be fucking kidding me. All I wanted to do was squeeze into the booth, and knock back a drink. We were *so* close. It was right fucking there.

The man's dilated eyes narrowed as he glared at Micah. "Make me," the bumper said.

Despite the man being a foot shorter and completely lacking muscle, Micah took a step back.

"Security!" Micah yelled frantically.

Sebastian and Emma came into view, just as the bouncer approached us.

"Throw him out of here!" Micah was pointing at the guy who bumped me, while yelling about why he should throw out the guy.

"What happened?" Sebastian asked me, his eyes narrowed as he took in the situation.

I rolled my eyes while speaking, "It's not a big deal."

The security guard raised his eyebrows. "Dude, he just bumped into her. I can't throw him out for that."

Micah flushed. "Then at least make him apologize."

Why was he making such a big deal out of it? Did he think I'd be more likely to sleep with him if he defended my honor? I'd give anything to be sitting in the empty VIP booth instead of dealing with this bullshit.

The bumper laughed and stepped towards me. "Oh, I'll apologize."

He reached a hand towards me. My body immediately tensed, waiting to react. If his hand got within a few inches of my body, I'd snap his wrist.

Before his hand could come into range, Sebastian grabbed it and the man's thin neck and yanked the man towards him. Keeping a tight grip, Sebastian whispered something into his ear. The man's face went from cocky to terrified. When Sebastian released him, the man stumbled back.

"S-sorry about that. I think I'm going to head home," the man stuttered out, his eyes flickering between Sebastian and I. Then he rushed out into the crowd, pushing people out of his

way. For his sake, hopefully he didn't shove the wrong person again.

"I had it under control," I said, raising an eyebrow at Sebastian. Was he expecting a thank you for something I could have handled myself?

He shrugged. "I know. There's just no need for you to waste energy on losers like that."

Micah stepped forward. "I was just about to do that, too. Sebastian beat me to it."

Sure he was.

"Can we just go into the booth already?" I asked.

Micah nodded eagerly, and the bouncer moved the velvet rope out of the way. The second I stepped into the half moon booth, I felt my body temperature lower five degrees.

Sinking into the brown leather booth, I felt the sweat on my shoulders drip onto the seat. Micah tried to put his arm around me, but I shifted away. He could interpret it as me being too sweaty to want to touch him if he wanted, or that I was irritated he hadn't fought on my behalf. As long as he didn't touch me I really couldn't care less what he thought.

Sebastian entered from the opposite side of the booth. Sebastian's eyes were alert, glancing around the room as if he were looking for an active shooter. I refused to dwell on the thought. All I was asking for was one night of normalcy before all hell broke loose.

After Sebastian sat beside me, Micah leaned towards me. "What do you want to drink?"

"Cosmo," I said.

Micah nodded eagerly and turned towards a cocktail waitress in a white body con dress that contrasted against her spray tanned legs. Maybe, I should ask for some shots too. At this point, I was completely sober, and in my experience the only way to tolerate a club was to get trashed. It was interesting if you thought about it: whenever we went clubbing we paid thousands of dollars to make it feel less miserable.

I felt the booth shift underneath me and turned my attention towards Sebastian.

His eyes were narrowed at me. But I ignored him, turning my attention towards the cocktail waitress moving our way with two bottles of liquor in her hand. Sparklers were attached to the tops of the bottles. Somehow, those sparklers were supposed to justify the insane markup on liquor.

Piper, who'd taken the seat to Micah's right, pulled out her phone and started recording a video. I reached over Micah and grabbed her arm when she was done.

"Don't tag me in it," I said.

The last thing I needed was to create a tracking beacon for all the people who wanted to hurt me. I wanted to forget my current predicament tonight, but I wasn't stupid.

"Why not?" she asked, while typing #girlsnight as the caption.

"I'm avoiding this guy. I don't want him to show up."

"Could be fun to throw another guy in the mix," she said while glancing conspicuously at Sebastian and Micah.

God, I wish I had only had to deal with some asshole trying to get in my pants. Of course the idea that Mafiosos and loan sharks wanted to kill me wouldn't even cross her mind.

"Piper," I said, the warning carrying into my voice.

She rolled her eyes, but she didn't tag me in her story. One of the Wall Street Bros approached our table. He nodded at Piper, and she immediately stood up. Although I had less than zero interest in snorting coke in the bathroom, I debated following behind her. The look Sebastian was shooting me told me I was in for an earful.

While Micah was distracted talking to the Wall Street Bros, Sebastian leaned towards me.

"Have you lost your mind, Selene?" he growled into my ear.

"Probably," I said at a normal volume, while reaching for a cosmo that the cocktail waitress had prepared for me.

Not feeling like talking about this anymore, I scooted away from him. Unfortunately, that moved me closer to Micah. His hand snaked out, and this time Micah successfully got an arm around me before I could dodge it. I leaned forward, but his sweaty arm stayed clamped to my back.

Fantastic, I had the Sweat Ness Monster to my left, and a pissed off gangster to my right. I didn't feel like wading into the throng of sweaty people, but leaving the table seemed like my best option.

“Bathroom,” I said.

I left my drink on the table. The last thing I wanted to do was spill my drink all over myself while I maneuvered through the crowd. Sebastian stood up as well.

I stopped my movements and raised an eyebrow.

“That wasn't an invitation,” I said.

His face darkened, and I knew he was about to start telling me why that wasn't safe.

One night of normalcy. One fucking night. Was that so much to ask?

He stepped towards me and leaned in so he could whisper in my ear. “We need to go home. This is-”

I interrupted him in a whisper, “Stupid? No, what's stupid was ever trusting you. Leave me the *fuck* alone.”

I spun around, and this time he didn't follow.

I elbowed my way through the crowd until I reached the bathroom. A few girls were gathered around the mirrors, attempting to fix their caking makeup. I stopped to look at my reflection.

That night, I'd just want to have one last fun night to blow off steam. My expression showed the opposite. My eyes looked dead, exhaustion permeating off them. My hair was sweat slicked against my forehead. Yeah, great final night of fun.

The door opened, and Emma stepped through.

“I just wanted to make sure you’re okay,” she said.

I rolled my eyes. “Just peachy.”

Her lips tugged into a frown.

I sighed. She had nothing to do with my problems, there was no reason to be rude to her.

“I’m fine, really. You can go back to the booth, I just wanted to get out of the heat,” I said.

“Bullshit,” she said.

I blinked, I don’t think I’d ever heard a curse word out of her mouth.

Emma shrugged. “Half of racquetball is getting into my opponent’s head, and it’s obvious what your issue is.”

I seriously doubted she could see too far into my head. Otherwise, she’d be running out of this room screaming.

“Try me,” I replied, somewhat curious about what she thought she saw.

“There’s something going on between you and Sebastian-”

“Wrong. Maybe you aren’t as good as you thought.”

As soon as it was out of my mouth, I knew it was too harsh. Yesterday, I’d put my guard down for the first time in a year. I’d relaxed around Sebastian, and the very next day he’d betrayed me. The last thing I wanted to do was talk about him. To remind myself of how completely alone I was. How I couldn’t truly trust anyone.

“Listen, I’m sorry. I’m just having a bad day, but I’ll be fine. You should go back, and have fun,” I said.

“If you want to talk about it-”

I shook my head, and her face softened.

“Okay, but come get me if you need anything,” she said.

I forced a smile at her as she walked out, but I knew I wouldn’t be taking her up on that offer. If there is one thing I’d learned, it’s that depending on anyone other than myself was a surefire way to get hurt.

I stared into the fogged up mirror. I wasn't even mad at Sebastian. Not really. He was Luca Amato's brother; it was inevitable I ended up hurt near him. No, what really pissed me off was that I'd been stupid enough to let my guard down last night. Pretended like the world beyond didn't exist, and we weren't on a collision course for disaster. But this morning had been a reminder that it was all just an illusion.

It was time for me to wake up.

I leaned onto the sink and closed my eyes, coming to the decision that I'd been putting off. It was time for me to squat in houses, and find a solution to my problems on my own. It was time for me to leave behind Sebastian.

I pushed off the sink and made my way back into the crowd. Shoving against the swell of bodies, I walked towards the back exit, already picking which neighborhood I would squat in.

A familiar face stepped in front of the exit. A face that made my stomach cramp up.

"Did you miss me?" Ray asked.

Chapter 35

Ray smiled at me, but his eyes were cold.

His threats from last time materialized in my mind. If I didn't get away from him, he'd drag me out of this club straight into a brothel.

I took a step back right into a very solid body. Large arms circled around my waist, and I instinctively kicked my heeled boot into a meaty shin. His grip loosened, and I spun out of his range. The fact that I hadn't heard a gunshot meant that they weren't willing to draw attention by using guns in the club. Good.

I elbowed into the crowd as Ray called after me.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you. Things will just end worse."

Yeah, I'd prefer not to be doing this either. But I'd rather attempt to escape even if it meant risking a worse beating if they caught me. Another man reached for me, and I snapped his wrist.

"God damn it," he growled, curling his body around his now useless hand.

I didn't wait to see what else he'd say. I elbowed into the crowd. Without turning around I knew more men were following me. But all of this fighting was drawing the attention of the crowd around us.

Before I could figure out the optimal way to use that to my advantage, more hands grabbed at my waist. I swung my head back, and it connected. But this time, the man clung on.

"*Fucking bitch,*" an unfamiliar voice growled behind me. A voice that I had no interest in getting to know better. I needed to get out of his grasp. This time I tried elbowing him in the gut. It was like elbowing a boulder.

"Do that again, and I'll break your elbow," the man said. He gripped my elbow hard enough to bruise, and I knew he could actually follow up on that threat.

While he held me in place, I glanced around at the crowd of murmuring dancers. A bouncer was approaching.

“Help!” I yelled out. A large hand clapped over my mouth, but the damage was done. From the security guard’s expression, he’d heard me.

The crowd parted as he moved through. But instead of forcing the man to release me, the bouncer turned his attention to the crowd.

“They’re helping me throw out this drunk. Go back to having fun.”

With his words, the crowd’s attention and any hope I had of getting out of this situation disappeared. The man’s grip on my elbow tightened painfully as he picked me up like a sack of potatoes. I held back a wince, not allowing him to get the satisfaction. Instead I silently allowed my body to go limp as they carried me out of the crowd.



When we were outside, the man handed me to another lackey. I was tempted to fight back, but knew he’d be expecting it. Instead, I kept still as the new man wrapped his hands tight around me while the other men surrounded me in the alley. I couldn’t see anything beyond the puddles on the cement and their oversized bodies.

But I still smirked at the man holding his limp wrist against his body. If he gave me the opportunity, I’d break his other wrist.

The twitchy man holding me probably thought I was leaving my body limp because I’d given up. But the truth was that I was saving energy. Energy I’d need when I found an opening.

When we were standing in the trash strewn back alley, Ray glanced over my outfit dismissively. “Our customers are going to want to see you in something more revealing.”

Nausea swam towards my throat as I visualized the brothel they’d be taking to in order to repay my debt. No, I need to stay focused. I needed-

A door slammed against the brick wall, and I readied myself to take advantage of the distraction. But the voice that carried across the humid air froze me in place.

“What the fuck is going on?” Sebastian snarled.

How did he know I was out here? When my struggle inside had taken place, no one I’d recognized was in sight.

Ray’s men tensed, but didn’t break their circle around me. I could just make out Sebastian’s dark hair right above their heads.

“Move, or I’ll make you.” Sebastian’s voice was darker than I’d ever heard it.

Ray nodded at the man who’d grabbed me in the club. He stepped out from the circle.

“We’re having a private discussion,” the bulky man said while moving towards Sebastian, “Go back inside, or else-”

Crack. Thud.

The circle dissolved around me as the men threaded out to see what had happened. My jaw dropped open. Ray’s biggest man was laid out on the concrete, knocked out cold. I hoped he drowned in that puddle of blood slowly forming around his face.

Sebastian’s expression was so dark that I would’ve taken a step back if I wasn’t being held. My eyes dropped to Sebastian’s hands: blood trickled from his right fist.

“Let her go,” Sebastian said, stepping forward. Five of his own men formed a half circle behind him, and it clicked into place how he’d figured out where I was. He must’ve had men in the crowd, making sure he was safe.

Ray inclined his head towards the next biggest thug of his. “Joe get her out of here while I handle this.”

Joe nodded, and moved towards the man carrying me. I sized up his roided out muscles. Probably, I could take him and the twitchy guy about to hand me off, but it wouldn’t be ideal since I couldn’t catch them off guard.

Joe flicked open a switchblade, and once again I hated not having a weapon of my own.

Sebastian's eyes narrowed at Joe. "*Touch her*, and you die."

Joe rolled his eyes, and reached for me with his free hand.

Bang. Joe's eyes widened before a glazed expression came over his veiny face. Blood poured out of his head at the same moment his lifeless body slumped to the ground.

For only a moment I gaped at Sebastian's smoking gun before the twitchy guy dropped me. I landed in a crouch, and darted away from the loan sharks. Sebastian's eyes softened when I stood next to him. He caressed a finger across my chin, and despite the dead man lying a few feet away from me, my body relaxed.

"I don't think you-" Ray began.

"Shut the fuck up unless I speak to you," Sebastian growled, all of the hardness returning to his face.

"Are these the loan sharks?" Sebastian asked me.

I nodded. What was the point in lying about it at this point?

"The ones who *hurt* you?" Goosebumps ran up my back at Sebastian's tone.

I said nothing, but he must have read it on my expression because his expression grew darker.

Sebastian snapped his fingers. Before Ray's men could react, all of Sebastian's men pointed guns at the loan sharks' foreheads. Sebastian ran his hand down my arm absently, but I couldn't keep the grimace off my face when he applied pressure near my elbow.

"Did they hurt you?" he asked, his expression murderous.

I shrugged. I could feel a bruise forming above my elbow, but I'd had worse.

"Who?" he growled.

"It's not a big deal," I said.

“It’s a *very* big deal.” Sebastian grabbed the closest man’s throat and lifted him in the air. “Who hurt her?”

Immediately, the man pointed at the guy Sebastian had punched. Sebastian dropped the man and jerked his head towards the unconscious man. “He’ll wish he’d stayed knocked out when I’m done with him later. Grab him.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” Ray warned, but there was a quaver in his voice.

Sebastian completely ignored him, instead focusing on the Mafioso dragging the unconscious guy into a waiting car. Even though beating the shit out of Ray’s men was something I’d dreamed of doing, I knew allowing this to continue escalating was a bad idea. At the end of the day the Underboss of the Amato family wouldn’t be dealing with the repercussions. It’d all fall on me.

I raised up on my tiptoes, so I could reach Sebastian’s ear. “You need to stop. I owe them too much money,” I whispered.

Instead of replying to me, he turned his attention to Ray.

“What’s her weekly payment schedule?” Sebastian asked.

“\$15,000. She went on a penalty schedule when she ghosted us,” Ray said.

My stomach tightened into a knot. The previous payments had been hard enough, now I needed to deal with \$15,000?

