



THE GREATEST GIFTS  
AREN'T ALWAYS  
WRAPPED IN PAPER...

A MAFFIA  
*mistress*  
FOR  
CHRISTMAS

BROOKE HARPER

*A Mafia Mistress for Christmas*

A DARK MAFIA CHRISTMAS NOVELLA

BROOKE HARPER

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# *Trigger Warning*

*This book contains dark themes and highly sensitive topics.  
For a full list of triggers, visit Brooke Harper's website:  
<https://authorbrookeharper.com/standalones/>*

# *A Mafia Mistress for Christmas*

***The greatest gifts aren't always wrapped in paper...***

Call me a grinch but Christmas sucks. Always has. So when there's an opportunity at work to infiltrate the Zicari Syndicate during their Christmas Eve bash, I jump at the chance.

The plan is simple: assume the identity of a seductive mafia mistress with dangerous tastes, and infiltrate the underground crime kingdom. I am prepared for the risks, but the unwanted attention is something entirely new. Specifically from Marco, the wickedly handsome younger brother and right-hand man of the monstrous Stefan Zicari.

Marco isn't my intended target, but he has a hidden agenda of his own. Instead of killing me, he proposes we form an unlikely alliance. We'll play pretend, with me standing in as Marco's newest fling so that we can collect the evidence needed to bring down his brother's criminal empire for good. And if we're lucky, Stefan will be in handcuffs before jolly old Saint Nick comes down the chimney.

But things are quickly shifting between us. It's not long before our acting crosses the line into something real, tempting, and dangerous. Being together can jeopardize everything we've worked for and get us killed.

Our charade was only supposed to be for the Christmas holiday, but now I'm

wishing I could be Marco's Mafia mistress all year long.

## CHAPTER 1

# Lacey



**C**hristmas cheer my *ass*.  
Nothing screams *holiday season* like watching Angela Ramos, my work nemesis, smile and wave to the crowd, pageant style, before graciously receiving more praise for all the work I've done.

My colleagues, new and old, lap up Angela's fake-as-sugarplum-dreams gratitude, as if this room doesn't contain the brightest and the best of the FBI.

I plaster a too-fake grin on my own face and clap politely along with the others.

All my hard work fighting for a promotion, for some kind of fucking recognition after everything I've given to my team over the years, and yet, there she is. Miss Perfect. How she does it, I'll never know.

She gets the glory, the good jobs, you name it. I'm halfway convinced she's sleeping with someone to get to the top. She certainly flirts with the boss often enough.

"You're going to have to wipe the pucker off your lips, or people are going to know exactly how you feel about her." My work husband and bestie, Wesley Pearce, elbows me none-too-gently in the side. "Work on the face, Matthews. That's an order."

I elbow him right back, but his handsome face doesn't crack. He barely breathes differently.

Wes is the kind of guy people automatically take seriously because he looks like fricken Ryan Gosling on his worst day—all American, boy-next-door, guy in charge kind of looks.

"Everyone knows this is *not* the most wonderful time of the year for me," I reply, jerking my nose toward Angela Ramos, with her perfect blonde hair

and pixie features. Work nemesis. Bitch.

“That’s what people say when they hate the holidays and want everyone else to be miserable too.” Wes crosses his arms over his chest and stares at Angela, but his face holds none of the disdain I know we both feel for her. “In fact, it’s exactly what a *Grinch* would say. You sure it’s her that’s getting you down or is it fact that you haven’t spoken to your mom in years?”

Wes knows more about me than anyone else in this building, and I still have to work to hide my slight flinch at his truth bomb as it slaps me across the face. He understands how I get as soon as autumn trails into winter. Once the last of the leaves drop from the trees and the days turn chilly and bright with sharp sun and sharper winds, my mood flips on its head.

“If you’re feeling badly about yourself, then you’re welcome to come home with me and Alison.” He offers me a bland smile.

“And ruin the honeymoon phase?”

My work husband is newly married. I even went to his wedding. He and I rose up the ranks together, and we make a great team, but that doesn’t mean I want to interrupt the newlyweds on their first Christmas together.

I mimic his posture as I turn, scanning him slowly from top to bottom. It’s a struggle, considering he’s over six foot and I top the charts at a whopping two inches over five feet. All my life, people have underestimated me based on my short stature and young face. It’s a curse that has followed me into the agency, too.

Except Wes. He’s never judged—well, except my hatred of the holidays.

“What are you trying to say?” I ask. “You think I can’t handle being alone? Hard pass on the invite, but thanks.”

“I’m trying to say you’re being a bigger pain than usual. If you’re not careful, Angela is going to come over here and talk to you, just because she knows it will bother you.” He bites down on a laugh.

“Am I amusing to you?” I gawk at him. “Wow, Wes.”

The impromptu meeting at the tail end of our work party, the one giving all glory to Angela, ends as quickly as it began. The others start to disperse back into their individual groups as Wes shakes his head, his dirty blonde hair falling across his face, hiding the amusement in his eyes.

He takes a step away and jerks his head so I’ll follow him. To my great displeasure, the second I take a step in his direction, the devil herself appears at my elbow.

“Lacey.” Angela wraps me up in one of those overly perfumed hugs

where her arms barely touch my body and her fingers are the barest brush on my shoulders. “Merry Christmas. You look beautiful tonight.”

“Yeah, thanks, Angela.”

“Do you have any big plans for the holidays?”

“To get roaring drunk and set a Christmas tree on fire.”

She laughs, the sound like a choir of bells, her head tipped back. Oh, she thinks I’m joking. How funny.

“Good job on your last assignment.” I clench my teeth; there is no way I’m telling her she deserves it. “Let’s hope you can close your next case as quickly as this one.”

Angela lifts a perfectly groomed brow, each individual hair slicked into place. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Just that you’ve had quite a challenging caseload over the last six months.”

She lets out a quick, scoffing laugh, as though she can’t even *believe* me right now. Definitely sleeping with one of the bosses—there’s no way she’s managed to get the best assignments every single time over other, more qualified agents. It’s impossible. The FBI is supposed to be above those kinds of things, and damnit, I’m supposed to be above letting it bother me.

I’m a trained professional.

Wes grabs me and flashes his teeth at Angela, the gesture both threatening and apologetic. It’s his favorite combination, and no one does it quite like him. “As much as I love watching this trainwreck from across the room, I do need to speak with you alone, Lacey”

Before I have a chance to say anything, he’s yanked me off my high heels—easy to do—and down the hallway toward the relative privacy of the staircase.

“Ouch,” he says once we’re alone. “You just made things worse on yourself by a mile.”

“I had it handled. I can be polite.”

“Under normal circumstances, I might even believe you.” He pulls his opposite arm out from behind his back and fans me with the folder he’s been holding. “Guess what I got? I was waiting for the right time to tell you.”

I roll my eyes. “A raging case of syphilis?”

He ignores my snark. “I somehow got us the most challenging assignment from the boss’ pile. I went in to speak with him before the party today. Merry Christmas to you, Lacey.” He shrugs. “Well, to us. This is a present for *us*.”

He holds out the folder to me, and I stare at it for a long moment, trying to gather myself. “You did that for me?”

I’d been fighting for a promotion for so long.

“Guaranteed to put us ahead of the pack,” Wes replies. “Unfortunately, it’s not going to be easy or quick to close, but then again, we didn’t think it would. Right?”

“This is why I love you.” Except the back of my throat has gone just a little dry as I take the folder from him, flipping to the first page.

It’s an undercover assignment, I see quickly enough. My eyes scan down the typed rows of information. Actually, let me clarify: tricky and hard as fuck. The mafia in Kingstead has a choking grip on the city. One family falls, and another rises to take its place, like the circle of damn life.

A few of the big players somehow managed to stay in power. The small fish are taken out of the pond, but the larger ones grow fatter, more powerful. This assignment gives us—me and Wes—the perfect opportunity to take out one of the largest names.

The old anxiety is back in a flash, compounded by my dislike of the season, making it easy for intrusive thoughts to take root and knock me down a few more pegs.

“This case is perfect for us, Lace. It’s something only you can do. You’re going to have to cozy up to some pretty big names out there.” Wes is infinitely pleased with himself.

“How did you manage this?”

Big names indeed. Stefan Zicari, specifically, is the head of one of the local families. The operation has been in the works for a while, but I guess the green light has recently been given by management, and Wes somehow convinced the director that we were the dream team.

Stefan Zicari took over his family’s money laundering business at the young age over thirty-seven, when his father was murdered by another family. By all accounts, he was determined to expand and make a name for himself, which he did. In the last five years, he’s become one of the most powerful and feared crime bosses in the city.

“So, according to the director,” Wes continues, “we aren’t the only ones who’ve been on this assignment. Another agent from Jameson’s section tried to take out Zicari and...failed. That was four months ago...”

“Shit. That was Quinn, wasn’t it? I heard about that.”

Wes nods.

Damn. This one is going to be more of a challenge than I thought.

“Have you accepted it yet? I don’t like being thrown into things at the last minute.”

“Absolutely not. I had to talk to you first, but I thought you’d appreciate being offered the chance, you know?” His face softens. “You work too hard. Maybe this case will give you your fix and you’ll be able to take a long vacation once we’re done.”

“It’s worth it to work so hard. There are a lot of risks involved with this assignment, Wes.”

“Absolutely, but we have something the other agent didn’t have,” he says.

“Which is?”

“You’re a chick. You can woo Stefan with your ‘female assets.’ Not to mention...” He trails off, glancing right and left before lowering his voice. “I’ve had my eye on this case for a while and I’ve been secretly monitoring the Zicaris. I have intel no one else has about this. The last-minute nature will actually be to our benefit, Lace.”

My stomach flips. “You’ve been busy. What do you mean ‘female assets’?” He opens his mouth to reply, but I hold up a hand to stop him. “Don’t answer that, or I’ll have to report you to HR.”

He laughs.

“But seriously, I’m not going to sleep with the guy. Why would me being a girl matter?”

“There’s a Christmas auction bash Stefan is throwing under one of his ghost corporations. He’s calling it a charity event, but we all know better. He’s laundering money,” Wes answers, “and who knows what else. We go there, make some introductions, and get the assignment completed. That is, if you’re willing to accept this mission.”

“You make it sound like we’re on Star Wars or some shit.” Still, I clutch the folder to my chest. “Thank you. For doing this for me.”

It means a lot to me that Wes, best friend and pain in my ass, gets me. He understands me, and he has already set things in motion to nab us this case. No matter how nervous it makes me.