“Fine,” Sebastian said.

My head whipped towards him. “Um, not fine. I need to negotiate that number.”

“I’m sure Tony will love to hear that,” Ray spit out.

Bile rose in my stomach. Tony was the boss of their loan shark operation. If Tony was aware of my situation...

“What’s Tony’s phone number?” Sebastian asked, his expression completely unruffled.

“Like I’d fucking tell you. Do you know who you’re dealing with?” Ray said.

Sebastian stepped forward, fire in his eyes. “Do you know who the fuck *you’re* dealing with?”

Ray’s posture collapsed.

“That’s what I thought. Now give me Tony’s phone number,” Sebastian said.

When Sebastian stepped away to call him, Ray regained some of his bravado.

“Selene, you’re so fucking dead,” Ray laughed.

“I won’t be the only one,” I said with a smile. If I was going down, I almost pitied the nearest man.

Sebastian finished the phone call and walked back to us.

“It’s settled.”

“What the hell do you mean it’s settled?” I asked, fear pumping through me.

Had Sebastian just transferred my debt to the Amato family? The idea of Luca owning my debt made the bile rise towards my throat.

“Don’t worry, we’ll talk about it after. There’s something else we need to deal with first.”

Sebastian moved towards Ray and yanked his arms behind him.

“Selene, it’s time for you to repay this cockroach for every bruise he’s ever ordered,” Sebastian said.

My mouth dropped open. I’d dream of this scenario, but I never actually thought it’d actually become reality. Still, there was a reason I hadn’t done this before.

I shook my head. “It’s a bad idea.”

Ray smirked. “You’re right. If you even hit me, I’ll have my men beat you so bad-”

Sebastian ripped Ray’s arm up out of the socket. Ray’s scream echoed against the walls.

“None of his men will ever touch you again. Because I’ll repay *every single bruise* with a bullet hole.” Ray’s eyes

bugged out. “If they bruise your arm, I’ll shoot the man who did it in the *exact* same position.”

Ray’s breath became ragged.

Sebastian nodded at me. “Now, I want you to remember all the times that Ray’s men hurt you. And I want you to make him experience the same pain that you felt.”

God, this was a bad idea. Tomorrow, Sebastian could decide he’d had enough of me, and I’d be left to deal with Ray’s retribution. But the reminder of the helplessness I felt when they beat on me all those times left me yearning to make Ray feel the same way I had. Luca may have taken away my sense of control, but Ray’s men had done nothing but make the loss worse.

I swung. Hard. My knuckles connected with Ray’s cheek, and it sent his face sharply to the left. Sebastian held Ray’s sagging body in place.

God, that felt good. Like a sliver of what I’d lost was regained.

“Based on your injuries from last time, you have a lot of catching up to do,” Sebastian said.

He was right. I swung again. And when Ray’s blood trickled down my fist, I smiled.

Chapter 36

When Ray passed out on the concrete, Sebastian and I silently walked towards his idling car. Right before we reached the car, I spared one last glance at Ray's unconscious figure. Even from here I could see his entire body was a mess of purple and red welts.

I'd come so close to killing him. But when I saw the look of sheer horror on his face when I shot him in the knee cap, it crystallized my decision. I wanted Ray to think of me everytime he tried to bend his right knee. Everytime he looked at his fucked up his face in mirror I wanted him to feel that complete lack of control all over again.

The car door opened, and the man who'd bruised my arm stared back at us with a scowl on his face.

Sebastian cracked his neck. "I'm looking forward to this," he said.

"Don't be fucking stupid, she isn't worth Tony coming after you. Walk away from this or-"

Sebastian bared his teeth. "The only words I want to hear out of your mouth are an apology to Selene."

"That fucking whore-"

Sebastian gripped him by the throat and snapped his head to an unnatural angle. The man's eyes popped open like a coin purse before the life faded away from them.

Sebastian threw the man to the ground before opening the car door wider for me to enter.

I froze for a moment. Earlier, I'd decided to be strong, and go off on my own. I glanced at the scattered guards cleaning up our mess. I could try to run while they were distracted.

But... I didn't want to leave.

With a sigh, I slipped inside the car and leaned into the pristine leather.

“How’s your hand?” Sebastian asked, nodding at my bloodied knuckles. And then I thought about whose blood was on my hands. The reminder of Ray’s promise for retribution tensed me tighter than Sebastian’s ropes ever had.

“My hand’s the least of my worries. What the fuck did you agree to with Tony?” I asked.

Sebastian snorted and put up the presumably soundproof divider between us and the driver.

“Why are you laughing?” I growled. There was nothing funny about my debt to the loan sharks.

He smirked. “Because you’re so fucking predictable. Let me check your hand for injuries, and then I’ll give you the details.”

Sebastian held his palm out, and I begrudgingly set my bloodied hand on top of it. I don’t know why I did it; I was more than capable of handling it myself. I always had in the past.

Sebastian ran his thumb over my knuckles, and something inside me calmed. But calm was the last thing I could afford to feel.

“My hand is fine. Now tell me what you agreed to *without asking me first*.”

Sebastian leaned back into the seat. “I’m going to be handling the weekly payments. If anyone approaches you, there’s going to be a problem.”

For the second time that night, my body began to relax. But then the reminder of the world I lived in hit me like a punch in the stomach. Nothing in this world was free, and every favor had strings attached.

Look at what had happened with the loan sharks: at first they’d given me money, and hadn’t asked me to make any payments. Then when I’d racked up more debt than I could possibly repay the beatings began. No, I would not be wrapped up in another spiderweb. I refused the same mistakes again. And certainly not with the Amato family.

“And what do you want in return?” I asked flatly. There was no point dancing around the issue. I needed to know if he wanted more than I could give.

Sebastian raised an eyebrow. “If that’s how you want it, then make me an offer.”

Good, at least he hadn’t started off making demands. What could I offer that would fully repay this debt?

“I’ll give you information,” I said. And now we were back to the original reason Sebastian had approached me. “*But* only a little at a time, and the information I give will be valued at its true value. If the intel I give you in a session is worth more than \$15,000 dollars, you’ll give me the remaining value in cash.”

I needed to be cautious about how much information I doled out to him. Give him too much information at once, and he might decide that he no longer needed me and wouldn’t pay me. Then I’d be at Ray’s mercy with no income to back me up.

I held my breath as Sebastian thought it over. Feeding him minimal information at each session was non-negotiable, but I hoped he wouldn’t fight me over the distribution of additional cash. The power I’d felt when I’d beaten down Ray made me realize something: I wasn’t helpless. And I could steal back my power from the people who’d taken it.

But that first step required money in my hands. Hopefully, Sebastian didn’t prefer me completely dependent on him.

The windows went dark as we entered his condo’s car lift.

“Deal.”

I blinked. Really? He’d accepted the proposition without a single counter offer.

Sebastian stepped out of the car and moved around the side in order to open my door.

He looked down at my likely shocked face, and rolled his eyes. “Why are you so surprised? You’re always waiting for me to screw you over,” he said.

“You really want to have that discussion now?” I asked, as I refused his hand and slid out of the car on my own. It was insane that an hour ago, I’d decided to go back to slumming it on my own. And now here I was back at Sebastian’s apartment of my own free will. I needed to get my head checked out. I slammed the door to the apartment shut behind me, but he maneuvered around it with a smirk.

Sebastian leaned in, and whispered in my ear, “There are other things I’d rather have that mouth doing.”

“Like what?” I blurted out before I could stop myself.

His hands pressed into the wall above me, effectively caging me in without even touching me. For a moment all I could stare at was his hungry eyes, and tensed stomach muscles. It took all of my self control not to run my hands down his perfect pecs towards his growing package.

Despite my quickening breath, I spit out, “With you, the only thing my mouth would be doing is yawning.”

“Oh, this is going to be fun, Selene. But do you remember my rules?”

I thought back to our prior conversation. He’d insisted on sobriety, separation between our business relationship and sex, and a safeword. Check. Check. Check.

But, I’d also insisted that there wouldn’t be another time. Even if my body seemed to yearn for the exact opposite of that.

I pushed his arms away, and he immediately stepped away from me.

Sebastian called after me as I walked down the hallway, “You can walk away if you want, but I thought you said you wanted to have fun tonight.”

I spun around to face him.

“Who said I didn’t have fun?” I said, showing off my bruised knuckles to emphasize my point.

Sebastian leaned against the wall he’d caged me in a minute ago. There was something wrong with me for being jealous of

a wall. “I agree it feels amazing beating the shit out of someone who absolutely deserves it. But,” he pushed off the wall and his voice dipped lower, “it doesn’t compare to what I can give you.”

A sarcastic remark died on my lips when I looked into his eyes. A predatory hunger glowed in them that made my lower body tighten. He stepped towards me, and I felt my thighs clench together. His eyes held a promise. He would make every thought in my mind disappear with his touch.

I swallowed down the arousal and forced words out, “Whatever you have to offer, I can give it to myself better.”

Sebastian’s eyes grew condescending. “Aww, you can’t admit you want me. That’s okay. By the end of the night you’ll be screaming my name at the top of your lungs.”

“Fuck you,” I growled.

He laughed, derision piercing through. “Is that an invitation?”

I stepped forward, only a foot away from him. “I just know you can’t make me come, so I don’t want to waste my time.”

What the fuck was I doing? Why was I still engaging him instead of leaving him here? Even if he’d helped me earlier, I was still pissed. But if I walked into my bedroom alone, I’d just be denying myself. And I’d never been good at not taking the things I wanted.

Sebastian reached forward, and his fingers tightened on my jaw. He yanked my face up, forcing me to look at him.

I bit back a moan. The intensity of his eyes was setting my body on fire. Even though my entire body was completely covered, it was like he was ripping my clothes open with his eyes. The veins in his arms were visible, as if he was holding back the urge to throw me on the couch, and make me scream. And damn it if the idea of that wasn’t soaking my panties.

“Then try to prove me wrong. But I don’t even need to fuck you to make you come,” he said.

“No guy has ever made me come, I seriously doubt you’ll be the first one.” I glared back at him.

His smile turned wolfish. He looked at me like I was a lamb flailing in a trap.

“Want to bet?”

“Sure. You won’t win, so I have nothing to lose,” I said.

His grip released on my jaw. “If you win, I’ll give you something you want.”

“And if you win?” I’d learned not to make deals without knowing the consequences.

“Making you come *is* my reward,” he said.

I bit down on my lip, holding back a moan.

“Now tell me what you want if you win,” he said.

What did I want? Freedom from my father. This damn death bracelet to come off. To turn back time and prevent what had occurred a year ago. All things he couldn’t give to me.

This would be a good opportunity to test him though. To see if what he said about separating sex and business would actually be true.

“I want you to guarantee you’ll pay me an appropriate amount for my information,” I said.

“What did I say about work talk?” he growled.

Sebastian glared at me until I nodded my understanding.

“What would you pick if you were me?” I asked, genuinely curious. What would the man who had everything pick?

“For one day, you’d have to do everything I’d told you.”

His eyes held a promise of humiliation and pleasure. My entire body clenched. Decision made.

“Sounds terrible.” I said, trying to force my voice to sound dismissive. Because even though I’d decided to let him touch me, I couldn’t resist fighting against him at every turn.

“Liar. You’re already quivering at the thought of it. Too bad for you, that’s not my reward.” He smirked. “Now pick something fun if you win.”

Something fun? I glanced down at the gloves he’d given me earlier. He obviously had no issue buying things for me at that price point. To him, it was probably the equivalent of buying a latte. It used to be for me.

“I miss my duffel bag. If I win I want a new one,” I said.

My bag was the last relic of my old life. It’d seen me in my father’s brownstone, then my uptown apartment, and finally in shacks with no running water. Through the last year, it’d been the most consistent part of my life.

“The white one you always carried?” he asked.

I nodded. I’d prefer the old one, but it’d likely been sold to a pawnshop to pay off my debt. A new one would have to suffice if I managed to win this bet.

Sebastian’s face grew serious as he said, “Agreed with one condition. This wager is to make things fun. If you want to walk away at any time tonight, then use your safeword and this game ends with no repercussions.”

I snorted, “No shit.”

It was just a fucking bag after all. I could just steal a new one without breaking a sweat. Plus, if I’d previously refused cocktails when they weren’t exactly to my taste, did he seriously think I would do anything sexual if I didn’t want to?

“Good, I agree to your terms. But this isn’t a bet you can win,” he said.

“I think you’re all talk.”

“Aww, you are so inexperienced and naïve.” His eyes narrowed. “Time to fix that.”

Lighting fast, his hands gripped my lower back and the sensitive skin underneath my knees.

“I am not!” I growled back against his chest.

Sebastian's grip tightened on me as he carried me towards the dining room. "You're inexperienced with any man who can make you come. You admitted as much."

The way he was looking at me made my panties damper. I wasn't about to let him win so easily. I had to push him off his game.

"You know I'm all sweaty and bloody. Not sure how fun this will be for you," I said.

Sebastian dropped me on a dining chair. Then he braced his hand against the back of the chair and leaned close to my face. My breath grew shallow.

His long tongue slowly licked up my collar bone.

"You taste delicious," his breath was warm against my skin as he spoke.

A shiver ran up my spine.

"But I won't reward you yet. You were a very bad girl tonight," he said.

His hands slipped underneath my legs and upper back again. He pulled me into his chest, bridal style, and held me there while he sat in my previously occupied seat. Before I could even think, he flipped me upside down and dropped me on his muscular legs. His hand caressed up my butt. Flashbacks of the last time he'd spanked me filled me with anticipation.

His hands stilled, and he laughed softly to himself.

"Did I make you so addicted to spankings that you tried to bait me into doing it again?" He leaned in closer. "Admit it, you tried to make me jealous, so I'd punish you."

Damn it, his words were turning me on.

Instead of admitting it I spit back, "I wasn't even thinking about you tonight. I couldn't care less if you were jealous."

Sebastian's voice grew darker, "Don't lie to me. Every time Micah flirted with you, you'd glance over to see if I noticed."

"You imagined it, because you wanted to pretend all I was thinking about was you," I said.

“So I must be imagining that right now you’re quivering under me, just waiting to be spanked,” he said.

“I’m not!”

Sebastian chuckled again, but there was a dark undertone. “Bad girls don’t get rewarded. No spankings tonight.”

“Good! I don’t want you to spank me, just like I wasn’t trying to make you jealous earlier. I could give two fucks what you think!”

He tsk-tsked. “More lies. No, the real reason you kept looking at me whenever Micah was flirting with you was because ever since I tied you up in this chair you’ve been wondering what I could do to you. Wondering what would have happened if I hadn’t untied you. And seeing how you can push me to tie you up again.”

“That’s not true! I was relieved when you untied me.”

His fingers dug into my stomach, and he pulled me up so my back was flush against him.

“It’s true you were relieved. Because you knew if I’d continued, I would have made you addicted to me. You knew that every time you saw me, you’d want to crawl into my lap and submit to me,” he said.

I laughed, but I couldn’t put much force into it. “You certainly have a huge ego. I’ll never submit to you.”

He pushed my upper back forward, and his hands grazed the zipper of my outfit, “Then prove me wrong.”

Chapter 37

Slowly, the zipper traced down my spine. The contrast between the warmth of his hand, and the coldness of the zipper digging into my spine made me wiggle against him.

Sebastian laughed. "I've barely started taking off your clothes, and you're already begging for my dick."

"Am not," I growled, forcing my butt still.

He laughed softly against my neck, and I resisted a moan at the feel of his warm breath. As he lowered the jumper down my back, I looked down at the black bra I'd worn. On the skin below it, purple and green splotches intersected with small cuts.

I forced my gaze away from my bare stomach. A year ago, he hadn't been involved with this life. I imagined the girls back then had been perfectly spray tanned. Not girls getting beaten up for missing their loan payments.

He kissed my shoulder. "Don't worry, I think you look beautiful."

"I don't care what you think." How had he known my thoughts had spiraled that way? I hadn't said it out loud, yet it's like he knew what I was thinking.

He slid the gloves off my fingers and rubbed at the spot between my thumb and index finger. I yanked my hand away and reached behind me. I gripped at the bottom of his shirt and began to tug it up.

Sebastian grasped my hand and dragged my hand back. "My clothes are staying on. Tonight is about you," he said.

About me? Every guy I'd been with had been more focused on themselves than me during sex. I'd made the obligatory moans, and told them how amazing their performance had been. Then I went home and used my shower head.

"What if I get you off with your clothes still on? Do I win something else?" I asked, rubbing my butt against his crotch to make my point.

He worked the jumper down my legs. “I don’t come that easily,” he said.

“Are you saying I can’t get you off? I know what I’m doing.”

He reached down and unclasped my heeled booties. “When you’re with me, you don’t have to do anything. You don’t even have to think. Just do exactly what I tell you to do,” he said.

Sebastian yanked the heel off my foot. “In fact, it’s better that you don’t think. Because I know better than you, what you want,” he said.

He yanked the other heel off my foot, and slowly teased down the jumper.

I bit back, “You’re so full of yourself. First you tell me you can make me come when no one else ever has, and now you say you know better than me what I want. This feels like a whole lot of talk, and not much action.”

Sebastian threw the jumper across the room and leaned back up.

His long fingers slowly slid up my damp red lace underwear. “Yeah, you don’t seem to be having much of a reaction at all.”

“Fuck you,” I growled, feeling a blush rising. “It’s just sweat.”

His fingers circled around the dampness. “I guess I’ll find out soon.”

Sebastian’s hand left my underwear, and against my better judgment my hips arched towards them. He stood up and set me down where he’d been sitting.

“Giving up?” I asked, as he moved towards a side table by the couch.

He placed his finger against a scanner, and a drawer clicked open.

“I wouldn’t dream of it. It’d be unfair to send you to bed, and make you use your hands to get yourself off.”

“I don’t use my hands.” I immediately regretted the comment when I saw the dark look in his eyes.

“Oh?” He turned towards me, a wolfish smile on his face.

I felt a blush crawl along my chest. “It’s not a big deal.”

He closed the drawer and started moving towards me.

“Tell me how you get yourself off. Because I know you don’t lie in agony after a guy fails to make you come.”

“And why the fuck would I tell you that?”

“Because you’re dying to tell me. You pretend that you’re satisfied when you’re with a guy, but what you really want to do is tell him what you want.”

“If you know what I want, then why do I have to tell you?” I asked.

He was a foot away from me now. “Because it turns you on to admit that you aren’t the cold ice queen that your father’s men think you are. That you aren’t just a soldier, who doesn’t have needs. No matter how much you hide it, you are dying to have a guy put you in your place.”

“Put me in my place? Do you know who I am? It’s hilarious that you really think you could do that.”

He roughly yanked my underwear down to the bottom of my thighs.

“I know I can.”

Sebastian kneeled down in front of me, and with his teeth he pulled my underwear towards my feet. He tossed my panties to the side. My mound was completely exposed to him. Damp liquid leaked from me, and a small puddle of darkness spread underneath me.

“I want you to touch yourself,” he said.

“I already told you I don’t do that. Why the hell would I do it now?”

The white cushion was darkening underneath me. God, I hated that these chair cushions were white. That he could see

every bit of liquid that pooled underneath me. I couldn't hide it from him: I was completely exposed.

"Because you want to please me. You want to stop thinking, and just listen to me," he said.

"Yeah right."

"If you wanted to stop, you could say the word. You can say it and go back to your room and imagine what I could be doing to you."

I glared at him, but remained silent.

"Touch yourself." He looked down at me, the command in his voice.

I rolled my eyes, and my fingers grazed my pink clitoris peeking out of my mound.

"Happy?"

"Spread your lips," he ordered.

I blushed as I did what he said, pulling my slightly hairy lips away from each other so he could see the pink ridges underneath.

"Do you know how beautiful it is?" The heated look he was giving me made me squirm, but I kept my lower lips open for him.

"Stop making fun of me. You don't have to rub in the fact I didn't shave."

"I don't care that you didn't shave. I think your body is beautiful in any state."

He kneeled down and pressed his nose against the mound. His nose tickled against my hand as he inhaled.

"It smells like you," he said.

His tongue licked up my exposed clit like it was the most delicious piece of ice cream he had ever tasted. My internal walls clamped together.

"It tastes like you," he said.

Sebastian stood back up, his eyes on my opened clit as he said, "So perfect."

He crossed his arms before commanding, "Now touch yourself."

I glared at him, while I rubbed a finger against my clit. I felt so completely exposed. So inexperienced. I wasn't used to feeling that way.

"This is humiliating."

He smiled. "You like being humiliated. In fact, you crave it," he said.

"No, I don't!" But my walls tightened as I denied it.

"You can't hide anything from me. I see every twitch of your body, every ounce of liquid that pools out of you, the cute pink heat on your chest."

I couldn't argue with that, so I tried a different tactic. "This doesn't even feel good, I don't even know what I'm doing."

"You want me to show you how a real man can get you off?"

I shrugged.

"Not good enough, you're going to have to beg for it," he said.

"I'm not begging you!"

"Do you want me to watch you fail to get yourself off all night? I don't mind watching you fail over, and over again. It's kind of cute that you don't know how to do something so basic."

His hand reached down to my clit, and he squeezed it hard. Pleasure bloomed from his touch. A second later, the pressure and pleasure was gone, and his arms were crossed again.

"Or you can beg me to use my skills. Your choice," he said.

When I pressed into my clit, it felt like I was just rubbing a finger across the palm of my hands. Not painful, but not

exactly orgasm inducing. How was he able to touch the exact same spot, and feelings of pleasure tingled up my spine?

“Just fucking do it.”

Chapter 38

Sebastian shook a finger at me, a smile growing on his face. “That doesn’t sound like begging to me,” he said.

“What do you want me to say?”

“Tell me you can’t even manage to get yourself off. That you desperately need me to help you.”

“I’m not fucking saying that.” I tried to rub harder against my clit, but it didn’t seem to work. “Can’t I just use the shower head?”

“Shower head, huh?” he mused, leaning back in his seat. “Is that how you usually do it?”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing wrong with it. There’s just something about digging into a woman’s clit with your fingers. Pinching that one sensitive part she didn’t even know she had.” His eyes darkened. “You lose something without the touch.”

My breathing grew shallower at his words. This was agony. Having to hear about how much better a job he could, and not being able to actually manage it myself.

“Just do it,” I said.

He raised an eyebrow. I rolled my eyes while I corrected myself, “Please, touch me.”

“That doesn’t sound like what I told you to say. Or is your memory as bad as your ability to get yourself off?”

“You’re such an asshole.”

“You want me to be an asshole. You’re sick of all of your father’s men who say ‘yes ma’am’ and do exactly what you tell them to do. You’ve fantasized about one of them throwing you on your back, and putting you in your place.”

“Fuck off,” I growled.

“Say the magic words.”

If this went on for the rest of the night, we'd get nowhere. And from the look on his face he was enjoying watching me fail way too much. He'd been right before, I could say a word and go back to my room alone. But having a shower head get me off wouldn't be satisfying after I'd felt him lick my clit.

I could not believe I was about to say this. I closed my eyes as I mumbled the words, "I can't get myself off. Please, help me."

His finger caressed my jaw, and I opened my eyes. The teasing energy was gone from his eyes. It was replaced by a deep hunger that left my chair damp.

"Your groveling could use some work, but I'll allow it."

He stood up and stepped back towards the couch.

"Where are you going? I said it, now get me off!" I demanded.

Sebastian dug into the drawer from earlier.

"I said I'd get you off. But we're doing it on my terms." He pulled out leather handcuffs and arm restraints that he'd used on me when I'd first entered his house.

Sebastian walked slowly towards me.

"I bet whenever we have dinner at this table, you wonder what it would be like to eat there while tied up. Completely naked, and exposed," he said.

He nodded at me as he ordered, "Take your bra off."

"You do it."

He raised an eyebrow.

I rolled my eyes and reached behind me, attempting to unhook my bra. One clasp stayed hooked.

"Bad at taking your own bra off, too. What are you good at?" he said.

"I'm great at killing people. Which you'll see if you don't shut up." I yanked the clasps apart and pulled the straps off my arms.

His eyes were locked onto my breasts as he spoke, “I think you’ll make a much better slut than killer.”

I threw the bra at his chest. Sebastian smirked as it fell to the ground and he continued to stare at my exposed breasts.

“Nice tits.”

I hugged my arms in front of my chest, blocking his view. He grabbed my arm and yanked it behind my back. Hard, but not so hard that I felt like my shoulder was about to snap. More of a reminder of who was in control. And I hated to admit it, but my body responded to it. He yanked the other arm behind my back and pulled both my arms into the restraint. It clicked into place.

Next he kneeled on the ground beside me, and forced my knee to the corner of the chair. When he finished restraining my ankles to the opposite sides of the chairs and the bottom of my thighs to the edges of the chairs, he stepped back and looked down at me.

The arm restraints pulled my shoulders back and forced my breasts out. My legs were completely opened to him. He could just pull out his dick, and screw me if he wanted to. I had the safeword, but damn it I didn’t want to use it.

“Now you can’t hide your breasts from me. If I wanted to, I could stand here all night and just look at you for as long as I wanted to. And in this position, there’s nothing you could do,” he said.

Sebastian pinched my left nipple, and a sigh sank out of me. Then he immediately moved his hand away.

“How does it feel to be so completely helpless? To know that if I want to make you feel pleasure, I easily can. But to also know that if I felt like it, I could turn on the tv and just leave you tied up there,” he said.

I glared up at him, but didn’t say anything.

“Maybe I’ll turn on that tv show that you like so much. But I’ll turn you around, so you can’t even see it,” he said.

“Are you going to get me off or just tease me?”

“Tonight you are my plaything, and I can do whatever I want to do to you.” He pinched the other nipple. “Let’s see if I’m feeling generous.”

Sebastian’s fingers found my clit, and my hips rose to meet them. My legs shivered as he pinched a spot on the upper left part of my clit.

“It’s funny. You touched the exact same spot, and you felt nothing. But the second I touch it, your body starts quivering. I guess you need me,” he said.

“I don’t need you,” I growled.

His free hand tangled in my hair. He yanked my head back, forcing me to look up at him.

“Are you sure about that?” The look in his eyes sent another shiver down my body. I felt like a lamb in a hunter’s trap, and he was about to go in for the killing blow.

Sebastian dropped my head and laughed darkly. “That’s what I thought,” he said.

Keeping a hand braced against the back of the chair, he licked at the delicate spot between my neck and shoulder.

I moaned, embarrassment flooding me at my reaction.

I felt him smile against my skin, and then he sucked on that same tender spot. His teeth dug into my skin. I felt a sudden sense of pressure, then his mouth was gone.

Still leaning against the chair, he looked down at me. I followed his gaze. A red circle was forming.

“Did you just give me a hickey?” I asked.

“I’m claiming you.”

“Claiming me? You’re way too late to take my virginity.”

His finger caressed the mark on neck.

“After tonight, I’ll own you Selene. If you’re ever with another guy in the future, he’ll touch you,” Sebastian ran his finger along the edge of my clit before continuing, “and you’ll think of me.”

“If you convince a guy to go down on you,” he kneeled down as he spoke, “you’ll crave my tongue.” His tongue slipped over my clit and circled around a sensitive spot near the top. My eyes slammed shut, and my hips jerked up to meet him.

His mouth was gone from my clit. I growled my displeasure, and his eyes met my own with a smirk.

“You’ll try to explain to him where that sensitive spot is, and the entire time you’ll think of how I knew where it was without a word,” he said.

His mouth was back on my clit, and his fingers dug into my bare butt cheek. The pressure from his tongue increased. My fingernails dug into my palms, trying to resist moaning out my pleasure. Just when I was reaching the beginning of a peak, his tongue disappeared from my skin.

My eyes slammed open, and I glared at him.

He smirked, still kneeling on the floor in front of me.

“Do you usually close your eyes when you come?” he asked.

“Why the hell do you care? Just get me off.” I tried to force his head back down to my mound, but the restraints on my arms dug into my skin.

“If you close your eyes again, I’ll stop and leave you there for a half hour. Naked and exposed. Turned on, and pissed off,” he said.

“For fuck’s sake, stop toying with me and get me off.”

He caressed my cheek. “Keep your eyes open. I want to see the moment you experience the best orgasm of your entire life.”

“Best orgasm of my entire life? You shouldn’t make promises you can’t-”

A large finger entered my vagina, and all thoughts escaped my mind. His finger teased at the entrance, and I felt my breath quicken.

“What was that you were saying?” he asked, his finger moving deeper. “Something about making promises I can’t keep?”

His finger curled, and my walls caved around his touch. Another finger joined the first one. The two fingers flicked in opposite directions, and my hips circled around his touch. I kept my eyes open, but I refused to look him in the eye.

“I never say anything I don’t mean. You should remember that,” he said, his voice low.

Another finger entered, and he forced his fingers up against the back of my cave. Pleasure shot up around his touch.

“Found the spot,” he said. He pressed down hard, and a moan escaped me. “Now don’t close your eyes. Or else I’ll have to tease you to the edge and then stop right before you come.”

I was about to tell him what I thought about that when another wave of pleasure hit me. My toes curled, and my body tensed.

“Tomorrow, when you’re using your shower head, I want you to remember this moment,” he said.

My legs started to tremble. His free hand tangled in my hair and forced my gaze up to him. Dark and hungry grey eyes stared down at me. Pleasure clawed up inside me, and I glanced down. Tendrils of pain shot through my head, and when I glared back up at him, the pain disappeared.

“You’ll try to bring yourself to this point on your own, but you’ll only end up disappointed,” he said. The speed of his fingers increased. My entire body was shaking. I was so close.

“Because the only one who can bring you to this point is me,” he said.