Undercover work has never been my strong suit. I’ve only been on a handful of missions, more comfortable with a task force than anything else. I’m like an indoor cat: the conditions have to be right for me to thrive. I hate to admit it, but it’s what’s probably holding me back in this job and letting Angela get ahead of me.

I need to get out of my comfort zone. I need to do this job and take down the Zicaris.

“So you’re in?” Wes stares at me. “We have to move fast if you are.”

I swallow over any resignation, any last hint of nerves plaguing my insides. “Absolutely.”

We accept the job, right in front of Angela’s face, and this time around, the clapping is for me. A girl can get used to this kind of deal, especially seeing the way the pretty princess’ lips sour and a few new frown lines form on her face.

Hmm. Knocking Stefan Zicari off his throne...

It might be a merry Christmas for me after all.

## CHAPTER 2

# Marco



“I need everything in place. If we can’t get prawns, then we’ll skip the cocktail and go straight for the crab canapes. Do you understand?”

Stefan speaks to me like I’m a fucking idiot when he’s the one having an anxiety attack over a bunch of appetizers.

“You’re worried about shrimp.” I arch my brows and straighten my shoulders, standing to my full height. It means Stefan has to look up at me, even if it’s only a couple of inches. I’ll take the win.

“Marco—”

“You’re really fucking worried about this? Of all things?” I tap my fingers hard on the edge of the desk as he settles into his chair, the king in his castle. “Unless you’re not actually talking about food.”

“Of course I’m not talking about food.” Stefan’s expression goes sly and hard at the same time. “Clearly, you haven’t remembered the fucking cues. Are you trying to piss me off on purpose? Are you taking some sort of sick delight in punishing me?”

He’s perfected the look over the years. Before Dad died, I rarely saw Stefan without a smile on his face. Then, the happy go lucky streak in him was shot down, no hope of returning, and it’s his own damn fault. Older by seven years but gifted with all the anger issues, he must have sucked it up like mother’s milk.

“If you’re not going to bother learning the lingo, then get the fuck out. I have no use for you, Marco. Not for this auction and not for the business.”

I swallow down the barrage of shit I want to scream at him. It’s no use; he never hears me anyway. “You threaten me with it five times a day. Do you really think it means anything to me? I’m here to make sure your evening is

flawless.”

Tonight is important on multiple levels, the way paved for new inroads to make money, for Stefan and for myself. I’ve enjoyed the lifestyle the arms dealing brought us—the money, the houses, everything.

What I *haven’t* enjoyed is what kind of man it’s made me. And Stefan... he’s just fucking doomed.

He brought it on himself, and my sympathy for his plight has long since died. Still, tonight is important for him, for me, for whatever future I might be able to carve out of all this madness.

“You will do everything in your power to keep things under control,” he warns me. “This time, there can be no mistakes.”

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. Nothing good is ever accomplished with an eye roll, outside of a simple internal release of frustration.

“If you doubt me at this point, then we have no business working together,” I snap back to him.

Things haven’t been decent between us for too many years to count. My brother and I might run one of the biggest crime syndicates in Kingstead, but disagreements are a way of life for us. No one gets under my skin the way he does. It’s one of his superpowers.

He’s an asshole down to his bones, and I’ve played ball with him for too long to be susceptible.

*Not anymore.*

Stefan finally lifts his dark brown eyes to me, the tip of his goatee pointed like some kind of movie villain. His dark hair has only the barest hints of gray showing at the temples, and he’s taken to dyeing it. One slow blink, followed by a second, is the only amount of ire he’ll give me, which is nothing but a fucking power move on his part.

Stefan thinks he’s tough shit.

To give the devil his due, he knows how to get things done—the Zicaris wouldn’t be where we are today without his grit or his ruthlessness. Unfortunately, though, he has no idea when to stop, when to hold the line.

“I’m not sure you understand *why* tonight is so important to me, Marco.” He hisses out my name. “Have you figured it out yet?”

I stop myself from responding right away, wait for him to draw out the pregnant pause to full effect.

“Tonight is the launch of the latest arm of our business, and any mistakes will not only jeopardize our largest payout yet, but also future deals.”

Something cold and sharp lodges stings at the base of my chest and starts slowly prying its way higher. What is he not telling me? It's absolutely like Stefan to work behind the scenes on something and not tell me until the last minute. He loves to play mind games and watch with a sense of superiority as I struggle to catch up.

This time, though, with the gleam in his eye and the snake-like grin he wears, I want him to be joking. I want this to be some kind of sick prank I shake my head. "I have no idea what you're talking about. What new arm of our business?" It's nothing he's discussed with me.

"It's something I've been working on behind the scenes for a few months now. I was waiting for a grand reveal, to be sure the deals actually went through before I told you."

"Which isn't an answer," I reply.

"All you need to know is that we'll have several very important guests from local cartels in attendance tonight. Keep them happy, and things will be smooth, our future power assured."

*Cartels.* My lips form around the word. He wouldn't—

I take a step closer to the desk and try not to take it personally when he tenses and reaches for the gun hidden in his suit jacket. It's a habit, I assure myself. A habit and not because he wants to shoot me to keep me in line.

He waits again for me to answer, a viper curled and poised, ready to strike at the perfect moment.

"Stefan, we agreed years ago that we wouldn't make any big decisions without the other knowing." I slide my hands into the starched pockets of my dress pants—black on black without a hint of color to mark the holiday season. "Especially something as large as dealing with the local cartels."

It's been hard enough to keep them off our asses. We've refused several offers to form an alliance against other syndicates in the area. No, we'd made a promise to our mother before she died—no drugs.

I've taken the promise seriously, but it seems Stefan's came with an expiration date.

I try not to snarl at him when he starts to chuckle under his breath.

"Stop worrying," he tells me instead.

"What aren't you saying?"

"I'm saying that you need to make sure the *appetizers* are in line tonight. That's what you need to worry about." He brushes a piece of invisible lint off the lapel of his suit jacket before standing. The papers he'd been pushing

around on the desk are forgotten for a split second before he shoves them into the center drawer.

“Drugs, Stefan,” I press as my hands curl to fists at my sides. “We agreed, no drugs.”

“This comes as a shock to you?” He glances up at me. “Marco, open your eyes. This is the next step in growing our empire. It’s the future. We also agreed to do whatever it takes to protect our interests. You remember?”

“I don’t like this. We were supposed to stop at arms dealing.” I drop my voice, even though there’s no one around to hear us. The guards stay outside his office unless explicitly invited in.

I hardly glance at the clock ticking away the minutes before we’ll have to head out, the precious moments before I don the mask again and become the hardheaded asshole everyone considers me.

No one will ever see the worry giving me a fucking ulcer.

“I don’t want to hear any of it. As far as we’re concerned, this matter is settled. Make sure tonight runs smoothly and keep your mouth shut.” Stefan flicks both buttons of his jacket closed and snaps his fingers. “Tia! Get in here.”

I swallow over a groan. “Don’t bring her—”

Once Stefan has his fiancée around, all conversation halts. Period.

I shift around to cut off his exit before he has a chance to blow me off. “Stefan, I’m serious. We were supposed to stop.”

“And I’m telling you to trust me,” he replies, his gaze hardening. “If you have a problem with the way I run things, then shut the fuck up and fall in line. I don’t give a shit about any moral qualms. Tonight has to be perfect. Put your focus where it actually matters. Tia! Get your goddamn ass in here before I beat it off you.”

He barks out her name like the woman is no more than a dog. The door opens half a heartbeat later, and Tia enters with her head already ducked low in subservience. A massive diamond glitters on her left hand, displayed to perfection by the dark velvet of her long-sleeved gown. The dress is cut low enough to show only a glimpse of the purple bruises marring her pale skin.

Shaken, bruised as usual, even with her brown locks perfectly curled around her heart shaped face—she used to be absolutely lovely. Radiant. Now, she’s subservient.

“You need me, my love?” she asks in a soft voice.

Stefan holds out his hand for her to take and wrenches her to his side,

forcing her to swallow her pained gasp when he presses his mouth against hers.

“Just do your fucking job, Marco,” he says as he pulls away from her. “You have one purpose tonight: to make sure all goes well.”

That’s the end of our conversation, the end of any sort of opening I’ll ever get to have about the decisions he’s made without me.

He stalks off down the hall, dragging Tia along with him, heading to the conference center, no doubt, or wherever the fuck he wants to go before the auction while he shoves the bulk of his responsibilities off on me. I should walk with a hunch. I’m practically shouldering the bulk of running the Syndicate by myself, my brother too lost in his own head and darkness to be bothered.

Except this threw me for a loop.

After a few heartbeats along in the office, I finally head out and take the steps two at a time.

The office building we’ve claimed as our headquarters is half a block from the massive convention center we rented out for the holiday party and charity auction. The wealthy elite of the city are invited, as well as a few fucking guests connected to *our* new business venture.

I grit my teeth against the wave of cold smacking me in the face the moment I push outside. Great gusts of icy wind creep inside my jacket, wrapping around my ankles and gnawing at any hint of exposed skin. I hurry my stride, head down, working to keep myself under control.

Goddamn Stefan. He knows I’ve had reservations about drugs since we started. It was my hard line, the one thing I told him I was unwilling to do.

Still, his latest surprise is fuel for the fire inside me, the one I’ve been doing my best to ignore, because once the fire lights for real, there will be no stopping me. I’ll be done trying to patch things up between us, done trying to make this work when his darkness grows alongside my conscience.

I head in through the back entrance, taking a second to warm myself before striding into the main section of the party space.

The massive interior has been transformed into a winter wonderland. A few guests already mingle before the bulk of the festivities start while the caterers move on silent feet, carrying trays of appetizers and bottles of wine and expensive liquor, finishing their setup.

An hour passes, an hour of me smoldering and grinding my jaw, muscles tensed beneath the facade of normalcy. The food is fucking perfect, and there,

in the center of the crowd, my brother and Tia hold court, laughing at some joke one of his simpering courtiers made. No one seems to realize the sound is as fake as his white smile.

No one holds my interest, and although I'm on the lookout for cartel members, I spot nothing out of the ordinary, which pisses me off even more.

Then, a flash of red from the entrance has me turning in that direction, and my heartbeat falters.

Red on red, it seems. The petite, crimson-haired beauty is clothed in a dress of a similar hue that, rather than clashing with her hair, only accentuates the fiery strands, like sunlight on rubies.

Her nerves are obvious, despite her attempts to blend in with the rest of the guests shuffling through security. Despite the fantastic strides she's made to fool everyone around her, she practically reeks of it: the obvious cop among the bustling merrymakers.

A flash of fury rises inside me before it twists and transforms into something else: curiosity.

I take a step in her direction before I realize I've moved.