He continued to hit the spot with an intensity that forced a high-pitched sound out of my mouth. A smirk pulled across his face.

“What was that? I thought you said that I made you dry as the Sahara.”

I opened my mouth to tell him what I thought of that, but his fingers picked up their speed. My body began spasming, and another embarrassingly high-pitched noise escaped me.

He leaned in closer, whispering into my ear, "I told you I'd make you forget how to speak."

I bit down on my cheek as the waves rocked me, trying to force out words, "Fuuuuccc.... Fuuuu...." His teeth grazed my neck, and my entire vision tinged white. I threw back my head and screamed wordlessly.

My walls crashed together, over and over against his fingers. He laughed, but I was too consumed by the overwhelming sensations rocking my entire body to give a fuck anymore.

When my walls stopped seizing and my breath wasn't coming out of me like I was in the middle of sprinting towards a target, I pulled my chin up from my chest and forced my gaze up. The intensity of his eyes branded me, and my stomach tightened. I was completely screwed. Those eyes would haunt me whenever I tried to get myself off with my shower head.

Chapter 39

Sebastian knelt down and clicked the restraints on my legs open. When he undid my arm restraints, I fell against his chest, my legs still trembling too hard to stand on my own. His arms circled around my back, and then he was carrying me across the room.

I could feel his massive hardness pressing into my leg. The idea of him attempting to fit that inside me sent a shiver of pleasure up my spine.

“Are we going for round two?” I mumbled into his shirt.

Sebastian’s laughter in his chest rumbled against my face. “No, you couldn’t handle it.”

He laid down on the couch, settling me onto top of him. I snuggled into the softness of his t-shirt, unable to find the energy to raise my head. I should be feeling embarrassed, but I was too tired to feel any negative emotions.

“Any pain or numbness?” he asked, grazing his finger down my spine.

“No.”

My entire body was still so sensitive, the touch of his hand sent another shiver down me.

“Shoulders tight?” he asked, his finger trailing back up my body.

I shrugged. They were always tight, but I couldn’t exactly afford a masseuse. His fingers dug into my shoulders, lightly at first. And when a moan escaped me they pressed in harder, finding that tender spot that had been nagging at me.

“I want to make sure you’re okay. I know that *this* can be overwhelming,” he said.

“I’m fine.” And surprisingly, those words were true. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt like this. Certainly not when I’d been spending money while trying to replicate Piper’s life. Even when I disregarded the nagging feeling I felt whenever I spent the loan shark’s money, I’d never felt at

peace. Piper and her friends had only ever seen a version of me. When I was naked and exposed in front of Sebastian, I'd felt seen in a way I'd never felt before.

God, he was the last person I should allow to see me at my most vulnerable. I shoved the thoughts out of mind and snuggled further into his chest. I nuzzled my nose against the soft v-neck and closed my eyes. The comfortable silence between us lulled me into sleep.



The next morning, I snuggled into a plush blanket that felt so cozy against my bare stomach. Awareness hit me that I was naked underneath the blanket. My eyes snapped open, and I noticed the hickey on my neck.

I pulled the blanket in closer to me, as the memories from last night came crashing over me. Moisture pooled underneath me as the reminder of Sebastian's touch seared my awareness.

"Want some coffee?" Sebastian called, and my head snapped towards him.

He was wearing a tailored black suit with a crimson button down underneath. I tried to keep from glancing down at the Italian leather belt on his waist. I hadn't been able to see what lay underneath his pants, and a part of me yearned to know.

A knowing smile covered his face as he watched me take in his appearance. But at least there didn't appear to be any awkwardness after last night. He wasn't trying to avoid me, or refusing to look me in the eye. No, he wasn't the type of guy to be ashamed by his actions. But maybe that wouldn't have been such a bad thing. Despite my body's reactions to him, deep down I knew he was the last person I should involve myself with.

I inhaled and mentally steadied myself. Finally, I nodded at Sebastian, and he began work on my coffee. When I was absolutely sure he wasn't looking, I quickly sniffed at my pits. The deodorant had mostly held up even though I hadn't

showered last night. A linen scent managed to override my musky dampness.

I took the finished coffee from him and inhaled the scents of cinnamon and cream. Warmth flooded my body as I took a large sip of the drink. God, what wasn't he good at?

Sebastian sat down on the chair to my left, his gaze rolling over my body. With my free hand I clutched the blanket tighter against me. Beads of sweat shivered down my body, but I knew throwing the blanket off was the last thing I should do.

He smirked, but before he could say anything his phone buzzed.

Sebastian picked it up, and his smirk turned into a frown.

"What is it?" I asked when he hung up the phone.

"I need you ready in fifteen minutes. We have to go."

A feeling of dread filled my stomach. "Where are we going?"

He shook his head and pointed towards my bedroom. "Unless you are planning on walking out the door naked, you need to get ready."

Ten minutes later, I was showered and dressed in black yoga pants and a black long sleeve t-shirt. I laced up black tennis shoes as I waited for him to put on his loafers. Unlike him, I needed to be able to sprint at a moment's notice. Although it was debatable how far I'd get with this damn death bracelet.

"Where are we going?" I tried again when he opened the door to the garage.

He remained silent as he stepped onto the polished concrete. The second I followed behind him, guns pointed in my direction. After a growl from Sebastian, they were immediately lowered.

I followed him towards the black military grade truck, watching his movements for any clues. The tenseness in Sebastian's posture told me that wherever we were going, I probably wouldn't like it. Something told me Luca would be waiting for us.

Once our car was moving into the city, I tried to cajole Sebastian into giving me a scrap of information about our destination. But he remained silent.

I speculated on my potential fates. Would they attempt to torture the information out of me before disposing of me? Sebastian had agreed to terms with me, but if Luca was in any way involved he'd attempt to sabotage the deal. Or was it possible that my father had come through, and they were doing a trade?

No. I couldn't allow hope to flood me. It would make me weak. Instead, I needed to focus on finding something to use as a weapon when they weren't looking.

Soon my view of the water disappeared, and was replaced by skyscrapers. My stomach tightened. Would this be my last time seeing the Hudson River?

Eventually, we pulled into a garage, and they shuffled me out of the car. Surprisingly without guns digging into my shoulder blades. But I could see the rigidity of Sebastian's back muscles through his suit as he strode towards the door. And that put me on higher alert than guns aimed at me ever could.

We entered a narrow hallway with cases of liquor clogging the artery. Photos dotted the wall of men clinking glasses together. It appeared to be some sort of bar. I wanted to grab onto a bottle to use as a potential weapon, but the guards were watching me too closely.

I could hear the distant sounds of clanging glasses, but the hallways remained suspiciously empty of any sort of waitstaff. Sebastian opened the door to a room on the right, his hand digging into the handle of the door as he gripped it.

We stepped into the dimly lit room. I spotted Luca sitting on a low white couch by a shuttered window. Even though I'd been expecting to see him, it took all of my willpower not to charge after him, and start punching him in the face like I'd done with Ray. Last night ignited something within me.

Sebastian silently moved towards a large wooden round table and took a seat facing his brother. He looked pointedly at the seat beside him. Now, wasn't the right opportunity to take my revenge. I needed to play along. *For now.*

"You can go," Sebastian said, nodding at the men who'd escorted me. Good, fewer people in the room would make it easier to take Luca out.

The men dipped their heads respectfully and left the room. I glanced down at the front of Sebastian's suit. The lines of a gun were noticeable by his chest. If it looked like my death was incoming, I could try to take Luca down with me. Or at least force Luca to use the lethal injection option on the bracelet before they could torture me.

Of course, the issue was that Luca could just as easily use the knockout function instead.

"How've you been?" Luca asked, his attention on Sebastian. When he spoke I noticed a line of concealer on his neck. It appeared he was trying to cover up the bruise Sebastian had given him.

Sebastian just stared back at him in silence.

Luca took a sip of his drink and turned his attention to me. A hardness came across his face, and he reached for his phone. I dug my nails into my palm, waiting for the stinging pain in my ankle.

Instead, a knock sounded from the door.

"Come in," Luca called, his focus shifting towards the door.

The door clicked open. I felt my mouth drop open, and I couldn't control the expression on my face.

Chapter 40

Ronan closed the door behind him, his dark eyes assessing the room.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I managed.

It made no sense. Ronan had always been my partner, a protector in a sense since I’d been a kid. But he was infinitely loyal to my father. There was no reason for him to be in the same room as Luca right now unless my father had ordered it. I shook my head. No, my father wouldn’t risk a war over me.

Ronan’s attention shifted to me. His hand was tensed into a fist, but he remained at his position by the door. I narrowed my focus on him. Something was wrong.

“We made a deal,” Luca addressed me for the first time, but I couldn’t drag my attention away from Ronan.

“With my father?” I asked, unable to keep the skepticism from my voice.

“No,” Luca snorted. “Your father never made contact about a trade.”

My eyes widened.

There was no way.

Ronan would never go against my father. Since I’d left the Regan family, he’d refused to assist me in any way until I returned to the fold. This didn’t make any sense.

“What did you do?” I asked Ronan, unable to believe that he was here without my father’s knowledge.

Ronan strode towards me, and silently examined me in more detail. His eyes darkened when they caught on my bruised hands. In my haste to get ready, I’d forgotten to wear the gloves. I moved my hands into the darkness underneath the table in order to hide the smattering of yellow bruises.

Ronan growled and turned towards Luca. “What the fuck did you do to her?”

Sebastian finally spoke, “That wasn’t from us. She got that from the debt collectors.”

Ronan’s expression turned pained, but I didn’t detect any surprise.

“Did you know what the debt collectors were doing to me?” I asked quietly. Of course Ronan had known about the debt. But had he been aware of the painful beatings, or terrifying threats? I’d always wondered when I’d gone to see Ronan if he was aware of what was happening to me. Part of me had hoped that if he was aware then he’d loan me the money. But I’d been too afraid of the answer to ever ask. Too afraid to find out the limits of our friendship.

Ronan’s jaw tightened. He’d been by my side on every mission since I was eight. So I could read all of his reactions better than my own: he’d *known* about the beatings from the beginning. Pain twisted through my stomach, but I fought through it. There was another answer I needed to know.

“My father knew, too. Didn’t he?” I asked.

He remained silent, and I had all the answers I needed. My father hadn’t attempted to save me when Sebastian took me. But I hadn’t expected him to do anything about it. By taking Sebastian hostage I’d dug my own grave. To assist me would’ve started a gang war.

But the debt collectors? My father could’ve given me a little protection. Encouraged them not to beat me all the times they did, and to threaten to sell me. Since I was eight, I had always done all the missions he’d asked. I’d sacrificed for him. And he couldn’t even help me a little?

What an asshole.

I sucked in a breath and forced my expression back to neutral.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, my voice not betraying a hint of the anger I felt.

“Where is the device?” Ronan asked, his attention on Luca, a threat in his eyes.

“On her ankle. But if you try to take it off, she’ll die,” Luca said.

Without a word Ronan reached down and pulled up my yoga pants. His eyes narrowed when the yellowing bruises were revealed, but he moved his attention to the death bracelet. Unlike me when I’d first discovered it, he didn’t try to yank it off. Instead, he ran a long finger around the silver bracelet.

“Do we have a deal?” Luca asked, and for the first time since Ronan walked in the door I turned my attention back to Luca.

A smirk spread across Luca’s face.

“What are you agreeing to?” I demanded, my attention snapping back to Ronan. It hurt that Ronan hadn’t lifted a finger to help me, but making any type of deal with Luca was dangerous. Even if he hadn’t protected me before, I didn’t want him to get hurt.

“If I do, Selene better not get hurt,” Ronan said, steel moving into his eyes as he glared at Luca.

Luca shook his head “I won’t make any promises about that. But if you cooperate, I won’t *kill* her,” he said.

Cooperate with what? What had Ronan promised?

“What deal did you make?” I growled, jumping up from the chair.

Ronan glared back at Luca, completely ignoring my words.

Ronan’s eyes shifted back towards me, and his eyes softened. “Fine, I’ll do it. But if she dies the deal is off,” he said.

“No!” I yanked at his arm. “You are not agreeing to anything with that little shit!”

Ronan shook his pale head. “I always promised to protect you.”

Protect me? Where had he been when Ray’s men were breaking my ribs? I pushed that thought away. Even though he

hadn't done the same for me previously, I would protect him by forcing him not to take this deal.

"No," I growled, and reached for his waistband where I knew he was hiding a gun. His calloused hand grabbed my wrist immediately. He knew me too well, he could predict my actions.

"I already made my decision," he said, keeping his hand firmly on my wrist.

"My father will kill you if he finds out you betrayed him," I said, while attempting to yank my wrist free. His grip tightened.

"And this asshole will kill you if I don't feed him information," Ronan said.

The old wood floorboards creaked, and I spun around. Ronan kept his hand on my wrist: he knew me too damn well. Luca was standing, a hand on his phone.

"So, you think I'm an asshole," Luca said. A cruel look came into his eyes as he glared at Ronan. "Would you like to see a demonstration?"

Sebastian sprang from his chair and started towards Luca. All of the muscles in Sebastian's body were tensed beneath his suit.

Luca stepped backwards, the look fading from his eyes. He put his phone back in his pocket.

"Fine," he said, his eyes on Sebastian before shifting his attention back to Ronan. "Your information better be good, or I'll kill her."

Ronan nodded. He released my wrist and stepped away from me before I could grab at his gun again. He strode from the room, and I tried to follow him. Sebastian grabbed my forearm, and with my free arm I elbowed him beneath his ribs.

"Don't," Sebastian grunted, but his attention was on Luca not me.

Without turning around, Ronan closed the door behind him.

I yanked my arm out of Sebastian's grasp and turned towards Luca. "If you do anything to hurt him. I'll-" I started saying.

Luca interrupted, the smirk from earlier coming back to his face, "You'll what? Under my agreement, I might not be able to kill you. But I can press a button on my phone, and have you twitching on the ground. Have you in so much pain you won't even remember what my name is. So tell me what exactly you plan to do to me."

I stepped towards him, wanting to punch that smirk off his face. Sebastian's arms circled around my waist and yanked me back into him. His rigid stomach muscles pressed against my back.

"Stop it, Luc," Sebastian said.

I tried to break free from his grasp, but the grip around me tightened.

Luca frowned, his eyes on the rigid arms wrapped around my waist.

"There is something else that needs to be discussed: your debt," Luca said.

"*Luc*," Sebastian growled, a warning in his voice.

I froze, but Sebastian's arms stayed tight around me. So Luca knew about last night?

"It's not your concern," I said.

"You're right, it isn't," Luca said. My body momentarily relaxed at his words, but tensed again when he continued with a glare at me, "As long as you're alive, Ronan will continue feeding me information. I don't care if you're on your back-"

I elbowed Sebastian in the stomach, trying to get out of his grasp and punch his brother. Sebastian grunted, but kept his arms firm.

"Shut the fuck up, Luc," Sebastian's tone was dark.

Luca's jaw tightened, but he didn't reach for his phone this time.

“What I was saying is that your debt is not my problem. However, I have a way for you to make some money,” Luca said.

“I already have a deal with her, Luc. She doesn’t need to do shit for you,” Sebastian said.

Luca shrugged. “And what about when Sebastian gets sick of you, and throws you to the street? What are you going to do then?” he asked.

The words gnawed at me, I’d been thinking through the same thoughts.

“That’s not going to-” Sebastian started.

“And why the fuck would I ever take a deal with you?” I interrupted him, directing my question at Luca.

Luca shrugged. “I don’t really care if you take me up on the offer or not.”

Bullshit. He wouldn’t be mentioning it unless it was a way to fuck me over. But, he had a point. I needed to diversify my income, because I sure as hell wouldn’t receive any money from my father now. I’d been seen out in public with Sebastian, and when it got back to my father that I was being paid to leak their secrets, he might send an execution squad after me.

I also couldn’t depend on Sebastian’s money forever. And wouldn’t it be sweet to use Luca’s own money in order to exact revenge against him?

But first I needed to find out if what he was asking for was worth the risk. After all, I’d just been advising Ronan against taking any type of deal with Luca.

“What’s the job?” I asked.

“Occasionally, I have some temporary positions that need to be filled. In this case, I need some waitstaff for a party at my house,” Luca said.

My eyebrows raised. Waitstaff? I’d almost expected him to ask me to re-organize his counterfeit money division, or

handle a political assassination. But instead he wanted me to act as a waitress at a house party?

“Don’t,” Sebastian whispered into my ear.

I couldn’t figure out what his angle could be. Yes, I’d be at Luca’s house and at his mercy. But he just agreed not to kill me as long as Ronan gave him information. I felt like I was missing something.

“What are the details?” I asked.

“Be at my house tonight at 6 pm.” Luca glanced down at the attire I was wearing and a grin came across his face. “I’ll have clothes there for you to wear.”

It clicked into place. Luca wanted to humiliate me. To show his men that he now had total control over the daughter of his rival. I clenched my teeth. I could handle it, and it’d be even more satisfying when I used the money earned against Luca.

Because I’d realized something: only one of us was getting out of this alive. And I’d do everything in my power to make sure it was me.

“Fine.”

Chapter 41

“You shouldn’t have taken his offer,” Sebastian said, when we were finally back at the house.

“Well, you should’ve warned me about *that*.” I made sure not to mention Ronan’s name. From the lack of people inside the room when we met up with Ronan, it was obvious that they were doing everything in their power to keep awareness of his betrayal contained.

“I couldn’t let it get out. And what does it matter? Now you’re safe.” Sebastian shook his head. “Or at least you were until you agreed to Luc’s offer.”

Safe? I almost snorted. Now, not only did I have to worry about keeping myself alive, but Ronan as well.

“What’s so bad about being a waitress? My ego isn’t *that* fragile,” I said.

“You know that isn’t the problem. This is a trap,” Sebastian said.

I had my own reservations, but I’d keep my guard up while I was there. But right now I had bigger problems: I couldn’t let Ronan be swept into this spiderweb. I flopped down on the couch with a sigh. Through everything he’d been like a brother to me. Although lately a disappointing one.

“Can you get *him* out of the agreement?” I asked.

“I won’t.”

“Why not?” I growled, leaning up on my elbows.

“Because I’m trying to keep you alive.”

“Why? Why the fuck do you even care?”

His face went hard as slate, and I couldn’t discern what he was thinking. He stood behind the couch, looking down at me.

“You shouldn’t care,” I warned.

Before he could respond I sprang up from the couch. I could feel his eyes on my back as I headed back to the safety of my room.



At five thirty, I was in the vestibule waiting for Sebastian to take me to his brother's event. I hadn't bothered with putting any makeup on my face, or wearing anything fancier than a sweatsuit. Sebastian strode towards me, a custom black suit accentuating his long muscular form. His eyes revealed nothing as we headed towards the garage.

Twenty minutes later we pulled into the garage of the Amato family's brownstone. When I stepped out of the car, the similarities between this time and last time struck me. Just like last time, Sebastian leaned against a nearby car and watched me getting searched for weapons by his men.

And just like last time, I was entering this marbled hallway needing money, and depending on the Amato family to give it to me. Would they try to screw me over this time, too?

Sebastian and I stepped into the elevator, and I wondered if this time when I left that I would be holding a gun against Sebastian's head. Unlikely, considering the death bracelet.

We stepped out of the elevator on the 2nd floor and headed to the room the butler had instructed me to enter. Sebastian's expression was tight as we moved down the wainscoted hallway.

When we reached the door, he reached for the bronze handle.

"You don't have to come in, Sebastian," I said.

He shook his head. "You don't understand what you're getting into."

Sebastian yanked the door open, and a scantily dressed woman sashayed towards the door. Her heavily made up eyes were cold as she assessed me, before turning her attention to Sebastian.

"Hello sir," she said with a strong Russian accent. "Would you like me to send one of our women to welcome you?"

Sebastian ignored the question. “Where will Selene be working?” he asked.

The woman pulled a cell phone out of her baby blue crop top and swiped across it with her long acrylic nails.

“Selene, this is your first time working here, right?” she asked, not looking up from her phone.

“Yes,” I replied.

“You need to do the examination before you get dressed,” she said.

“Examination?” I asked, completely confused. Was I expected to list what ingredients went into a Negroni? Or tell her what paired best with an Aperol Spritz?

“Dr. Fitzgerald’s waiting in there.” She jerked her head towards a door on her left. Well, that didn’t answer my question, but I didn’t like the direction it was going.

Sebastian’s eyes were stormy, and his arm muscles tensed.

“You don’t have to do this, Selene. I can have Michael take you back to the house,” he said.

I turned my attention back to the woman. “What kind of examination?” I asked.

“We need to make sure none of the women working here have STDS,” she said.

My voice was a low growl, but internally my heart was beating out of my chest. “I must be in the wrong place. I’m not having sex with anyone.”

She shrugged. “Fine, you don’t have to. But it’s required for you to get examined just in case.”

I thought back to Luca’s description of the job. Waitstaff my ass.

“If I decide to go along with this, *which I probably won’t*, what exactly am I expected to be doing?” I asked, crossing my arms. With every word out of this woman’s mouth, Sebastian’s offer sounded more and more tempting.

“You’ll be delivering drinks and food.”

“So I don’t have to have sex with anyone?” I asked, skeptical.

“No. But the men pay well, so you’ll probably end up participating.” It wasn’t worth fighting her on that last point, it was obvious she thought I was just making a fuss to save face.

“So even though I’m not having sex I still need an... examination?”

She rolled her eyes before nodding. Yeah, this was a woman who did not like having to repeat herself.

I took in the woman’s six inch high heels and bare midriff. God, I was so tempted to take Sebastian up on his offer. I glanced back at Sebastian.

“I’m serious, Selene. You don’t have to do this if you don’t want to. You’ll make plenty of money if you just feed me information,” he said.

As much as I wanted that to be true, I couldn’t depend on his generosity. The only person I could depend on was myself. I dug my nails into my palms.

“I won’t be having sex tonight. Is that going to be an issue?” I asked, attempting to detect any lies in the woman’s facial expression.

Her face twitched. “I really don’t care.”

That was true.

“And no exceptions on the examinations?” I asked.

I didn’t care about the examination itself: it was never a bad idea to have a gyno exam. But the likelihood that all of this information would get back to Luca and his men made my stomach crawl.

This time she couldn’t keep from rolling her eyes. “No exceptions.”

Sebastian crossed his arms. “Make the exception,” he demanded.

The woman frowned. "I'm sorry. I really can't."

Sebastian opened his mouth, but before he could speak I grabbed his arm.

"It's fine," I said.

The last thing I needed was to be ostracized for getting special treatment. I walked towards the door she'd motioned to earlier and Sebastian followed behind me.

"Planning on joining me?" I asked, trying to force a laugh into my voice.

Sebastian stopped in front of the door. "I'm serious, Selene. You don't have to do this."

I shrugged as I opened up the door.

"If you need anything, just yell. I'll be outside the door," he said.

An Italian woman in her mid-sixties stood on the other side of the door. She wordlessly gestured to a small daybed, and began her onslaught of questions. When she got to the question about how long it'd been since I'd had sex, she looked at me with disbelief in her eyes when I told her it'd been three months. Technically, Sebastian and I *didn't* have sex last night. And there was no way I was volunteering any information.

The last thing I needed was for the details of how Sebastian had dominated me physically and mentally to get around.

While the doctor began the physical examination, I thought back to the last time I'd had regular, standard sex.

Three months ago when Ray's threats had gotten more serious but hadn't yet materialized, I'd been in my denial phase. I was in denial that I couldn't just live a life like Piper. I'd mimicked her life. The normal life I'd always yearned for since I was a kid. I'd gone to clubs with her. Bought bottle service with a 500% markup. Bought Chanel like it was candy. And I didn't work at all in order to pay for any of it.

I'd also been going for guys like Piper would have. The last one was a junior partner at a prestigious law firm. At the club

he'd yelled in my ear about how he was going to the youngest senior partner at the firm. And the hand on my leg was a whisper of what he'd do to me later.

If I'd been more sober, I would have realized that it was a whisper of how unsatisfying the sex would be.

An ad on Spotify lasted longer than he did.

I snapped back to attention as the gyno finished inspecting my IUD. This exam had gotten me more wet than Mr. Junior Partner had. And that was saying something, since I cringed in pain when the metal speculum was pulled out of me.

Predictably, all the STD tests came back negative, and I headed back out the door. Even though I'd barely revealed anything, I cringed internally at the thought that all of this information would be relayed to Luca and his men.

Sebastian was leaning against the wall, waiting to make sure I was okay just as he had promised.

"Were you listening?" I asked, leaning against the opposite wall.

"The doors are too solid for that." True, they didn't build homes like they used to. It was insane to think that a brownstone from the 1800s had better soundproofing than an overpriced new development.

I shook my head. "You can go. I think I need to get to work."

His face darkened, as he stepped away from the wall.

"This isn't like our game Selene. I won't be here to protect you if someone tries anything."

Chapter 42

“I can take care of myself,” I said.

One of Sebastian’s eyebrows arched up, and he looked like he was about to say something sarcastic. Instead he just shook his head, and with a seriousness in his eyes said, “Just be careful.”

When he was outside I moved my attention to the woman from earlier. She wordlessly nodded towards a door behind us, and I followed her through it. Fifteen women were sitting in front of makeup mirrors in varying states of undress and makeup.

The Russian woman who told me to call her Anya went over expectations for my appearance. When she got to the part about makeup, I interrupted her.

“I didn’t bring any makeup with me. Can’t I just go out like this?” I asked.

Anya raised her eyebrows at that, her oversized fake eyelashes still touching the bottom of her brows.

Before I could respond, she gestured for me to sit in a white hard-backed chair in front of her. The second I sat down onto the uncomfortably hard chair, Anya began applying a foundation that was slightly too dark for my overly pale skin.

“So how did you get Sebastian?” she asked, her Russian accent shining through.

“What do you mean?” I said, turning to face her.

Anya roughly yanked my face back towards the mirror and brushed foundation on my jawline.

“He never takes us up on our offers to service him.” Her brows furrowed as she stared at my face like it’d personally offended her.

“I’m not sleeping with him, if that’s what you’re asking,” I said. Which was technically true, we hadn’t had sex together. And I hadn’t decided if we would in the future. Although, I wondered if it was smart of me to reveal any information

about Sebastian and I. If some of these women were willing to sell their bodies, it made sense they'd be open to selling information about a woman they weren't even friends with.

The nearby women began laughing. They didn't believe me, so it didn't matter, anyway.

"You're funny. The men will like you," Anya replied, her artificially plumped lips formed a stiff smile.

She moved onto bronzer, and began applying it. "It's important you don't underprice yourself. We don't want to undercut all of our pricing," Anya said.

"I'm not planning on selling myself," I said while trying to keep my face as still as possible.

There were more laughs.

"All the girls say that. Then they see how much money they can make, and change their mind," Anya said.

"I'm serious."

When Anya finished my makeup, another woman took over my hair. She transformed it from frizzy blonde curls to sleek straight hair.

When they were done, I peeked into the mirror. Definitely not an image I'd be uploading to Instagram. My eyelids were brushed a pale blue with a fluorescent neon blue in the creases. Thick black winged eyeliner encircled my eyes, and long fake eyelashes framed them. The foundation had already been too dark, but the contrasting bronzer almost washed me out. To finish the look, I had a bright red lipstick that had been over lined in order to make my lips look fuller.

"You should have Sebastian buy you lip injections," Anya said, assessing me with her arms crossed.

I ignored that statement and asked where the clothing was. Anya led me to an armoire in the back, and I would have blushed if not for the overly bronzed foundation covering up any hint of redness.

"Do I really need to wear lingerie?" I asked, staring at the lacy red bra, and high waisted matching panties.

Anya just stared at me.

With a sigh, I pulled off my sweatpants. Russian swear words echoed behind me.

I turned around, and Anya was staring at the bruises on my legs. I'd attempted to cover it up with bronzer before we left the house, but it appeared I hadn't been totally successful.

As she continued to stare at my legs, a softness bled into her voice. "Did Sebastian do that to you?"

I shook my head. "No, some debt collectors I owe money to," I said.

A look of understanding came over her face. She threw her bony arms around me and pulled me in close.

"It's going to be okay. You'll make enough money tonight that they'll fuck off for a while," Anya said.

From the conviction behind her words, I almost believed her. My body relaxed as she released me and sprayed concealer on my now naked body.

As Anya began concealing the bruises a frowning woman shared tips about a few of the men. Preferred positions, favorite words to whisper to them, and how much they usually tipped.

In all the years I'd been working under my father, I couldn't remember ever feeling this embraced. My father's men always held me at a distance. Aware of who my father was, they were a mixture of fearful and jealous of what I could do. In my school life, I'd always felt like I was looking in on a different world. No one there knew about the illegal assignments I got up to after school. And it was hard to relate to them when their biggest problem was whether they'd pass the chem final.

But these women saw a girl who they could get nothing out of, and they still helped me. Even though I had absolutely no intention of participating in any salacious activities that night, I felt a sense of togetherness.

And a sense of guilt for the judgment I had passed on them earlier.

When the spray dried, I slipped on the lingerie. The cheap material itched at my skin, but this time I didn't complain or protest. It was important to me that they didn't think I was judging them for what they were doing. I picked up the pleated black skirt that barely covered my butt, and the matching crop top that was so low cut that the red lace bra showed.

Although, I definitely was judging the men who insisted on this uniform.

To finish my look, I slung on some six inch stiletto heels that would have me towering over a lot of the men tonight. I checked out my profile in a gold leafed, full length mirror leaning against the wall. If I didn't know it was me, I wouldn't even recognize myself.

The power suits I used to wear were replaced by a cheap, midriff baring crop top, and a wanna-be schoolgirl skirt. Pale skin was replaced by a bronzed spray tan.