The FBI has been trying to take Stefan down for some time now, and the last agent they sent our way...didn't end well. I'd watched it all happen; his death was gruesome.

If *this* is another one of those feeble attempts, then it may very well be impossible to knock Stefan down from his pedestal. The woman stands out like a drop of blood on fresh snow, with her red hair, pale skin, and luminous blue eyes.

Unless—

Without looking too closely at my motives, I move toward the woman in red, prepared to do anything to get her alone.

## CHAPTER 3

# Lacey



**W**es is down the street, a block over, waiting. He's parked a safe distance from the swanky event in a discrete white van with blacked out windows and the logo of a fake plumbing company across the side.

He's also in my ear the entire time.

"Keep your breathing regulated. Nothing raises suspicions like a woman hyperventilating in the middle of a party," he says. "And don't forget to smile for the cameras."

His voice reverberates through my skull. I'm not even close to hyperventilating, but he's got a point. The more I draw attention to myself, the harder it will be to make it through the night undetected. The hardest part, I know, will be to enter without the earbud or the gun in my purse being detected.

This is why I don't do undercover work anymore.

I force a smile, lips painted the same deep crimson as the dress clinging to every nook and cranny of my body. It shows more skin than I'd like, and the extravagantly tall shoes still only make me shoulder height on most people, but I do feel beautiful. After wearing mostly suits at work or sweats while at home, it's a nice change of pace.

Still, feeling confident in an outfit and being able to do my job well are different beasts.

Two guards stand at the entrance, looking discreet enough as doormen, holding the thick glass door open for guests as they approach. Inside, there will be more guards and...a metal detector.

*Ah, shit.*

These kinds of places always have top notch security. We expected the place to be swamped with guards and muscle men—Wes scoped everyone out before I even got dressed—but the metal detector is a new touch, something I’ll have to figure out on the fly.

I’ll add that to my mental list. First, I have to come off inconspicuous as my new persona. Lacey Matthews no more; I’m born anew as Natasha Moretti.

One guy holds the door open for me, and I flash each of them a coy look under my heavy eye makeup. Natasha is a *very* different person from Lacey. Natasha is well known within the criminal underworld, a vibrant and seductive woman, the mistress of high-ranking mafia member Gerardo “Mad Dog” Fante.

Natasha is a real person, and I’m assuming her identity.

I clutch my purse tighter as I approach three more men by the entrance to the ballroom, their metal detecting wands scanning the guests ahead of me.

No weapons—one of the only rules for entering the party today. Everyone comes in peace with goodwill toward man, while I came to arrest someone.

What these people don’t know about Natasha Moretti is that she’s been missing for a while, and for a different reason than what they’ve been told. While the rumors say she’s been driven underground after a deal gone wrong, she’s really been taken into custody after flashing her boobs at a police officer one night. One drunken nipple slip led to an arrest for public indecency and during booking, the arresting officers found way more than a dimebag of cocaine shoved up her crotch.

With how powerful Natasha is, I doubt they’ll be able to keep her long on those charges. Someone will be more than happy to make or take a deal, which means my time as Natasha is short for this job.

The clock is already ticking.

This is where Wes’ skills really shine. He found out that there are only a few people who know what Natasha really looks like. Apparently, Gerardo keeps her well-hidden as his mistress, and because of some bad blood between him and Stefan, he’s been kicked off the guest list for this event. His loss, my gain. At least we both have red hair, so there was no reason to dye mine to match. That’s about as far as it goes in the looks department.

Wes and I matched me against her mugshot before coming out, and the differences are way more apparent than the similarities. Natasha, even on her

worst day, strikes you as the type of person to cause a scene when she walks in a room, as though she thrives on the drama and the attention. I'm happier in sweats with a little hood, watching Netflix on the couch, or a nicely tailored suit, taking my team through a debrief.

A throat clears, and I stare straight ahead, having to remember to soften the surprise on my face. The guard gestures for me to step forward, and I stride ahead confidently, without the wobble of trying to get my balance in these ridiculous shoes.

For me, three inches is ridiculous. These are double.

The convention center is decked out in a Christmas explosion. Someone set off a bomb, and seasonal cheer went everywhere, the room completely draped in garlands and lights and fake snow. Even the glass has been frosted, making it impossible for the uninvited to peek inside.

I take another step toward the guard, another. There's security everywhere, and there is no way I'll be able to get through.

My stomach drops.

My hand starts to shake on my black clutch.

No. I'm not giving in to the nerves. I've been trained to keep my cool in situations like this, and the gun is a prototype, designed to be undetectable. But what if it's not? What if something goes wrong and the sensors start shrieking? My cover is blown, and then I'm as good as dead, just like the other agent who tried to get close. Did they even make it through the door?

The sensation of eyes on me burns the side of my face, and when I turn, there's a man in a tuxedo staring. A—I swallow over the lump in the back of my throat. A very handsome man with dark hair, scruff on his lean jaw, and a furrowed brow. His hands are in the pocket of his jacket, and instead of offering a smile once I meet his eyes, he does nothing. Immovable.

I ignore him as my turn in line approaches.

"Are you sure the earpiece is going to pass this? There are a lot of big dudes with guns here, and I am definitely underdressed," I panic mumble to Wes in my ear.

"Try not to stress yourself out. You'll sweat."

"Of course I'm sweating. What do you think?"

"I think we have the right person for the job, and everything is going to be fine, *Natasha*." Wes emphasizes the name. "Moretti would never be nervous in this situation. She'd breeze right past the guards and probably flirt with them, if only to have her boyfriend slit them asshole to navel while she

watches.”

“You’re disgusting,” I whisper hiss.

I hardly realize Mister Dark Handsome is at my side until he grabs me roughly by the arm. The last bits of air explode from my lungs with a squeak, and I almost topple over as he pulls me back toward the outside door.

“Don’t say a word.” At once I’m at his side, his mouth pressed against my temple, he utters his warning in a voice so low, I feel it in my bones. “You understand? Mouth shut, and you’ll be okay.”

His warmth seeps into me immediately, along with the strong musky scent of his cologne.

I’m caught.

Already.

I’m going to die.

I open my mouth to argue with him since we’re already out the door onto the street, but the guy moves fast, practically lifting me and keeping me at his hip to get me to hurry.

“*Hush.*” He utters the warning again, the demand barked. This time, the swirling in my stomach isn’t from nerves alone. The scent, the look on this face, the proximity...how long has it been since I’d last been fucked stupid? He’s so much taller than me, the kind of height you know has muscle to match.

He slides his hand down from my elbow to my palm and grips me tightly, his thumb stroking over my skin. My breath catches in my chest, and he backs me against the wall, caging me between body and brick, making sure I have nowhere to go without going through him first.

This is the time to *insert sexy flirtatious phrase here*. Something Natasha would say.

My brain is nothing but mush in his presence.

He drops his head beside mine, our lips inches apart. “You are never going to get in there with your gun.”

My jaw drops, and I blink, struggling to meet his eyes. They’re dark, fathomless, the soul behind them visible to me in a flash, and I shudder. A small smirk plays across his full lips, as though he’s enjoying the way I respond to his touch.

The stranger takes a step forward and pins me further with his hips. I need to deny it.

“I-I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I can smell the nerves on you.” He bares his teeth at me. “You reek of cop. Did you really think you’d be able to make it inside without someone spotting you? You might as well have worn a sign above your head.”

“I’m not a—”

He grabs my purse and roughly yanks it out of my grip, flicking through the few things I have in there until he finds the specialized gun. “Nice try.”

My breath catches and completely disintegrates in my lungs when he runs the nozzle of the gun against my lips, pressing with just enough force to get me to open for him.

“Are you the kind of woman who gets off on handling a gun?” He drags the edge of it around my mouth before chucking it off toward a sewer grate with a clatter. “Doesn’t matter what kind of weapons you’re packing, sweetheart. The metal detectors are only the first step. There are several layers of security, and one look inside your purse would have given you away.”

He runs his free hand along my waist, down to the flair of my hip and back up, settling his hot, very large palm on my ribcage. My god, he’s huge compared, like a monster cornering a mouse.

My heart nearly beats out of my chest in an attempt to get to his hand as my nipples peak.

“Are you going to kill me?” I manage to ask.

“No.” He leans down to drag the end of his nose along my neckline.

I shiver beneath the touch and his closeness. Damn, the man smells good, too good for his own good. At least if he’s the reaper coming for me, he looks like this.

“Follow me if you want to avoid security.”

Without waiting for an answer from me, he takes my hand, linking our fingers together. Wait a minute...is he *helping* me?

“You’re going to have to play along if you want this to work. Do what I say, or you’ll regret it,” he says. “Nod if you understand.”

My attention focuses on the moment, the sensation of his calloused palm in mine, and the click clacking of my heels along the pavement. Not to mention—

“Lacey! What the fuck is happening? Talk to me. Are you okay? What is going on?” Wes’ voice buzzes inside of my ear. “Your location changed.”

I can’t answer him—the man is already half dragging me back inside, but this time, we cut to the head of the line. He slips my hand into the crook of

his elbow, linking us together and holding me close, like we're a couple.

Like we belong together.

What the fuck is happening *indeed*.

His touch turns caressing, the sort of absentminded gesture a man in love might make while they're out in public. I don't even know his name.

He takes us past the two guards waving their metal detecting wands; up ahead, through the door, is a secondary detector. He drags me forward confidently, and the detector beeps, sending a shockwave through my system. Without pausing, the man points to his hip, and the gun he no doubt has hidden there.

Much to my eternal shock and a little bit of dismay, he is automatically waved through.

"Let's go," he murmurs to me.

The convention center's massive main area has been transformed into a grand ballroom, bedecked in gold, red, and green. The latter comes from garlands strung along every available surface, on top of four different Christmas trees with differing decor on each of their boughs.

I stop dead in my tracks, and my mysterious savior pauses along with me while I take in the view.

Christmas used to mean something to me. It used to be fun and light and joyful, all the things the Hallmark movies and relentless commercials try to sell you, but things happen. Family dynamics change and people die. It makes the season a little less bright and a whole less merry. Recently, it's been about work, but maybe...maybe I should actually call Mom when I get out of here, see what she's been doing and how well she's been holding up without me in her life.

Work has been my sanctuary and my escape, a way for me to avoid all the things I've needed to avoid while keeping myself busy and building a future for myself.

Except, standing here right now, none of those things matter. There's only the beautiful decorations, the bodies twirling in time with soft Christmas music on the dance floor, and the man at my side, the one giving off enough heat to thaw an iceberg.

I chance a look at him and find him watching me again.