When I'd gone to work for my father, I'd hidden any hints of sexuality. I always tried to appear like one of the guys, as if showing any signs of femininity was a weakness.

As I looked in the mirror at my bare stomach, and high cheekbones I wondered if maybe I should have thought of it as a weapon instead.

When everyone else was ready, I followed behind the similarly dressed women into the hallway.

"Go up to any man with an empty glass and find out what they'd like to drink. There are some men who have preferences for other girls, but I'll help you with that," Anya instructed.

I found myself smiling as I followed her into the hallway.

We strode into a room two doors down, and I immediately recognized one of the faces. Sebastian leaned against a marble fireplace. Three men sat nearby him, reverent yet nervous expressions on their faces as they spoke in hushed tones.

A familiar feeling wormed inside of me. My father's men had looked at me with those same expressions. And even though I was in glorified lingerie, I felt no envy for Sebastian's

position. There was something to be said about knowing the people around you saw you as a person rather than a tool. When you didn't have to wonder if they were saying something to you because they thought it would elevate their position.

Sebastian's grey eyes hooked on me as I moved into the large sitting room. They drank in the low cut tank, and the pleated skirt that barely covered my red underwear. He crooked his finger, telling me without words to come over right now.

Did he think I was a dog that he could say 'here' to, and I would come running?

I switched directions, following Anya towards five men circled around a green felt poker table.

"Would you like something to drink?" Anya asked the suited men.

I smirked at Sebastian and then turned my attention back to the men. An older man with a receding hairline grabbed my arm.

"Fifteen hundred," he grunted.

"If you don't take your hand off me, I'll break it," I growled. I might have enjoyed irritating Sebastian, but no man could grab my arm and speak to me disrespectfully. Well, apparently except for Sebastian.

"I like it when they fight. Three grand." He kept his hand on my wrist, but loosened his grip.

Sebastian stepped in front of me, anger etched into the hard lines of his face.

Chapter 43

“Elio,” Sebastian growled, the command apparent from a single word.

The calloused hands were off my wrist in an instant. The older man looked fearfully up at Sebastian. “Sir, I apologize. I didn’t realize she was yours.”

Without sparing him another glance, Sebastian grabbed my arm and yanked me out of the room. He led me down the hallway to an empty bedroom and locked the door behind us.

“Are you okay?” Sebastian asked, his entire body tense.

“I’m fine,” I said, sitting on the end of the king sized bed. My feet were already aching from the heels.

“You don’t know what these men are capable of. You need to be careful.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’ll be fine, you can go back to your party,” I said.

Sebastian’s demeanor shifted. His gaze turned from wary to sensual, and damn it if my body didn’t respond.

He stepped towards me. “You don’t want me to leave.” His eyes glimmered as he drank in my outfit. “You want me to put you in your place.”

The hungry look in his eyes left me clenching my thighs together.

“You know the word that ends this. Nod your head, if you remember,” he said.

Damn it, I did want this. I’d been craving his touch since the moment I started baiting him in the other room. And who was I to deny myself?

This was just sex. I could maintain an emotional distance. I’d never had any trouble doing that in the past.

Once I nodded, he slowly unbuckled the unadorned leather belt he was wearing.

I raised my eyebrows. “Wow, no foreplay this time?”

Sebastian slid the belt off the loops of his pants and sat down on the bed beside me. Realization came to me of what he had in mind when he snapped the two ends of the belt together.

“Bend over my knee,” he said.

“Why the hell would I do that?”

He just smirked.

And damn it, if the promise in his eye didn't have me following his orders. My stomach caressed his muscular thighs, and my head was dangling towards the floor. My breath caught as his hand slowly pushed up the pleated skirt.

His fingers brushed against the red lace panties, then moved lower towards my slit. I felt his finger press against the dampness emanating from the thin cheap lace.

Sebastian laughed darkly. “It feels like you want me to belt you.”

His long fingers hooked around the cheap panties and slowly pushed them down. When they were dangling around my ankles, I let out a moan. My thighs clasped together as I looked at the sopping underwear clinging to the cheap hooker heels.

The leather of his belt brushed against my bare bottom. My body tensed in anticipation.

“Say yellow to warn me if the pain is getting close to your limit. And you know the word that ends this completely,” he said.

I nodded, my head bobbing towards the wood floors. God, my body was shivering from horny anticipation.

“Answer me when I speak to you, slut,” he said.

Another moan escaped me.

“Wrong answer,” he said. Sebastian brushed the belt over my butt, leaving a goosebump trail.

“Please,” I gasped out, and then blushed. I was glad my face was facing away from him, so he couldn't see my reaction.

He rubbed the top of my head softly. “Good girl.”

The belt lashed against my butt. I gasped at the pain bubbling from the impact, but just as quickly, his hand massaged the spot. The pain dispersed into pleasure. I couldn’t hold back a moan as the sweetness of the pain overcame me.

“You’re secretly a pain slut,” he said with a chuckle.

Another smack, and again that bubbling euphoria and pain.

Fuck. Maybe he was right.

“Tell me what you should’ve done back in that room,” he said.

“Screw you,” I bit out.

He laughed darkly. “You *want* me to whip you harder, you little brat.”

The belt barely grazed my butt, and I jumped.

“Aww, it’s so cute watching you squirm. But I’m not giving you what you want until you ask for it,” he said.

“Fuck off.”

“Then I’ll stop.”

I scrunched my eyes closed, and screamed, “Fucking do it!”

The belt smacked hard against my butt cheek. Agony and pleasure welled up inside of me in a sweeter cocktail than I’d ever tasted. Liquid leaked from my eyes, but the tears were a sweet release of the tension building up inside of me.

“What color is the sky?” Sebastian asked, a demand in his voice. My mind was fuzzy for a moment from the high of the smack, but I realized he was reminding me to use my safeword if I wanted this to end.

“Blue,” I said. I never wanted these sensations to end.

“Good, now tell me what you should’ve done back in that room.”

“Someone sounds jealous,” I gasped out.

The belt whipped against my butt cheek so hard that my toes curled into the hard synthetic heels.

“You sure you want to push me?”

For some reason, I *did* want to push him. To see how much I could handle, and how far I could take this. What was wrong with me? His hand roughly pushed against my slit.

“Hey pain slut, you’re leaking all over my pants,” he said.

I heard the belt fall to the bed, and his arms encircled my stomach. He pulled me up, and I glimpsed his narrowed eyes before he dropped me onto my knees in front of him. My burning butt ached against the coldness of the floors.

“Time to clean up your mess,” he said.

Sebastian pointed at the gleaming wet spot on his pants.

“Lick it up,” he ordered.

I opened my mouth, but instead of softly licking the dripping liquid, I rose on my haunches and bit down hard on his leg.

He raised an eyebrow.

“I’m just returning the favor for the hickey,” I said.

Sebastian smiled, exposing a dimple. It was like the heavens were shining down on me, and all I wanted was for him to keep looking at me like that.

“Fair enough, but are you going to clean up your mess?” he said.

The honey in his voice made me want to follow his every command. I poked out my tongue and began to softly lick at my liquid on the thigh of his pants. I wanted this so badly. What was wrong with me?

“Faster,” he said.

His pant leg muffled my moan.

“This is a much better use for your mouth. In the future, you should talk less, and suck more,” he said.

As humiliating as his comment was, I wanted even more. Instinctually, I sucked at the fabric, creating a vacuum with my mouth. A growl erupted above me, and I sucked harder until he tugged my hair so I was looking up at him.

“Good girls get rewarded.”

Chapter 44

Sebastian's hand moved towards my clit. My body ground against his approaching touch.

"So desperate for me. It's kind of pathetic," he said.

His finger circled around my sensitive spot, and I bit down on my lip to keep from crying out my pleasure.

A buzzing sound rang out in the room before a familiar accented voice spoke from a speaker, "Sir, your brother is requesting your presence."

Sebastian glared at the offending noise, but his fingers continued to work on my spot. A small part of my mind knew I needed to be alert. But a larger part of me felt safe in this room. That nothing could touch me when he was in control of me.

"Stand up," he growled at me, while continuing his ministrations on my clit.

My legs were shaking as I forced my legs into a standing position. When I tumbled towards the ground, a large arm shot around my waist. His hand on my clit didn't even miss a beat.

We were moving towards the far wall. He was half carrying me, as my legs didn't seem to want to cooperate with the high heels. I leaned into his hard chest as we moved towards a small intercom. His hand left my clit, and he rubbed his sticky hand against my mouth. I moaned against his touch.

"If you don't want her to hear you, then cover your mouth while I make you come," he said.

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep quiet.

Sebastian moved his hand towards the intercom, but paused before pressing it. "Snap your fingers if you want to stop. And if you don't want to do this, use your safeword," he said.

Like hell I'd be using my safeword. I might murder him if he didn't let me come.

He pushed the intercom button then moved his fingers back to my clit. I covered my mouth with my hand.

“Tell Luc, I’m busy,” Sebastian said.

“I apologize sir for interrupting you.” The familiarity of the voice clicked into place. It was Anya. After I’d insisted I wouldn’t be having sex tonight, here I was being fucked by Sebastian’s hand. The idea that she might hear made my internal walls press together even tighter. I dug my fingers into my cheeks to keep from moaning.

Anya continued speaking, “However, he said it’s important that you come see him right now.”

Sebastian sunk his teeth into the tender section between my neck and shoulder. I bit down on my tongue to keep silent.

When I caught my breath, I removed my fingers and mouthed, “Cheater.”

He just smirked back before going in for another hard bite above my right breast. I shoved my fingers into my mouth to muffle my moan. “I play dirty,” he growled into my ear.

“Um, sir,” Anya’s voice echoed from the speaker. “I apologize, but I need you to come out.”

“I’ll be there later,” Sebastian grunted while his finger circled a sensitive part on my clit.

I shoved my fingers further into my throat to keep silent. He smirked and pinched my clit hard. I bit down on my fingers, but his smirk only deepened.

“Luca wanted me to relay this message: ‘If you aren’t here in ten minutes, *you* won’t be the one in trouble’,” Anya said.

Sebastian’s arm stiffened against my stomach, and his fingers stopped moving. I pulsed my hips against his motionless hand.

“Fucking asshole,” he muttered too softly for the intercom to pick up. “Fine, I’ll be there,” he finally said at full volume before turning the intercom off.

I took my fingers out of my mouth and licked up the drool pooling beneath my lips.

“Think you can get me off in ten minutes?” I asked.

The glimmer in his eyes darkened.

He moved towards the bed, and I stumbled behind him. My legs were shaking in anticipation.

After I plopped down on the bed, he stayed standing while staring down at me.

“Now spread your legs, you little slut,” he said.

I opened my trembling legs to him, and he kneeled down before me. His strong fingers grasped my tender butt. I cried out at the sensation, and it turned into a moan when his tongue brushed my slit. He sucked on my clit like it was a piece of ice, and I felt my legs tensing around his head.

A deep groan rumbled from his chest. “*Fuck*, I want to draw those sounds out of you for hours. Make you scream for me to make you come,” he said.

I gripped his thick hair, and he nipped at the end of my clit. My eyes closed in ecstasy, but I immediately forced them open again.

His fingers entered my vagina, pulsing at the sensitive part near the back.

Sebastian’s eyes were dark as he watched me quiver beneath him. “God, I can’t wait until I have time to work you up properly, and watch you break around my dick.”

His mouth teasingly inched towards the sides of my clit while he hit that sensitive spot with his fingers again and again. My legs clenched harder around his head.

He blew a cold breath on my fiery hot clit. My fingers dug into his scalp. I was barely holding on.

“Come for me, Selene,” he growled before biting down on the tip of my clit.

The grey room tinted white as an orgasm wrecked me. His fingers continued working on my insides, moving mercilessly

against my throbbing core as I came over and over again. My body gushed beneath his touch.

When the sensations slowed, I fell limply against the bed.

He stood up, and glanced down at his soaking, wet hand.

“Look at the mess you made,” he said, hunger brushing his tone.

Clear liquid dripped thickly through his fingers. He brushed his dripping hand against my face, and I leaned into his touch.

“Good thing I like messes,” he said before turning from me and walking towards the closet in the back of the room. Sharp awareness that he was leaving shook me from my blissful state.

“You should stay,” I said, hating how desperately I wanted that. How much I needed that. What was wrong with me? Earlier, I’d convinced myself that I wouldn’t allow myself to care about Sebastian, and now I was begging him to stay.

“I won’t go against Luc when he has that bracelet on you. I can’t let him hurt you,” he said, turning the handle on the closet door.

Those words should’ve scared me, but being with him in this room had brought on a circle of warmth and safety. I didn’t want that feeling to end.

“I can handle the pain,” I said.

He turned towards me, and vicious hunger flashed in his eyes. “You don’t even know what pain is yet.”

“Then show me,” I said, standing up from the bed.

Sebastian shook his head. “I knew you’d become addicted to my touch.”

I stood up from the bed and moved towards him.

“Don’t go,” I said, hating how pleading my voice sounded.

His jaw tightened, and he opened up the closet door. “I have to. I’m the only one who’s allowed to hurt you.”

Sebastian stepped inside the closet and tugged at my hand gently. “Come here. I want you to see something,” he said.

We moved into the closet, and he wrapped me in his arms with a tenderness that surprised me.

“This is who you really are,” he said while nodding at the mirror. Mascara ran down my cheeks, and the tears from earlier created a trail of white down my bronzed face. Lipstick and glittery cum spread out from my lips in a swirly display of debauchery.

“When you fix your makeup, you’re going to pretend that you’re still a good girl. But this,” he spread the lipstick further across my face before continuing, “is who you really are.”

I nibbled on my lip. There was something that’d been bothering me.

“Is there something wrong with me?” I asked.

His hand trailed down my face and caressed my jaw. “What do you mean?”

“Why do I enjoy pain?” That admission of vulnerability terrified and thrilled me.

“What about that scares you?” he asked.

Part of me wondered if I shouldn’t be volunteering anymore information, but the larger part of me reminded myself that I’d just melted into his arms while he hurt me and pleased me. He knew how dark my desires were, yet he was holding me tenderly.

“When I’ve been in fights or been beat up, I didn’t enjoy it. So why do I like it now?” I said.

His fingers twisted through my hair. “Because you’re safe even when it doesn’t feel like it. Even when I’m whipping you so hard that you cry, you’re safe.”

Safe? The last thing I should feel is safe when I’m with him. His brother was the reason I’d left behind my entire life.

My stomach recoiled at the reminder. And now Sebastian was leaving me to go to the very person who’d ruined my life.

Desperation clawed up my chest.

“Please, don’t go.” I hated how needy my voice sounded.

His jaw tightened, and for a moment I thought he would relent.

Instead, he shook his head, and reached for the door handle.

Chapter 45

When we walked through the door, Anya was standing outside. Her eyes were staring down at the ground, and I noticed a hint of fear in them.

“Where is my brother?” Sebastian asked Anya.

“He’s in his office,” Anya replied, hesitation slipping into her voice.

Sebastian turned back to me. “I’ll come find you when I’m done. *Don’t* get into trouble.”

When all of this was over, either Luca or myself would be lying dead. I knew who Sebastian would pick. I tried to ignore the pain that realization swelled inside me.

Instead of replying, I turned my back on him.

After his footsteps receded away from us, Anya looked up from the wooden floors for the first time.

“You need to fix your makeup. Come.” The assurance was back in her voice as she led me down the hallway. I should’ve been embarrassed that someone was witnessing me in this state. But unlike Sebastian, this woman wasn’t abandoning me.

When we were back in the changing room from earlier, she began removing my makeup.

“I thought you weren’t planning on having sex tonight,” Anya said, a smirk on her artificially plumped lips as she took in the state of my makeup.

I rolled my eyes, but I couldn’t keep a laugh from bubbling out of me. What a weird night this had been.

A smile cracked across her face. “I’m relieved he didn’t seem upset with me. When I rang the doorbell, I was worried he might hurt me for interrupting,” she said.

I knew Sebastian would never do that, but the nonchalant way she expressed the idea of a man beating her worried me.

My earlier mirth died. “Do men hurt you often?” I asked.

A shrug. “Sometimes my pimp gets pissed when I didn’t hook enough men that week. Sometimes, a John gets pissed that his football team lost.” She glanced at my spray tanned skin hiding my own bruises. “You just get used to it.”

“Don’t let them do that to you,” I said, reaching for her hand.

She avoided my hand and resumed her work on my makeup. I stared down at my spray tanned knees. That was easy for me to say. When it had come to my own beatings, I hadn’t been able to prevent any of it.

Afterwards, there was no hint of dried mascara or smeared lipstick in sight. Anya’s hand had been heavier this time. The lines of my eyeliner were thicker and the bronzer more apparent. I cringed as I looked in the mirror, but kept my thoughts to myself.

“Time to get back to work,” Anya announced, and I followed her down to a billiards room while smoothing down the fabric of my skirt. The roughness of the fabric bit against the tenderness of my skin. Even though he wasn’t here, the achiness felt like a caress from Sebastian.

What was wrong with me? He wasn’t even here and I couldn’t stop thinking about him. I was sure he wasn’t thinking about me, so why couldn’t I do the same?

Inside the room, four men were playing pool. A shorter man with a bit of a potbelly attempted to make a shot. The pool stick completely missed the cue ball. He cursed and slammed back the rest of his drink. This was probably exactly who we shouldn’t be offering a drink, but no one cared what I thought.

Anya sashayed towards the men. When she spoke her Russian accent came through stronger, “Would any of you like a drink?”

The short, portly man with greased back hair moved closer to us. He looked the two of us up and down and then smacked his pool stick against my vagina. My entire body tensed. The irritation and frustration that had been gnawing at me since I’d left Sebastian’s side overwhelmed me.

I grabbed the pool stick out of the man's hand. He scowled at me, and Sebastian's warning about these men flashed into my mind.

Well, fuck Sebastian. He wasn't here, because just like every person in my life he'd picked me second. I'd learned long ago that the only person I could depend on was myself. And right now, taking this entitled greaseball down a peg was going to make me feel very good.

"Don't fucking touch me," I warned.

His eyes narrowed, and he stepped forward to grab the pool stick back. I held on tightly, a laugh escaping my lips at his futile effort.

"Do you know who I am?" he roared.

"Someone who sucks at pool?" I shrugged, while yanking the pool stick out of his reach.

The three men standing nearby silently watched with shock on their faces.

The greaseball took another step forward. Anger and embarrassment turned his cheeks crimson. "I won't have some fucking whore disrespect me. I make more in a year than you'll make in your life. Get on your knees and beg for my forgiveness," he said.

"Not going to happen," I said, rapping the pool stick against his shoulder.

He grabbed at my shirt, and I was ready to aim the stick at the most sensitive part of his body when Anya spoke.

"I apologize for her. She's new, and still learning." There was a tension in her voice that I didn't like. "Allow me to make it up to you. I'd be happy to give you a discount as a show of our apology."

The portly man released my shirt and stepped back.

"Fine," he growled, and grabbed Anya's arm.

"Are you sure?" I asked, ready to jump in if she changed her mind.

“Don’t worry,” Anya flashed me a small smile. The man yanked her out of the room, and I reluctantly turned my attention to the three men staring at me.

“Whiskey?” I asked.

They stared back at me in silence, and I slowly set the pool stick back on the table.

“I’ll be right back,” I said while backing out of the room.

Regret gripped at me while I wandered down the empty hallway. I didn’t give a shit if I’d embarrassed that douchebag, but I felt bad about Anya getting involved. I’d give her a portion of tonight’s payment in order to more than make up for the money she’d lost appeasing that greaseball.

After I circled the floor twice, I realized I had no idea where the bartenders were. Until this point I hadn’t made it far enough to actually get a drink order.

Eventually, I found another skimpily dressed girl who guided me towards the kitchen. She introduced me to a young man preparing drinks with a small scar underneath his eye.

“What drinks do they want?” Dario asked, his large lips tugged into a deep frown.

“Three whiskeys,” I shrugged.

“What kind?”

“No idea. Also, could you give me a shot of something so I can make it through this evening?” I needed something to calm me down. I could handle the collateral damage, but none of these women who were just doing their job deserved to deal with the consequences of my actions.

Dario shook his head and handed me three glasses of whiskey in crystal tumblers.

“And my drink?” I asked, trying to keep the edge out of my voice.

He rolled his eyes, and I smiled. That smile dropped when he pulled out a bottle of cheap vodka. Great, I was surrounded

by the best liquor money could buy, but they cheaped out for the hired help.

Dario poured me the shot. Since I had a feeling he wasn't going to add a mixer, I grabbed the shot glass and poured the contents down my throat. The taste of rubbing alcohol reminded me of when I was a sophomore and Piper and I paid some random guy 100 bucks to buy us a bottle of vodka to pregame with. After that experience, whenever I had enough free time to see her, we started snatching the liquor from her parent's wine cellar.

I coughed and slammed the glass down. "Another, please."

He poured a single shot into the glass, his dark eyebrows slightly raised. I knew from his slightly judgmental look that this was a bad idea. But I was wound up so tightly, I needed something to take the edge off. And getting drunk seemed like a better idea than getting into another argument with Luca's men.

After I coughed down the shot, I grabbed the three glasses of whiskey and headed back to the pool room. I handed the men their drinks, and they silently received them with an assessing look. The greaseball still wasn't back with Anya, and I wandered into the hallway to find hopefully less obnoxious men to serve drinks to.

A pained wail sounded from a nearby doorway. My entire body tensed as I crept towards the door and pressed my ear against the oak wood.

"Please, stop." It was a familiar Russian voice.

Anya. My heart leaped into my throat.

"You stupid bitch. It's your fault I couldn't get hard," a male voice said.

The sound of bone crunching echoed, and I heard another high-pitched yelp.

Without even thinking, I yanked the door open and stepped inside.

Chapter 46

Anya was lying on the floor, her arms curled up around her ribs. Her eyeliner was streaking down her cheeks.

“Don’t fucking touch her,” I growled.

The greaseball spun towards me, rage flashing in his eyes. “Get the fuck out, before I fuck you up too.”

My fist clenched. This was my fault. If I could’ve kept my mouth shut earlier, he wouldn’t be taking his anger out on her. I needed to make it stop.

With a howl, I ran forward and decked him in the face. His head snapped back against the wall. Before I could strike again, his eyes narrowed and he shoved me. From a combination of alcohol and the narrow high heels I lost my balance and fell backwards. My back hit the soft bed, and the man sprang on top of me.

“Now, you’re going to make it up to me,” he said, the liquor on his breath burning into my nostrils.

“Sounds like a waste of time. Your whiskey dick can’t even get hard,” I said.

He slapped me across the face. He couldn’t get hard, or even hit hard. And on top of that, he attacked women like Anya who couldn’t fight back.

I swung my knee up between his legs. With a groan he fell off the bed clutching at his crotch. I jumped up and swung my right foot into his temple. He tried to grab at my high heel, but I swung my leg back further and connected with his head again.

He slumped down, his eyes closed. I kneeled down and placed a finger against his pulse.

“Still alive,” I announced to a stunned Anya.

I searched around his pockets for a gun and came up short. Then I marched over to Anya and held a hand out to her in order to help her up.

“We need to get out of here,” I ordered.

“What did you do?” she whispered, still lying on the ground staring at the man.

“We don’t want him to wake up and find us. *Get up.*”

Anya finally snapped out of it. She stood up, while keeping her hand pressed gingerly to her rib.

“Is it broken?” I asked, as we headed towards the dressing room.

“I don’t think so,” she replied, a slight wheeze in her voice. “It just hurts.”

We stepped into the dressing room.

“Grab your things. I’m going to try to get us out of here, untouched,” I said.

Even though I was the only one who attacked him, I knew he wouldn’t just come after me when he woke up. He appeared to be the vindictive type, and would want as many people to experience pain as possible.

Anya shook her head. “No. My pimp will kill me if I lose this job.”

I closed my eyes. “That guy was in a violent mood, I’m not sure what he’ll do if he finds you,” I said.

“It can’t be worse than what my pimp will do to me.”

Damn it, I just kept making things worse for Anya.

“You won’t leave will you?” I asked.

She shook her head, her heels firmly planted into the ground. I stayed silent for a moment as I tried to come up with a plan. A way to start to make this right.

Anya grimaced, and collapsed onto a chair, one hand still on her ribs. “Let me lighten your makeup, you hit Lorezno so hard he might not even recognize you,” she said.

My heart ached as she grabbed a makeup brush. Even after all I’d done, she still wanted to help me. A plan began to form in my mind.

I sighed. I needed to find Sebastian, and beg him to protect Anya. Sure, I was still mad at him, but I'd put aside my anger and pride to help Anya.

"You don't happen to know Sebastian's phone number do you?" I asked. Not that I even had a phone I could use. Although, I'm sure Anya had one stuffed inside her purse somewhere in this room.

Anya shook her head.

Hmm... I couldn't have her call someone else in the organization. I didn't know who would report this to Luca. A chill passed down my back. No, the last person I wanted to get involved with this was Luca.

I needed to find Sebastian, and fast.

I set my hand on Anya's stiff body. "I'm going to try to protect you. But while I'm gone, I need you to hide in that closet," I said.

She shook her head. "Don't go out there. If he finds you, his men will hurt you."

I moved towards the door. "I can handle it. Please, just hide."

Every nerve in my body was pushing me to escape the house. I had no idea where Sebastian was, and I didn't even have a gun on me if Lorenzo found me.

But I wouldn't abandon Anya.

I peaked out into the hallway. When I determined it was empty and Anya had hidden herself inside the room, I started towards the staircase.

Awareness pounded through me that every second I spent trying to find Sebastian was another chance Lorenzo could happen upon me or Anya.

Who *was* that asshole? At least, I had a first name from Anya, but I didn't have the slightest clue where he fell on the hierarchy.

Was he someone Sebastian could make back down easily? Lorenzo could be some peon exaggerating his importance, *or* he could be one of Luca's top men. My stomach twisted at the thought, but I ventured down the stairs.

Somehow, whenever I was in this house I ended up making terrible plans. But just like last time, I'd need to follow through with my terrible plan. I couldn't just leave Anya here.

Two sturdy men were leaning against the stairs. Even though my heart picked up, I kept my face neutral. One of them glanced over at me dismissively before moving their attention back.

I moved past them, and further down the stairs.

Shit. Lorenzo was standing down the hall, blood creeping down his face despite his hand pressed against his temple.

"You bitch," he growled, pointing at me.

So much for finding Sebastian before Lorenzo found me. I continued moving down the stairs. But I was way too slow. I couldn't exactly run with these heels on, and I didn't even have a weapon to take someone hostage. Not that it would help me since I still had this damned bracelet on.

"Grab her," Lorenzo yelled.

Footsteps echoed behind me.

"Don't touch me," I growled, whipping around so I could see the two men approaching me.

The man on the right laughed and tried to grab me. I kicked him in the shin. Hard. He grabbed at his leg, the laughter dying in his throat.

The other man drew a gun out of his pocket, but kept enough distance so I couldn't snatch it out of his hand.

"Don't try anything, or I'll shoot," he warned, aiming the gun at my head.

There was nothing I could do. Even if I managed to grab it from his hands before he shot me, Luca could just send an injection into me the second he discovered what happened.

And if I was unconscious or dying from a gunshot wound, I couldn't protect Anya.

I sighed and raised my hands up in order to show I wouldn't fight back. The man who I'd kicked stepped towards me cautiously. Then he grabbed me by the waist, and hauled me over his shoulder.

"Is this really necessary?" I said, beginning to move my hand up towards my skirt in order to pull it down. I could feel it sliding down my back, leaving my underwear and my still burning butt completely on display.

At least, I'd had the foresight to put my underwear back on. Being commando was not something I wanted to be in front of these men.

"Don't move, or I'll shoot you," the man with the gun said. With a sigh, I stopped my hand movement. I needed to get the man holding me alone and wait for him to get distracted before I made my move.

Because I wasn't going down without a fight.

"Can I at least move my head?" I tested him. I was staring at the man holding me's black shirt stretched tightly against his rock hard abs. It'd be advantageous to see where I was going.

"No."

"Fine," I meekly mumbled into the man's shirt. Let them think I was done fighting.

The man's grip tightened on my legs, and we began moving forward.

"Where is the other girl at?" Lorenzo asked.

I remained silent, and the man's abs rumbled as he spoke, "Girl, he's talking to you."

"What other girl?" I asked, hoping Lorenzo had hit his head hard enough to forget Anya had ever been there. Maybe he'd be convinced he'd just seen double after the kick he took.

“You fucking know what I’m talking about. Where the fuck is she?” Lorenzo demanded.

I sighed, and accidentally breathed in some of the man’s pinewood scented cologne. Hey, at least I didn’t have to deal with locker room BO.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I must have hit you so hard that you saw double,” I said.

“You won’t be talking like that when I’m done with you both,” Lorenzo said.

Lorenzo’s voice echoed in a different direction, “Tommaso find the other girl. I think her name was Anya.”

My stomach tightened at his words. If he knew Anya’s name, he’d find her eventually.

“She didn’t do anything. Don’t involve her,” I said.

Lorenzo laughed, it was short and slightly high pitched. “You aren’t in any position to be making demands,” he said.

“Matteo,” Lorenzo addressed the man holding me, “bring the girl down to the basement. I’ll deal with her and the other girl when we find her.”

Matteo’s upper body shifted forward, and I assumed he’d nodded.

“I’m fucking serious, just deal twice the pain to me,” I growled. “Forget about her.”

Footsteps moved away from us, and Matteo began walking in the opposite direction.

He stopped, and I heard the beep of an elevator. Earlier today I had hoped the next time I was in an elevator it would go differently than last time. It was different from last time, but it *definitely* wasn’t better. Heavy steps echoed against the metal of the elevator as we moved inside.