"What are your motives?" I ask him out loud. "I mean, why did you help me?"

A small smile tweaks the corner of his mouth. "You mean besides

wanting to enjoy the company of a beautiful woman?”

“Lacey, breathe. Calm. You’re in. I can’t come and get you. You’re going to have to stay focused and get yourself out of this mess.” Wes’ voice sounds tinny in my ear.

Does he know I’ve lost my gun? That I’m flying blind at this point?

“Of course you have a motive,” I reply. This is probably a trap. I’m about to die. The knowledge lodges in my throat, along with a churning low in my abdomen.

One of the guards cuts across the dance floor and addresses my stranger with a sharp bob of his head. “Marco, I’m going to need your help with something.”

“What is it now?” He doesn’t even glance at the man—he just continues to stare at me. A girl might drown in eyes so deep and brown, I’m sure of it.

“It’s...one of those times where nothing is enough to calm the beast,” the guard answers in a low baritone.

Realization clicks then, a flash of sickening inspiration. I know who this man is—Marco Zicari, Stefan’s younger brother and his second-in-command. I am so dead.

## CHAPTER 4

# Marco



The woman in red is law enforcement, absolutely. What level, what agency, though I'm not sure yet. Red hair, blue eyes, a round face, and the healthy glowing skin of youth, with her lips set in a grim, determined line.

Still, she is a gift, no matter where she came from, because I've been hoping for someone like her. I've been hoping I'd have the answer to my problem, and it's been dropped right into my lap like a fucking present.

Her looks are the biggest gift of the night, though.

There are two reasons for my gratitude.

One, she is absolutely gorgeous, a woman I would not mind fucking stupid right here behind one of the Christmas trees.

Two, she and her team might finally help me boot my brother off his throne. He needs to go, and I've been hashing out ways to do it—not just for the last few minutes, or months, but for years.

Having the feds involved will mean extra manpower, the kind necessary to finally dismantle our organization once and for all. I don't even give a shit if I fall along with the rest of the chips. Things have to change, and the longer I wait, the more damage Stefan causes.

I just needed this last piece, this last prod, and that's where this woman comes in. I don't even know her name, but the guard is standing there waiting for me to answer.

"Are you trying to tell me my brother is having one of his fits?"

The guard's face goes blank. "Sir."

I call them his temper tantrums. Whenever something hasn't gone Stefan's way, he blows a gasket, wanting heads to roll for whatever the slight

he perceives, whether it's real or imagined. I should have known something would set him off tonight. I'm surprised he managed to last this long. Stefan has grown too powerful, too fucking fat headed. Shouldn't his position bring a little bit of personal culpability? Apparently not. It shouldn't be that way.

Looks like I'm going to have to balance him and this woman, because there is no way I'm letting her out of my sight.

Finally, I straighten. It's hard to drag my gaze away from this woman's petite frame to the man beside me. She's so small, I could throw her over my shoulder and carry her away, maybe to some darkened corner to peel that dress off her and bare the silky skin underneath.

"How bad is it?" At least Stefan isn't out on the main floor causing a scene. What would his new business associates think of him then?

"Bad," the guard notes.

With that one word, I have my answer.

"He's upstairs in one of the conference rooms."

The general assessment is that I'll need to hurry my ass up there before he causes too much property damage to be ignored, even with a fat check.

Okay. I weigh the options before turning to the redhead.

My father would roll over in his grave if he saw this bullshit. Stefan is proud of his accomplishments and wants to dig deeper, while I'm stuck in the situation, bound by blood and obligation, unable to walk away and hands tied when it comes to making a difference.

I arrive at a decision and send the guard off, bending to whisper in her ear. "I know who you're supposed to be tonight. The hair gives you away."

"I'm Natasha," the woman answers with conviction, but she shudders against me, and I've got her close enough to feel every tiny movement of her fragile frame.

"Well, Natasha," I stress the name and pause, watching her reaction. "You're going to have to stay out of the way, unless you want to be killed. If you move, then you're taking a risk. There is another pressing obligation I have to see to, and when I come back, we're going to talk. Trust me. I'll be *right* back. Do not move."

She stares at me in confusion. I fucking hate leaving her, especially when I want to know more about her, why she's here tonight, but if I don't see to Stefan, hell is going to break loose. I'm the only one who can head him off before he detonates.

"I'll come back for you."

I wait for her to bob her head in answer before casting a final look back. It takes more effort than I would have thought to turn on my heel and head for the elevator to the second floor. The sound of the crowd and the damnable Christmas music slowly fades, and once the doors close, they disappear entirely. There's only me and the evenness of my breathing, a stark contrast to my racing pulse. When the doors open again, I'm composed and striding down the hallway.

It takes no time at all to find where Stefan has sequestered himself, far away from the party.

I open the door and duck in time to avoid the chair thrown at me.

Stefan stands in the middle of the chaos, throwing a fit that would make the gods of Olympus proud.

The chair crashes into the door behind me as he moves to one of the small tables. He upends it and sends it slamming against the glass table in the center of the room. The glass shatters, shards cascading through the air.

Tia, cowering in the corner, flinches to try and avoid the shards, but with no such luck. She cries and throws her arms over her head to protect her face.

"Stefan."

He doesn't hear me call his name above his roar of fury as my brother charges through the carnage and grabs Tia by her updo. He swings her away from the wall by her hair, a small scream escaping past her painted lips, before he tugs her straight and slaps his open palm across her cheeks. He follows with a yell right in her face as he wrenches her head back by her hair, forcing her to look at him.

"Hey, that's enough." I stride forward, inserting myself between them and taking Stefan's next punch right into my gut.

Fuck. The air goes right out of my lungs, and I bend over, every part of me groaning at the impact. He might have cracked one of her ribs if he'd hit her instead of me.

"Stefan, enough." The words come out garbled.

I stay put and block him while gesturing for Tia to get the fuck out of the room. It takes her a long moment to scramble toward the door, and she waits there, watching us, as Stefan roars for her to come back.

"Go!" She's got to leave before things get any worse.

"I don't want to see you!" Stefan spits in my face. "Get the fuck out of here, Marco!"

I grab him by both shoulders. My brother might be older, but I'm

stronger, a few inches taller, and slightly out of breath from his punch. It doesn't make a difference.

“Stefan, come on. It's me. Who better to be with you right now?”

Stefan yells, trying to rip out of my hold with little luck. I back him into the corner and keep him there.

“Do you really want to go back down there all red faced? Knowing what kind of impression it will leave on people?” I keep my tone light yet firm, using my charm on him the way I normally do. It's the only thing that calms him down, and it might be the last line of defense to keep Stefan from murdering someone. “You're acting like a fucking lunatic. What would Father say if he saw you right now?”

He looks up at me, eyes wild. “Fuck! Don't say his name to me!”

“You know it's true, Stefan.”

Breathing hard, he just stares at me. I wait a bit before finally letting him go, and he turns in a circle, giving me his back. He wrenches his hands up, practically ripping his hair out by the ends.

“They got stopped.” The words are forced, each one of them strained and harsh. “Okay?”

“Who?”

“A few of our mules. They got stopped at the airport. I've lost kilos. Do you fucking understand, Marco?”

“Why don't you explain it to me?” I sigh.

“Kilos of drugs.” The whites of his eyes are stark against his golden-brown skin. “Gone, confiscated. People here are waiting for them. The drugs have already been paid for, and people are expecting a product! This is my first transaction with my connection to the cartel—it doesn't look good on me. And if it doesn't look good on me, then it doesn't look good on the Zicaris. Get the picture now?”

Everything inside of me plummets lower.

“What have you done?” The words are barely above a whisper.

Stefan clearly hasn't thought this through. He already has guys moving drugs? Why would he send them through an airport? It's asking for trouble. No wonder the feds are sniffing at our heels.

He smooths his hair back, but his fury is still evident. “I've invited Mr. Herrera over for dinner tomorrow.”

“Herrera?”

“The head of the Black Scorpions.”

I know the name of the largest drug cartel in the country. Everyone in our line of work does. Of course Stefan had to partner with the biggest and baddest to start this transition into drug running.

I glance at Stefan. "It's Christmas tomorrow."

"He will come," Stefan continues as if I never spoke, "because I owe him, whether that be in money, drugs, or blood. Mine, yours. It won't matter to him."

"It's too dangerous to host him," I argue. "Are you insane? Getting involved with the Black Scorpions is too far. This is ridiculous. You're acting suicidal."

Throwing a goddamn tantrum like usual. I'm not sure why I ever expect better from him. I'm constantly disappointed, and it's my own fault. He proves me right time and again, and I never learn.

"It doesn't matter if it's dangerous or not." Stefan's eyes narrow. "It's happening."

"On Christmas."

"No better time. Perhaps the spirit of the season will make our new friend more forgiving. We need them, Marco. We need them, or everything is lost for us."

"I have very strong doubts about that." It's starting to feel like I'm talking to myself. He's perfected ignoring me.

I trail Stefan over to the tinted window overlooking the party below us. He's a miser, surveying the glitz and glam, unhappy with all of it, even though he has more than they do.

"Wait. Who," he starts, "is that?"

I follow his pointed finger across the crowd, landing on a familiar red dress, still in the same place I left her.

"Like the decorations?" I ask with feigned ignorance.

"You know damn well what I'm pointing to. Now who is that delicious morsel?"

"That's Natasha Moretti." I easily hand over the fake name.

Stefan bobs his head in silent acknowledgment. "No wonder old "Mad Dog" Fante keeps her under lock and key. I wonder why he let her out tonight. She must be reporting back to him, since he wasn't invited."

Immediately, I go on the defensive, crowding closer, as though I'll block his view with my body.

"She's my date tonight." I'm not sure why I'm protective over a woman I

don't know, but I see the way Stefan stares at her from his perch.

Predatory.

I don't like it.

"You're kidding me." Stefan sounds shocked. "You never bring women to these events."

"Things change"

"If Gerardo finds out... it could cause trouble between us. His family and ours."

I blow Stefan off. "It's not going to be trouble. I wanted some ass tonight, and Natasha offered herself willingly. Besides, we hate Gerardo. Consider this an opportunity to stick it to him."

Stefan barks out a laugh, something hard disintegrating in his eyes. "Yes, you're right, though you're not the one to stir pots. Still, I like the idea." He turns his attention back to "Natasha."

A low growl purrs in the back of his throat. "The things I would do to her. Bury my cock between those creamy breasts. Bend her over and stick my cock in her ass, raw... I'd like to do so many things," he murmurs.

"Cut it out." It's the only sign of aggression I'll show, especially since Stefan is finally starting to calm down.