The man was on too high of alert. I needed to wait for an opportunity to surprise him.

A few seconds later the door beeped and opened again. I felt Matteo’s head spin towards the door. This was my opportunity.

I raised my hands to attack him.

“For fuck’s sake,” I heard Sebastian growl.

Chapter 47

My hands froze. Despite my instructions from earlier I shifted my head to get a better look. Sebastian stood at the entrance to the elevator.

Sebastian's face was dark as he glared in our direction. Despite the rage in his face, hope bubbled up inside of me.

The elevator door began to close. The metal twanged as Sebastian slammed his hand against it.

"Bring her out here," Sebastian said, his eyes on the man's face. Or possibly my underwear, they were right around the same spot.

Matteo's voice shook, "But sir, we've been instructed to bring her to the basement."

Sebastian's eyes narrowed. "The basement?". He stepped forward menacingly. "If you don't set her down now, you'll be the one locked in the basement."

My captor immediately dropped me. Sebastian steadied me before I could fall on my ass.

"Sir, what should I tell Lorenzo?" Matteo asked.

Sebastian pulled me out of the elevator.

"Tell him to meet me in the library," Sebastian growled, the threat apparent in his voice.

I caught Matteo's wide eyed look of fear before the elevator doors shut.

I smoothed down my skirt, so that my red underwear was finally off display.

"Anya-" I started.

"Not here."

We continued in silence towards the library. It was odd how in certain ways this night was mimicking my last experience here. It was the same library Sebastian had led me to when we had the ill-fated negotiations. Once again, I needed something from him. Let's see if he would come through this time.

When we were back in the library, I sat in the exact same black leather chair by the fireplace that I'd picked previously. I wondered if we'd be exiting the room in the exact opposite manner to last time. Gun against my head as I headed down the elevator.

I glanced towards the fireplace. Still no fire poker.

Sebastian sat across from me, mirroring our previous interaction in the room.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his eyes assessing me.

I smirked. "You should see the other guy."

His hand tightened into a fist. "What happened?"

Nervous that Anya might've been found, I rushed into an explanation. Sebastian remained silent with a darkening expression.

"Fuck!" he yelled, slamming his fist against the side table.

"Don't fucking blame me!"

"Blame you?" His eyes narrowed. "All I want to do is rip Lorenzo limb from limb while he begs for your forgiveness."

My breath caught, but before I could reply the oak door slid open.

"This is going to be fun," Luca smirked, his eyes moving over my skimpy outfit. Lorenzo followed in after him, looking a bit smug.

Sebastian jumped up from his chair, his angry facial expression telling me he was ready to follow through on his threat to Lorenzo.

Luca tried to reach for him, but Sebastian swept past him. Lorenzo backed up, real fear in his eyes.

"If you don't sit back down Sebastian, I'll have Selene seizing on the floor," Luca ordered.

With a growl, Sebastian slowly moved back into the chair. His fingers gripped the arms of the leather chair so tightly, stuffing looked like it was about to burst out.

“That’s better,” Luca said with a smirk. Lorenzo leaned against a bookshelf twenty feet from us. Smart. He wouldn’t tempt fate by getting close enough for Sebastian to reach him. “Now I’m sure you know why I’m here: one of my men was attacked. And I can’t stand by and let that happen.”

It was obvious from the gleeful glint in his eye that he could give two shits that Lorenzo was injured. Luca just wanted an excuse to hurt me.

“Then maybe you shouldn’t let your men beat up defenseless girls,” I said.

“That’s a lie,” Lorenzo jumped in, his voice desperate. “Anya and this bitch tried to rob me.”

Sebastian opened his mouth, but I beat him to the punch.

“Rob you?” I growled, “If I was planning on robbing you, I would’ve waited until you were outside and alone.”

Okay, maybe that wasn’t exactly helping my case. Not that it mattered anyway, Luca would find any excuse to hurt me.

“Who are you going to believe?” Lorenzo tried to make his voice sound steady, but I noticed the tremor in his hand when he snuck a glance at Sebastian. “Some whore, or a man who’s been with your family for thirty years?”

“Call her that one more time, and I’ll cut your tongue out,” Sebastian growled.

Lorenzo’s straight posture wilted.

“Enough,” Luca said, and all of our attention snapped to him.

“I don’t care *why* it happened. Selene, you can’t go around attacking my men.” When he said the last word, his eyes shifted towards Sebastian, and I knew he was thinking about how I’d taken Sebastian hostage.

“Now how should I deal with this?” Luca asked, and the way he looked at me sent a shiver down my spine.

“Luc, leave her the fuck alone.” Sebastian’s eyes were dark as he glared at his brother.

Luca grabbed the phone from his pocket and pressed a button.

Electricity pulsed through my ankle, and the pain radiated up my entire body. Screams echoed around me, but I couldn't see. Couldn't process anything beyond the pain.

Then just as quickly as it started, it was over.

I lay slumped against the floor, my breaths coming in jagged gasps.

Sebastian kneeled next to me, and whispered in my ear, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I gasped back.

Sebastian gently ran his hand across the crown of my head before standing in front of me, blocking Luca from my sight.

"I'll do it, just leave her alone," Sebastian said.

What was he promising? I pushed myself up and forced my shaky legs to stand.

"You'll do what?" Luca asked, glee glittering in his eyes.

"What you asked for earlier. I'll do it. Just don't hurt her."

"Don't promise that asshole anything. I can handle it," I growled.

Ignoring me, Luca responded to Sebastian, "Fine. But I can't allow her to get away with this completely. She attacked one of our men."

Luca's attention shifted back to me as he continued, "Selene, you and this Anya girl will pay all of Lorenzo's medical bills and any additional damages. However, only Anya will be physically harmed."

Sebastian's eyes narrowed, but I spoke before he could.

"No," I growled, and Luca's eyebrows raised. I was sure that wasn't a word he was used to hearing. But there was no way in hell anyone was laying a hand on Anya.

"Leave Anya and Sebastian out of this. I can handle whatever you throw at me," I said.

Images of the last time he'd tortured me swam through my mind.

"Selene, let me handle this," Sebastian said, his posture stiff.

"You're stupidly brave," Luca said to me with raised eyebrows. "But I'd rather have what Sebastian's offering me than you writhing on the floor."

"Fuck you!" I snarled, pushing away the remnants of the memories.

"Don't push me too hard. You may pretend like you aren't scared, but I *know* that isn't true," Luca said. Bile moved up my stomach, but I kept my face hard as he continued, "Plus, I have Anya locked up in the basement. Are you really sure that you want to push me?"

Shit. He had me. I couldn't push back, or he'd take it out on Anya.

I dropped back in the chair with a groan.

Luca smirked, knowing he'd won this round.

He stepped forward and began laying out the terms. "You and Anya will take full financial responsibility for Lorenzo's medical bills. It also appears he has a concussion, so you'll also repay him for missed work." Luca paused after glancing at Sebastian. "However, you and Anya will not be physically harmed for this."

Great, another debt I'd owe. I seriously hoped Lorenzo was a peon rather than one of their top men. I groaned internally. The man had said he probably made more in a year than I made in my entire lifetime. He was definitely exaggerating, but I still didn't want to think how expensive the cost of his lost wages would be.

"Luc, just let it go. I already said I'd do what you asked," Sebastian said.

Luca's face hardened. "She has to learn there are repercussions for her actions. Don't push me Sebastian, or I might feel less generous."

“I’ll handle the bills on my own. Don’t punish Anya for this,” I said.

Luca smiled.

“And,” I continued, “you’ll continue hiring her. If anyone harms her again, Lorenzo’s head wound will seem like a bruise in comparison.”

Luca’s eyes narrowed. “If you dare-”

Sebastian interrupted him, “I’ll guarantee no one hurts Anya. If anyone lays a hand on her, I’ll carve their heart out.”

Luca’s lips tightened together, but he said nothing.

“Will you keep hiring Anya?” I asked Luca.

He nodded reluctantly.

“Fine, I’ll do it,” I said.

A smile returned to Luca’s lips before he spoke, “Then understand this: the second I leave this room your new debt will be turned over to our offices. You will work for us, and if you decide to slack off, I’ll send my *own* debt collectors after you.”

“Agreed,” I said, feeling like I was making a deal with the literal devil.

Chapter 48

Luca turned his attention to Sebastian. “And Selene’s debt can only be paid off when she works for the family. I won’t accept any money from you,” he said.

Luca’s expression was so jubilant. I definitely made a deal with the devil. One I couldn’t back out of now.

Sensing Sebastian’s tension I leaned towards his ear. “It’s fine. Please don’t fight him,” I whispered. Luca had me beaten, and I didn’t want him to shift his fury to Anya.

The entire situation was less than ideal, but it still seemed like a better outcome than what I’d expected when Matteo started dragging me down to the basement.

Luca exchanged a look with Sebastian, and a wordless discussion seemed to pass between them. Again, I wondered what Sebastian had agreed to.

Sebastian turned back towards Luca. “Selene’s leaving now. You’ll pay her a full day’s wage,” he said.

“She didn’t even make it to dinner,” Luca replied, a lazy smirk on his lips.

“*Luc,*” Sebastian growled.

Luca rolled his eyes. “Fine. But she won’t get off so easily for the rest of her debt repayment.”

Sebastian grabbed my arm and tugged me towards the door. When we were in the hallway, he whispered into my ear, “Don’t say anything else until we get home.”

I somehow made it down the elevator without a gun being pointed at me. That feeling of success was overshadowed by the men roughly patting me down in the garage. Although it didn’t take long considering how little clothing I was wearing.

We set out into the night, and I sighed. Definitely a different outcome from last time I’d been there. No speeding out onto the FDR with a gun pressed against Sebastian’s head this time. Also, I’d walked into the building attempting to decrease my

debts, and I'd somehow added another debt to the mix. But at least, I'd begun to fix my mistake with Anya.



After the men in Sebastian's sky garage had patted me down and we'd reentered Sebastian's house, with a few smirks from the men, Sebastian broke the silence.

He had just taken off his shoes, and I was attempting to unbuckle a tricky strap on my high heels while not falling over.

"There's something I want to show you," Sebastian said, pulling out his phone.

I slipped off the stubborn shoe and straightened up.

"What is it?" I asked.

He showed me the dark screen, then hit play on the video.

Lorenzo's eyes were out of focus, and his face was more bruises than tan skin.

"I'm sorry," Lorenzo mumbled towards the screen.

A large hand punched him in the face.

"I'm sorry, Selene," Lorenzo corrected, fear coming into his hazy eyes. "It won't happen again."

A gunshot rang out, and Lorenzo stared into the camera lifelessly.

The image went black and a sense of relief flooded through me. Good. My stomach tightened as I thought about the look on Anya's face when she'd talked about her pimp. I had brought all of this on her. She'd embraced me as one of her own and I'd repaid that kindness by making everything worse.

A thought occurred to me, "Will his medical bills be added to my debt?"

A smile spread across Sebastian's face. "Your agreement was only to pay the medical bills for what *you* did to him."

My stomach fluttered. But what had he sacrificed to make sure Anya and I were safe? When he'd promised to do what Luca asked, it had looked like someone was dragging the words out of him unwillingly. He was evidence that in our world there was always a price for a favor. What would I owe Sebastian?

"Why?" I asked, failing to keep an edge out of my voice.

He reached up and ran his thumb over my jaw. "Always so quick to assume the worst."

"That's how I stayed alive so long. Why'd you do it? Leverage?"

Sebastian's eyes darkened. "No one touches you and gets away with it."

My heart fluttered, but I pushed that emotion down. "Good luck with that," I snorted. "You have a long list to get through."

He smiled tightly. "I'm working on it."

"What does that mean?"

Sebastian shrugged and pulled up another video. My mouth dropped open as the camera panned over 8 familiar men: the men who'd ambushed me that rainy night before I went to Sebastian for help.

A man screamed as a knife pierced through his right foot. "You kicked her with that foot," Sebastian's voice echoed on the video. "Now you'll lose it." Another stab.

I stared at the screen as Sebastian stabbed every man who'd hurt me that night until they bled out.

As fucked up as it was, I think it was the most romantic thing anyone had ever done for me. I was staring at the ground, trying to process all my thoughts, when my eyes caught on a slightly beat up bag in my peripheral vision.

I blinked a few times and turned my attention to it. It couldn't be. I moved towards the white duffel bag and knelt in front of it. I unzipped the bag and checked the tag. My breath caught.

Underneath the Chanel label was written “Selene Regan” in scrawling cursive.

I hugged the bag against me and stood up.

“But I thought I lost the bet,” I said.

“You did.” He shrugged. “But I knew it’d make you happy.”

It would’ve been so much easier to have bought me a flawless new bag. But this slightly damaged bag with a small scuff near the zipper had been with me since before I’d left the suffocating safety of my father’s house. It’d been with me through the agonizing uncertainty of my freedom. It’d seen me laughing as I spent money at Tao, and muttering curses as I tried to fix wounds on my stomach.

He had no idea how happy he’d made me by getting this bag. I set the bag reverently on the floor. Or maybe he *did* understand how happy it made me. The way he looked at me when he played with me like a toy told me he could see through my front. He shattered me with the knowledge of my secret thoughts. But each time he shattered me, I felt a sense of peace. At finally being seen. At finally being understood.

I stood up and stepped towards him. Slowly, I wrapped my arms around his body, pulling him into a hug.

“Thank you,” I mumbled into his shirt.

He yanked me in closer, pressing the front of my body completely against him. The feeling of relaxation that swept over me was even sweeter than I’d felt during my release earlier.

While keeping one arm tightly wrapped around my waist he played with the tendrils of my hair. As the tenderness of his touch reached a part of me I thought I’d lost, I nuzzled my face against his hard chest. In the back of my mind, I knew I should be worried about my new debt, about his brother, and so many other things. And yet as he held me there I felt completely safe. As if nothing could touch me as long as he was near.

“Thank you,” I said again.

Gratitude swept over me as I spoke. Gratitude for protecting me. Gratitude for seeing me at my most vulnerable and accepting me.

“Now, let me do what I’ve been dying to do ever since we finished our game earlier,” Sebastian said.

“Let me guess, you’re going to fuck me.” I laughed into his chest. It didn’t seem like a half bad idea.

“No.” He brushed a gentle hand over my head. “I want to take care of you.”

I pressed my face closer against him, allowing all the feelings I’d been suppressing to overwhelm my body. For the first time, I didn’t fight against my feelings. I let them wash over me as I stood motionless in his arms.

To Be Continued...



Want to read about Sebastian chaining Selene to the bed,
and blindfolding her?

Sign up for my newsletter to read the spicy bonus scene:

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About The Author

Lila Sharp

Lila Sharp is a dark mafia romance author who crafts moments so hot you'll feel like you're biting a jalapeño. Expect feisty heroines and dominant heroes who grapple with their inner demons on their way to a happily ever after. When she isn't writing scenes with her heroines restrained emotionally and physically, she's devouring another book on her TBR.