His head snaps in my direction. "What?"

"I don't want to hear any of it." I'm trying to keep the swell of fury and frustration to myself.

"Look at you, getting snippy with me." Stefan rounds on me, squaring his shoulders in a way he knows makes him look larger than he is. "Remember your place, Marco."

"You're threatening me?" I ask.

"Brother or not, I won't let anyone undermine me, especially for a fucking piece of ass. If I want her, I'll have her." His fingers stretch at his sides, like he's itching to hit me again. "Now, get the hell out of my sight."

Because I can't stand to look at him anymore, I do.

## CHAPTER 5

# Lacey



**W**hy the fuck am I standing here?  
*Because Marco Zicari asked me to.*

I figure, in the back of my mind, that if I can't seduce Stefan himself into lowering his defenses, his brother is the next best thing. I wring my hands together before realizing the implications of the gesture and tossing my shoulders back.

Confidence. It's got to be confidence and not fear; otherwise, the sharks around me are going to eat me alive.

Might not be such a bad thing, with Marco. He's hot as hell.

But now that he's left me alone, I've actually got to do something with myself, which includes not acting too obvious. I shouldn't stay still, clearly, even though he wanted me to. Natasha Moretti would not stay in place because a man warned her to, not unless that man was Mad Dog.

Being with Marco will have certain implications in their world. I say as much out loud to Wes, who's still murmuring advice in my ear.

"Nothing you're saying is actually making me feel better," I whisper in return.

"Oh, it's my fault I'm worried about my partner?"

I shift my focus to a white and black penguin of a server, who's holding a bottle of champagne wrapped in crisp white linen. I need to keep my head clear, but man, I'm parched—a few sips of bubbly will do me well.

"I'd be worried about me too," I admit.

"With good reason. I hear the way you interact with Marco. What's the matter? You got the hots for him?" Wes teases.

I roll my eyes, hoping he can somehow feel it where he is. "Shut up, Wes.

Now's not the time." Left to my own devices, I get to snooping. The first stop is the waiter and soon, I'm making the rounds with a half full glass of dry champagne dangling between my manicured fingers.

"Laceee," Wes sing-songs in my ear. "I know you. Besides, there was a lot of panting going on back there when he first grabbed you. I could hear it."

"Okay fine. Have you seen him? He's gorgeous," I admit. "But I'm working, and he's not here right now. I do, however, see a few high profiles over by the buffet line."

Their faces match the mug shots I remember from cases past. All of them are men who got off on technicalities, and although the bureau suspected that money passed between hands to smooth the transition, we'd never been able to prove anything.

I go on to describe the rest of the room to Wes, making sure to keep my voice low and a sinfully confident expression on my face. The makeup helps—the makeup and the dress and the sparkling nail polish slashed across each finger.

This is a persona I can wear as easily as any mask, any costume. This isn't me, which makes it much easier to do what I need to do.

"Just please, don't start picking out curtains yet," Wes continues, ignoring literally everything else I've told him. "Natasha might, but he's the literal enemy here. You can't let the D distract you. Unlike *some* people."

"And here I thought you put me in this position because I've got the V to handle the D." My gaze zeroes in on another familiar face. This one has been on our radar for quite some time, a tall and wire-thin man with a gash across his chin that splits the peppered hair along his jaw into two, distinct patches.

"What is it?" Wes asks in my silence.

"I'm pretty sure I see Waldo the Rat standing underneath some mistletoe."

"What's the matter? You going to give him a little slip of tongue?"

Not exactly, but I'm pretty sure Waldo has been connected to Stefan and the syndicate for the last eight months or so, but nothing I've been able to find has substantiated the relationship between them. Time for me to do a little digging and see what kind of info I can drag out of him, if I can.

I drain the rest of my champagne and saunter over to where Waldo stands, staring at the garland of mistletoe as though scrutinizing every white berry.

"You know the lore about standing underneath the mistletoe," I say by

way of greeting.

He turns to face me slowly, a light flickering inside the depths of his icy blue eyes.

“You’re a little tall for me to kiss, so you might have to bend down a little and help a girl out.” I stand on my tiptoes to prove a point, puckering my red lips slightly so he gets the idea.

After another long moment of pause, Waldo bends just enough for me to place a kiss at the center of his cheek.

“Is that supposed to be for good luck?” he asks.

“You’ll have to let me know if it works.” Another waiter passes us, and I flag him down, grabbing another flute of champagne and replacing my empty glass. “Or perhaps it’s not good luck so much as a wish,” I continue.

“Then what have you wished for?” His gaze scours me from top to bottom, lingering on my chest.

“It’s not polite to ask a lady to reveal her secrets. Not unless you’d like to share first.”

“I’m not in the habit of letting people know my secrets. Not unless they are easily carried out.”

“Then perhaps you’d like to tell me something you’re most proud of; one of those wishes you’ve had carried out.” The fastest way to get a man to open up was to get him to brag about himself, and in this case, it fits right along with the flirtation. Stroke his ego, make him believe I’m invested in what he has to say, and he’ll start to talk. They always inevitably slip, especially when there’s alcohol involved.

I take another sip of champagne while I wait for him to answer.

Waldo the Rat happens to be a big bragger. It’s easier than expected to get him to talk, and my second flute of champagne settles nice and warm in my empty stomach. His movements grow grander as he speaks, life glinting in his eyes through each story.

“You know, working with the Zicaris brings about a fair share of drama.” Waldo’s voice drops into a conspirator’s whisper.

“Oh my, tell me more.” I’m close enough to touch him, and I run my free hand along his forearm. He’s about to let something big slip. I can feel it.

A throat clears, and Waldo straightens, his gaze shuttering, the rest of him going stiff. “Marco.” He inclines his head just as heat presses into my back—a solid, male body.

An arm bands around my waist. “I see you’ve been keeping my date

company while I've been busy, Waldo," Marco replies.

My blood is alight, his nearness doing strange things to me, undoing every last reservation I have about my ability to get this job done.

I don't make the mistake of turning to look at Marco, however. Not when he yanks me back against him, his grip leaving no other way to interpret his actions: possession.

"Yes, we've been swapping stories," Waldo says tightly.

"And perhaps I'd been about to share a story of my own. There is quite a lot of drama in my world, too—such as trying to find a place to hide a gun in this outfit." I let out a laugh.

"That's enough." Marco yanks me back harder. "Say goodnight, *Natasha*."

I barely have a chance to glance at Waldo the Rat before Marco hauls me against his chest and turns, my feet skimming the ground.

"What the hell are you doing?" he whispers in my ear.

"What do you mean?"

"You're fucking drunk. I leave you alone for five minutes and you, what? Down an entire bottle of champagne? Here I thought you had more tact than this."

Tact? I'm not drunk.

I've only had three glasses of...my head spins, my limbs hot and heavy once I tune into the sensation. I'd been so focused on getting the Rat to talk that I hadn't given a thought to drinking more than I should have.

"I'm not sloppy," I argue.

"Which is what a sloppy drunk would say. You almost gave yourself away, did you know that? Did you even realize?" Marco pulls me away to the party down a short hallway lit by only a few lights speckled overhead.

He stops to drag open a door to the left and thrusts me inside before slamming it shut behind us. Crates are stacked against one of the walls, an antique fainting couch with gilded finishes in the center. Art hangs on the other walls, along with several display stands boasting vases and sculptures. There's more wealth in one room than I've seen in my life.

"What are you doing?" I turn on him. I know I'm small in size, but I've had combat training, and I don't appreciate him man-handling me. "I almost got him to talk. Do you know how much intel I could have gotten from him?"

Marco's gaze hardens. "You would have been dead if I hadn't stepped in. This isn't a joke, and these people...everything about them is part of a game.

You weren't getting him to talk. He was getting *you* to talk."

I scoff, shaking my head. "Not true."

"He wouldn't have told you anything of use, trust me, but by the time the conversation ended, he would have had your number. This isn't your world. As much as you'd like to act like you have it handled, trust me, you do not. Especially when you're practically ready to topple over."

"I'm not drunk."

"I wouldn't blame you if you were, but there is no excuse for being drunk *and* sloppy." His eyes narrow. "You would get into more trouble than you're worth. Your best bet is to stick with me, because I know Stefan, and I know the best way to take him down."

"Oh, you seriously think I'll just believe you when you say you want to take care of your brother?" I cross my arms over my chest, frustration bubbling alongside the alcohol in my veins.

"Yes." It's as simple as that. "I know the best way to take him down, one that hopefully won't get us killed."

*Us.*

I don't know this man beyond rumors of his ruthlessness. Or perhaps that's the shadow of his brother tainting everything it falls on. I have no idea what's real and what's not at this point.

Marco approaches me with a hand held out in front of him, like I'm some kind of wild animal he's trying to soothe. "No, you have no reason to trust me, but I have a few secrets of my own. Maybe sharing them with you will get you to trust me, even if it's just for this case."

"Try me."

"I fucking despise my family business."

The stark truth of those words shoots through me, arrow-straight and aiming for the heart. "What do you mean?" Wes is silent in my ear, listening to all of this.

"I've been clandestinely working from the inside to bring down the syndicate without getting caught," Marco replies. "I tried feeding the last agent information, but he refused my help. He thought I was setting him up, and it ended up getting him. killed"

"I'm wondering the same thing," I blurt out. "If you're setting me up." Okay, I'm a little tipsier than I thought. "How can I trust you?"

"I believe, if we work together and combine our wit and intelligence, we can find a way to dismantle the syndicate once and for all. You, my drunk

and obviously pissed off savior, are the key to my escape.”

It’s not enough to get me to trust him. It’s not enough for me to forget all my bureau training, although getting even a little tipsy at a party like this is a rookie move. I’ve made mistakes, and I wonder if trusting Marco will be one.

I take a step forward, then another, bringing my palms flush with his chest. “You really want to help me?”

He shakes his head. “Oh no, sweetheart. I want you to help me. There is a big difference.”

I’m not sure which one of us is holding the cards at this point. Neither of us, maybe.

“I do think you aren’t here by chance tonight.” He’s the one to move now, crowding me backward step by step. “I think you’re smart enough to understand what it means to have someone like me at your disposal. And the little voice inside your ear knows it, too.”

“Don’t trust him, Lace,” Wes whispers. “We can do this without him.”

Still, I know without having to ask that Wes understands what I do in that moment: Marco is an invaluable asset. He’ll have insider information, and he could have ratted me out a dozen times, could have let me get myself killed or worse, but he stepped in.

Marco reaches out to push against my collarbone at the same time my knees hit the back of the fainting couch. I go down hard, still holding his eyes.

“We are going to tear each other apart in this partnership,” I tell him.

His smile turns wolfish. “Oh, I’m counting on it.”

The drink in my veins makes me more reckless than I like—more reckless than logical, which is my only excuse for being alone with him like this.

The talk is heated, and the look in his eyes is hot enough to scorch me. God, he’s good looking, especially when he’s smirking down at me the way he his. Marco reaches out and tips my chin up to face him.

“Let’s get one thing straight: we’re helping each other, but we both know who the muscle is in this operation.”

“As long as I’m the brains.”

“From where I’m sitting? It’s not looking too good for you.”

I glare at him, my skin on fire from his touch. “Then why are you still here?”

“Because I can’t fucking help myself. Not when you’re staring at me the

way you are.”

I’m going to hell for this. Surely every step I’ve made tonight is nothing but wrong because I can think of nothing else but kissing him. Marco must notice the change in my expression, because he sucks in a deep breath.

“What—” He cuts off at the sound of a zipper, and I’m pulling down his fly before I even realize what I’ve done.

“Let’s see how vulnerable you’ll be around me,” I whisper.

Taking a second to yank the earpiece out and toss it far away, I pull out his already-thickening cock. Oh my god, it’s gorgeous and *huge*. I can barely get my hand around it as I squeeze. This antique velvet couch puts me at the perfect height, and I cast one last look up to his eyes before darting my tongue out to slick it across the underside of him.

He’s thick and hard, and the mushroom head of him throbs as I watch. I lean in and suck him deep until my lips press to my fingers. He hits the back of my throat, and Marco sucks in another breath, this one strangled.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

But he doesn’t touch me, doesn’t string his hands through my hair the way I wish he would while I work him. I close my lips around him to increase the suction while I work my head up and down in time with my hands. He stays still, his hips jerking occasionally when I find just the right spot. I release him with a pop and swirl my tongue around his crown.

“Nice dick,” I murmur before sucking him deep again. This is what Natasha Moretti would do.

His grunt tells me everything I need to know.

This is insane. *I’m* insane, to go down on a dude I just met who is the absolute definition of dangerous and untrustworthy.

Yet...

It’s not the champagne to blame. It’s not the champagne or adrenaline or anything else egging me on while I lap at him, edging him closer to completion. It’s instinct, and there is something about Marco Zicari in this moment that I don’t want to resist. I want to trust him.

I’m going to go with my gut on this one. Well, maybe my pussy. Let’s just hope the horny bitch doesn’t get me killed.

I slide my tongue across his slit, lapping at the leaking precum before pulling back. I glance up at him and continue to work his cock with one hand, and then two, cupping his balls.

“How close are you?” I ask.

His eyes darken. “Close enough to hope you’re hungry.”

My lips part in a smile. “Starving.”

I keep bobbing my head until his movements grow strained, his hips slamming forward before he cups the back of my head and holds me in place, fucking my face faster, harder. Tears spring to the corner of my eyes, saliva pooling and dripping down my chin. He grunts again and his dick spasms, shooting hot cum down my throat faster than I’m able to swallow it.

I gag on his cock, but he won’t let up until he’s spilled every last drop down my throat. Finally, Marco releases me, and I gasp for breath, reaching up to wipe the tears from my eyes.

“I think we’ve both shown the other more than we want.” He sounds breathless. Staring at me, he reaches out to tuck himself back into his boxers, zipping his pants. “At this point, I’d call this better than a handshake.”

I’m dripping wet from sucking him off and wondering how his cock will feel inside me. “I guess we’ve agreed to work together, huh?”

“I’ll be happy to return the favor—” Marco starts, right as the door to the room opens and his brother strides inside.

## CHAPTER 6

# Marco



“It smells like sweat and cum in here.” Stefan’s laughter booms, and that instantly has me straightening. I step quickly in front of Natasha while she composes herself.

“I can only guess what’s happened in here, little brother, and I commend you for moving so quickly.” Stefan doesn’t bother to close the door. He just starts to clap, slowly, for effect. “I never thought you’d be able to seal the deal this quickly.”

It’s clear we’ve been doing *something* in this room, something I’d rather not discuss with my brother. Half a second later, “Natasha” clears her throat and stands, the skirt of her dress falling gracefully back into place and pooling around her ankles.

“What we’ve done is none of your business,” she says in a harsh tone. She catches herself and softens the blow with a sly smile. “Can’t exactly take care of business in the middle of a crowded dance floor.”

“So auction storage is the best place for a couple of young lovers?” Stefan steps into the light, and although there is no hint of his earlier loss of control, I know him, all too well. He’s hanging on by a thread, and he’ll use any excuse he can find to stir up trouble, to let out a little bit more of the aggression he hadn’t been able to lose on his fiancée’s face.

“Rather than enjoying the festivities, you choose to run off. I can’t say I blame you, Marco.” His attention is wholly focused on fake-Natasha, his gaze zeroing in on the swell of her hips and lower. “I don’t blame you for not wanting to wait until the party’s over. With such an attractive woman, I’m sure you were all too eager to bend her over this couch and stake your claim.”

“That’s enough,” I say through gritted teeth. “Whatever point you’re

trying to make, get there. Quickly.”

“Oh?” Stefan arches a brow and steps around me, reaching for her. He trails his finger over her wrist and higher before skimming down her ribs. She freezes. “Perhaps I want to see—”

“Shit, Stefan. Keep your hands to yourself. I told you that she’s my date.”

Natasha isn’t the only one pissed off now. Stefan’s heavy handedness, the way he always tries to take, take, take has reached a boiling point.

Not liking the challenge, Stefan pulls his shoulders back, glaring at me. “Prove you’re an item, Marco. If you’d like to keep her for yourself, then prove it to me. Otherwise, I’ll take her from you, right here, in the middle of the party. I will drag your little redhead out to the middle of the convention center floor and fuck her where everyone can hear her scream.”

Beside me, the agent blanches.

“You’re out of your goddamn mind,” I grunt.

“Am I? Say it one more time.” Stefan is closing the distance between him and the agent, and I cut him off before he has a chance to take her away from me, anger misting my vision.

“You’ve made your point. She’s mine. I’ll prove it to you.”

She’s wide eyed and too ashen when I turn to her. She doesn’t want this. She doesn’t want to be forced to do whatever it is we’ll both have to partake in to soothe the beast.

I keep my focus on her, willing her without words to do the same with me. I smooth my palms down her bare shoulders, her arms, until I’ve got her hands in mine. I squeeze once, reassuringly, before I dip my lips to the base of her neck and kiss a line straight up to her chin. She’s overheated and smells of some sort of floral perfume that goes straight through my senses.

“Focus on me,” I whisper against her ear before biting down on the lobe. “Only me.”

She’s trembling when I grab her, kissing my way from her chin to her nose and her forehead. No, she doesn’t want this, but we’ve got to pretend, or else it could get us both killed.

“Go with it.”

She understands, nodding against me. Her hands move to the back of my neck on their own accord just as I bend to capture her lips with mine. A few steps, and we’re back at the settee.

Where the damn earbud is right there on the cushion for anyone to see if they look closely enough.

I dip her down, my tongue sliding between her lips and tasting myself there, just as I reach for the earbud and crush it, pocketing the pieces in a single, smooth move.

She whimpers when I pull away, righting her at the same time. “Eyes on me, Natasha,” I say loudly.

She obeys, a flush now pinking her cheeks as I guide her back toward the wall, the tip of her head in line with the bottom of a heavy gilded frame, a masterpiece in oil housed within.

*Someone should paint her*, I think before dipping to kiss her again.

I run my hand through her hair, keeping her in place while I taste every inch of her mouth. Our tongues tangle together in a carnal, open-mouthed kiss, and my senses are all but lost. There is no control here. I might be touching her to prove a point, to put on a show, but the outside world fades with each scorching inhale, with every press of her body against mine.

It’s so easy, too easy, to forget that Stefan is here watching the entire show, that this is all for his benefit.

She is so tiny in comparison, her body tight and delicate against my massive height. How easy it would be to pick her up and shove her dress up to her hips, to peel her panties off and take her right here. She’d have no way to fight me if I tried.

I’m powerless to stop myself from touching her, from lifting her off her feet to fit her body more perfectly against mine, her feet dangling above the floor. I shove her dress higher on one leg, and she wraps it around my waist for better purchase, our kisses deepening, my body shielding her from being seen by my brother.

Lost in her—that’s what happened. The intoxicating taste of her mouth, the softness of her skin.

I slide a hand between us and probe between her legs at the heat there. Fuck me, she’s absolutely soaked through the thin material of her panties.

I want my mouth on her. I want to slide my tongue through her cunt and see her wetness on my face when I catch my reflection. I glide two fingers across her pussy, still above her panties, and she groans, the sound catching in her throat.

To taste her the way she tasted me...

*Mine.*

Her arms are tangled around my neck, my mouth on her face, her neck. If one has to be lost, there is no better place to be, although I can think of one

last vista I haven't seen yet. I stroke my fingers over her cunt, back and forth, until her hips are thrusting in time with me.

Stefan clears his throat, and the sound is a gunshot of clarity ripping through my system. At once, I pull back, catching a glimpse of astonished lust on the agent's face before embarrassment starts to set on her cheeks.

This is becoming too dangerous too fast, especially that slender reed of hope forming inside me. Hope of actually being victorious, and perhaps coming away not just unscathed, but with this woman in my bed.

I want her.

"It seems I have to applaud you again, little brother,' Stefan begins. "You sure do know how to put on a show. I'm sure our guests enjoyed the display as much as I did."

I gently set the agent back on her feet and turn, angling my body to keep her slightly behind me as she adjusts her dress again. Several men stand clustered at Stefan's side, and all of them are focused predatorily on the delicate redhead pressed to the wall.

"Marco, I'm not sure if you recognize our guests, but this is Gil Chamberlain. He's Gerardo's third in command." Stefan pauses. "Gil is an acquaintance of Natasha."

I clear my throat. "A pleasure to see you again, Gil."

The man is shorter than Stefan by a head but wider by a good foot or so.

"Gil, Natasha Moretti." Stefan makes the introduction to no doubt rub it in Gerardo's face eventually.

Gil cocks his head to the side. "Excuse me?"

"Come now. Perhaps all the festivities have gotten to your head. Natasha Moretti." Stefan emphasizes the name again, but it's devastatingly clear Gil does not recognize the woman.

Why would he? She isn't Natasha.

Fuck me, this is going downhill fast. My cock stirs in my pants again, a reminder that we have unfinished business, but the most important thing is to get her out of here. Fast.

Without waiting for her to comment or for Gil to call us out, I grab *my* Natasha and whip her into my arms. She's too small to do more than beat against me helplessly as I adjust her in my grip, whirling out past the men, down the hallway, and out the back door, where the Zicari personal car is waiting.

"Marco, put me down!"

Not until we're safe. Not until I've got the back door open and toss her inside the car, where she lands on that sweet ass with a squeal, and I stuff myself inside beside her.

The interior is chilled, the vehicle parked since Stefan got here. The parking lot behind the building is filled with expensive vehicles and several spaces are claimed by stretch limos. Beyond, the street is busy and bustling, full of life. My pocket buzzes, and I zero in on it while Natasha rights herself with a curse and a grumble.

"Care to tell me what the fuck just happened?" Her breath erupts in a white cloud from the cold.

The text isn't one I can ignore without some form of consequence and, being this close to cracking the syndicate wide open, I'm not about to bring more scrutiny down on my shoulders. The phone buzzes again with a second text.

***WTF was that all about?***

Stefan isn't going to be happy with me, no matter what excuse I use.

I hurry to type out a response. ***I need to bang one out. After all that, I can't wait.***

***Then get it fucking done, nut in the bitch, and get back in here.***

His response comes after a minute, and judging from the low, stifled growl from over my shoulder, the agent reads everything as it comes in.

"I hope that's a joke," she snaps. "I'm perfectly capable of working with you without your cock inside me, and if you think—"

"Shut up," I interrupt. "We got too close to being figured out by Gerardo's man. Gil is too close to the top to mistake you for anything but a stranger. You certainly aren't Natasha Moretti."

I wait for her to catch up, for her to tell me exactly who she is.

"Lacey," she admits after a time. "I'm Lacey."

"And, just so we're clear, I'm not going to fuck you until you're begging for it, Lacey." When her eyes widen, I smirk. Although I desperately want her, I don't force women to accept me. I don't have to.

She gulps and a flush creeps up her neck. It's clear the idea of fucking me turns her on too. She certainly sucked my cock without any kind of hesitation, the same cock that's now hard and ready to make good on my lie to Stefan.

"I need to contact my partner and update him, since you destroyed my earpiece."

“We’re lucky it wasn’t seen. You can once we get someplace safe.”

I type out another text, and within thirty seconds, the driver is pushing into the front seat. The vehicle roars to life, heat pouring out of the vents.

“Are we able to talk here?” She eyes the driver seated on the other side of the privacy divider skeptically.

“Don’t worry about him. He’s been trained to wear noise canceling headphones, and we always keep the divider up unless called for. He can’t hear us.”

Which gives me an idea...

## CHAPTER 7

# Lacey



“I want you to lean over the back of the middle row.” The seriousness on Marco’s face has my stomach jumping with anticipation. “Keep your front half facing the trunk and that delectable ass toward me.” He presses a button on the side and says to the driver, “Take us to the Marriott on third, please.”

I stare at Marco for a long moment as the heat belting out of the vents slowly thaws the chill in my blood. “Are you kidding me? I’m not going to do that.”

The look in his eyes says he’s anything but kidding, and once again, I’m back in that storage room. Only now, the buzz from the champagne has turned into the hum of desire, of want and need. I’m back against the wall with his mouth on mine while he glides his fingers along the line of my panties, kissing me with such abandon so that I’ve completely forgotten we have an audience watching our every move.

The thin thong barely offered any resistance to him, and the barest twitch would have had the fabric gone—skin against skin, his callouses sliding against my wet, aching flesh.

Marco sees the change that comes over my face and twirls his finger in the air, gesturing for me to assume the new position.

A thrill runs through me. Lacey Matthews would never, but Natasha... She most definitely would be more reckless and listen to her baser instincts, like sucking an underground crime lord’s dick during a Christmas party.

Maybe I’m taking my fake identity too far, but whatever is happening between us, I don’t want it to stop. Not yet. Not when I’m aching for him.

I finally shift onto my side, then my knees, reaching back toward the

middle of the rear seat with my arms gripping the headrests on either side.

This is not me, and yet, it could be, with the right partner.

Marco shifts until he's behind me, pushing the dress up to my waist. "This ass is fucking perfect. A thong." He groans at the sight. "I should have fucking known. And you've gone with black lace."

"Do you like it?"

He trails his massive hands along my ass, my legs, my thighs, my hips, squeezing and probing and stroking. Each touch has my head spiraling up to the clouds. My breath catches in my throat when he grips my ass and spreads the cheeks further apart.

"Best view in the fucking city. You're gorgeous."

This is fantasy territory, the things the smutty romance novels I read are made of.

Finally, Marco adjusts the tiny straps of the thong to the side and bends until his mouth is level with my throbbing pussy. The first flick of his tongue almost has me screaming and lurching forward.

He moves his mouth over my core, feasting on me, nibbling at my pussy lips before he slides his tongue across my hole and toward my clit. He pushes the thong aside further, but he pauses there, using a finger to tease my ass. I twitch at the contact.

"I don't—" I start to warn, because I've never done that kind of stuff before, but then I groan when he twists his tongue in tight circles over my clit. I'm completely at his mercy. He can do whatever he wants with me, however he wants.

"Soon, but not yet," he mutters against me before latching onto my clit again, torturing me with his mouth. I buck against him and gasp. "Maybe you'd like to be a good girl and come on my tongue."

God. For him, I will be.

Cars pass the entire time, coming close to the back windows, and I pray they're tinted so no one can see me with my ass out and my pussy on display. Except the thought gets me hot, just like it did at the party when Marco touched me in front of his brother.

"Do you know how good you taste, Lacey?" He goes slow, still fingering my ass, and it feels so fucking good.

Then, he surprises me when he slides his tongue directly inside my pussy, fucking me with it. I cry out and clench around him. He laps at me, tasting me, mercilessly pleasing me, though he keeps his movements slow and

deliberate.

“Fuck me, you’re delicious. You taste like you enjoy being on your knees with me behind you, worshiping you. Like you want more.”

I shiver, every part of me going tighter and tighter with each word. He sucks my clit between his teeth, and the sound alone is enough to send me over the edge as I come hard.

Holy shit. Holy shit. I just let a stranger eat me out, and he’s so damn talented with his tongue, it won’t take any convincing to let him fuck me in the ass.

He moves back, keeping his hands on my hips to steady me while I pull my thong back in place and adjust my dress. His eyes are on me the entire time, even when he wipes my juices from his mouth and sucks on his fingers, like I was the most delicious meal he’s ever had in his life.

I want to touch him so badly, to take whatever this is to the next level. And from the stiff tent to his pants, he does too.

He’s so fucking hard, and I’m nearly trembling at the idea of him plunging that cock inside me. The desire is almost enough for me to throw my last bit of caution, the last bit of logic, out the window and damn myself in the process.

The jerking of the car pulling to a stop adds some much-needed sense to the situation, a little bit of a division between myself and my wildest fantasies. We’ve parked in front of a high-rise hotel, and rather than continuing with the oral sex, Marco pulls me across by my ass, nestling me on his lap for a moment.

“Forget Gerardo.” His voice is like the richest whiskey, smooth and full of hidden heat. “Maybe you can be *my* mistress, at least until we take out my brother. Would you like to play with me, Lacey? Would you like to be mine?”

The idea makes me dizzy, of belonging to someone like Marco. I’ve never been the type of woman who wants things like that. I’m too focused on work, too concerned with doing everything for myself...

I glance out the fogged windows and vaguely recognize the outline of a hotel moniker. “What are we doing here?”

“I figured you’d need a place to lay low for a while. Tomorrow, we’ll have a lot to talk about.” He keeps me in place, massaging my hips, and I decide the perfect spot to perch is right here on Marco’s lap.

For as long as he’ll let me.

His breathing is back to normal, his touch tender, almost as though he never ate me out in the back of his SUV.

“Here.” He reaches into his own pocket and slips out his wallet. From the depths, he pulls out a black credit card, thick enough to slice a throat. “Use the name on the card and get the best room possible. “Lay low. I’ll be in touch.”

I hesitate only a moment before taking the card and dangling it between two fingers. “Are you sure? I might skip the hotel and go on a shopping spree.”

“Not very above the law of you, Agent Lacey.” He drags the tip of his nose along the side of my neck and inhales deeply. “The Bureau might frown on that.”

The Bureau will frown on *all* of this, from start to finish.

“Now go.” Pushing me off him, Marco swats my bottom to get me moving. “I know where to find you. I have to take care of some business first; I’ll be back in the morning.”

The driver rolls down the partition only long enough to ask, “We going to 462 Delacot Place?”

Marco nods, and any heat I’d gotten used to seeing in his eyes disappears entirely. Knowing I’m only wasting time by staying here, I open the door to a blast of chilly December wind, keeping the address in the back of my head for later. It might be important.

Marco doesn’t look my way as he pulls the door shut. The SUV takes off into oncoming traffic as goosebumps erupt on my exposed skin. The credit card is a weight in my hand, and I examine it on my way through the front door. Immediately, the blast of heat from the hotel lobby cuts away the last of the chill that followed me inside.

The name on the card says Justin Longtower, an assumed identity none of us knew anything about. I wonder what kind of squeaky-clean reputation Justin Longtower has that Marco Zicari does not.

I shake my head. “Learn something new every day.”

The front desk clerk glances up at my approach and offers a bland smile of greeting. It takes practically no time at all for me to get a room. The process is smoother than it’s ever been under my own name, and then I’m in the elevator, heading toward the top floor. The keycard slips into the slot easily, and the door opens to a beautiful suite decked out in neutral tones and, yeah, more Christmas.

I halfway wonder if the hotel decorated every room with a little bit of holiday cheer—a table in the dining area boasts a three-foot-tall tree, and there’s an actual, honest to god fireplace in the living room.

I already asked if the room phone made outgoing calls. It’s not the safest option, but I’ve got to get Wes on the line and explain some shit. He’s probably losing his damn mind after our communication was cut off. I can only hope he hasn’t called the calvary in to help me.

The first thing I do, after using the bathroom, is to call him. He picks up on the first ring.

“You’ve got some fucking explaining to do, and you’re going to start at the beginning and go all the way to the goddamn end, Lacey Matthews.”

A small smile plays across my lips. “It’s good to hear your voice too.”

“Do you have any idea what kind of risk you put us in? This entire operation might have been jeopardized because you wanted to jump on Zicari dick.”

I might have taken offense to his tone if I didn’t hear the sliver of worry beneath every syllable.

“I was about to call in the troops to swoop in and save your ass, so you got me at just the right time,” he adds. “Where are you?”

“I’m fine. I can handle it.” It sounds like I’m trying to convince myself as well as him. “And I’m close. Really close.”

I tell him everything that happened, minus the sexy parts, of course. My partner does not need to know all about the scorching hot oral sex in the back of an arms dealer’s SUV. My pussy tingles at the memory, and as hard as it is to do, I force myself to focus.

“Anyway, I’ll keep you updated,” I finish. “I need you to bring me some clothes and a gun, please. Oh, and my pajamas. Remember, it’s the Marriott on third.”

Wes pauses for a beat before he huffs out a groan. “I don’t suppose there’s any way for you to get your ass out and come back so we can figure this out...and you actually listen to me, is there?”

I shake my head, despite the fact that he can’t see me. “Nope. I told you, I got this. I’ll be in touch.” It’s an echo of Marco’s statement as I hang up the call.

I finally have a moment to take a deep breath, take everything in, and give the hotel a good look around.

Wow, an impressive suite at a swanky hotel, just for me. I imagine how

lovely it would be to have the entire king mattress at my disposal, what kind of antics Marco and I would be able to get into here, all we've already done...

"Too deep," I scold myself, like it will somehow help hammer the point through my thick skull. "Way too deep. It's distracting me from the job."

Except hearing my own voice does nothing to quench the desire already taking root, as though someone flipped a switch in my system. Suddenly, I'm nothing but a horndog for a guy I literally know nothing about. Nothing that really matters, at least, because I've decided to trust him to help me take down his brother.

Wes dutifully drops off a change of clothes and a gun, wanting to stay to go over the case, but I'm too tired to be of any use. I shoo him out of the room ten minutes after his arrival and pass out halfway through changing.



I wake up early the next morning, before the sun has risen. Delacot Place is waiting for me, and seeing as Marco hasn't gotten in touch, it's time for me to stop waiting for him to make the first move and actually do something.

The burner cell Wes dropped off gives me directions to the apartment complex where Marco must be staying. An online search pulls up no "Marco" living at the complex. It could also be a safe house of some kind, or he might be there under Longtower again. A million different ideas flash through my mind, and talking them out with Wes on the phone helps me narrow down to the best one.

It's only a few blocks over from the hotel, absolutely doable as a walk. I'm back in sneakers, with a sensible coat and a sweater designed to cut through the chill. The gun against my lower back goes a long way toward helping me feel better about this.

Still, it's a risk I've got to take.

Wes will be hiding out, only a button press away if things go south, and I'm not new to dangerous situations like this. I can hold my own. So, hunching my shoulders against the wind slamming against my back, I trudge down the sidewalk.

Fifteen minutes later, I've found the right spot, the only people around me and a fragile-looking old woman struggling to get up the icy front steps. Delacot Place is a typical-looking apartment complex, decently maintained with weathered brick and neat black trim around the windows. Nothing as fancy, expensive, or modern as the convention center where the holiday party was held, but I can see how the steps might be tricky and hustle to help the woman.

"Careful." I step to her side and gently take her elbow, her hand, guiding her to the top.

"The salt gets most spots, but it's always a little tricky." She offers me a grateful smile. "My shoes don't have the right kind of tread. Thank you."

"It's my pleasure," I say.

"Never seen your face around here."

"I'm looking for someone. He's rather tall, broad shouldered." I describe Marco and ask if the woman knows him.

"Yes, he helps me out when I need things changed in the apartment; a lightbulb, a filter, you name it. I think he goes on vacation a lot though, because his place seems quiet most days, as though he's not home." Her face wrinkles further. "He's in 4A. Biggest unit, corner of the building. Better views than the rest of us have."

I draw open the door for her. "Thank you. I appreciate it."

I head up to the apartment via a clean yet musty smelling elevator. It's a small matter to find the right apartment, because the woman was right: the largest, and the corner unit.

There's no way to tell if he's actually inside, but a quick press of my ear against the door greets me with nothing but silence.

Here's hoping.

I pull one of the specialty pins out of my hair, the one I'd stuck in this morning after my shower, and carefully picked the lock. A gun is a really fucking nice idea, and I draw it now, keeping it trained in front of me while I sweep the tidy apartment.

The shower is running. Marco is definitely home.

I creep further into the apartment when the shower suddenly cuts off. My heartbeat jerks, resumes an erratic rhythm.

When I turn the corner, he's there, standing in a towel and dripping wet, *his* gun trained directly at me.

## CHAPTER 8

# Marco



**S**hit, this woman is going to give me a heart attack.

I keep the gun trained on her a second longer out of instinct, both of us aiming for the head.

My finger hovers on the trigger, my heart beating rapidly in my chest. Does she have her safety on? I sure as fuck don't. She's lucky I didn't act on impulse and drive a bullet between her eyes like my brother would have.

I should have known she wouldn't be content to stay at the hotel and wait. Lacey doesn't strike me as the kind of woman who is content to let any man tell her what to do, which is only part of her allure.

Having her point a gun at me shouldn't make me hard, but it does.

"Maybe you should have a talk with your driver if you don't want to be found." She tilts her head to the side, and an amused smile dances across her lips.

No one knows about this apartment, not even Stefan. It the only safe place I've somehow managed to carve out, away from crime and death and that part of my life. It's a place no one would ever think to look, because it's so middle americana.

I had thought I needed a night away from her, to lay in my bed and stare at the ceiling, to clear my head and focus on the reason I need her help, but I was unable to get her scent out of my nose, the feel of her body pressed against mine, her taste...

Fuck me, her taste. Her pussy is sublime.

I finally put the gun down and look her over.

She's right—my driver made a critical mistake last night in saying our next stop out loud, one I missed because I let my desire to fuck her obscure

everything else.

Now she's here, in my apartment, looking just as gorgeous as she looked last night, even without all the makeup and glam. Today, her face is scrubbed lean, and she's wearing a thick jacket, worn jeans, and a scuffed pair of boots.

"You come into my apartment and pull a gun on me?" I ask.

"I wasn't sure what to expect."

"You don't trust me." I tuck my own piece into the knotted front of the towel and hold both hands up to show her empty palms.

"No." She still hasn't lowered her gun, but the blank look in her eyes gives me an indication that she's not planning to use it, even if the trust isn't exactly there. No, she's too focused on my chest. On my abs. On the water still trailing down my front from my wet hair.

She's absolutely fresh faced in the light of pre-dawn. Losing the makeup has her looking rounded, dewy, and way too young for my peace of mind. What is she even doing taking on an assignment like this one, trying to bring down my brother?

The Bureau must be out of their minds to put her in danger this way. Or maybe Lacey is the type of person who jumps feet first into danger, confident in her abilities. Damn me, but I'm smitten with her. I know it. She probably knows it. Getting involved like I am is too dangerous for both of us.

"How did you find the right apartment?"

"The nice lady downstairs," she answers, finally lowering her arm to her side.

"Damn. Mrs. Folders sold me out?"

"And I didn't even have to bribe her with anything, other than helping her up the front stairs." Lacey tucks the gun away and unzips her jacket, the apartment toasty warm. She finally shrugs out of it and drapes it over the back of the couch.

"She's innocent in all this. Doesn't know who I am or what I do."

Lacey's eyes narrow. "And what is that, exactly?"

I pause. Clever little agent, but I won't be answering that one. It seems like tonight, she's all business. The playful Natasha is gone, but that's okay. I'm more intrigued by this woman in front of me anyway.

Clearing her throat, Lacey walks deeper into the apartment, glancing around at my sparse furniture and empty spaces. "It's practically barren here," she says. "Where are your Christmas decorations?"

I try to stay focused on her and not the way her pants hug her body. She's so small and petite, but she has hips and the cutest ass I've ever seen. I want to take a giant bite out of her and eat her ass instead of breakfast, with a giant cup of coffee to get the day started right.

"Not really the kind of person who likes to string lights everywhere." I stare at her. "You might call me a scrooge."

She holds up her hand. "Guilty as charged."

"You too? Shame."

"Yeah, well, you get older and things change. It's kinda hard to keep the spirit alive when you're working every day. There are no breaks when you're fighting crime *or* committing it."

"Very funny."

The door to the bedroom is open, and I walk through, pointedly showing her my back. It's test for both of us; do we both trust the other enough not to shoot?

"I used to be big into the season, the kind of person who went to all the light displays and volunteered, bought presents for kids and wrapped and all kinds of shit." I fumble around in my dresser for a change of clothes.

Judging from her voice, Lacey hasn't moved from the living room. "You'll pardon me if I find that a little hard to believe."

"It's true. You never saw a jollier man than me."

"What changed, then?"

"My dad died." Pain still laces the statement, even though it's been years. "About a week before he was supposed to come and spend time with me and Stefan here. One minute, he's on the phone, talking about the drive and all the food he planned to buy, and the next, the hospital is calling, telling me to hurry, that he's not going to last much longer."

"I'm sorry." She sounds honest, empathetic. "Death really does change things, in so many ways."

"What about you?" I'd rather take the focus off me. "Any particular reason you sneer when you look at a Christmas tree?" I'd noticed her reaction at the party.

Placing the gun on the dresser, I slide my legs into a pair of gray sweatpants.

"It's nothing major. I guess we all have issues with our family." Now she's gone cold, shutting me out. "Regardless, things change. I'm not really the celebratory type anymore, which is absolutely fine with me."

“You're also not the type to listen when someone gives you an order, are you?” I drag a shirt over my bare chest, the material clinging to the wet spots. “I'm not sure how you made it that far within your agency with that kind of temperament.” Fully clothed, I stalk to the doorway and stand there with a scowl.

“I'm not sure what you mean,” she says.

“You didn't listen to me and wait for me to call. You decided to track me down and break into my apartment.”

“I didn't break in. The door was unlocked.”

Liar.

“And I wanted to know more about your plan.” She glances around at the house, taking in the plain furniture, the lack of art on the walls, the sterile taupe carpet. “And you. Your motives for helping me.”

Maybe it's her bravery, or the stupidity masquerading around as bravery, that gets me talking. Maybe it's being so fucking fed up with my brother and disgusted about what he's done to this family that loosens my lips.

Either way, I find myself telling Lacey about Stefan and the cartel dealings as a gateway to building trust, getting to know each other well enough to see this tentative partnership through. I tell her about the issues with the mules at the airport, the way he destroyed the room at the conference center, about the dinner coming up tonight.

Through it all, she stays silent, probably processing every word and formulating a plan. The gears are clearly shifting behind those baby blue eyes.

“I plan to use the dinner as a distraction to find his tapes,” I finish. “With those, I'll be able to show the police every dark and disgusting thing he's done over the years.”

“What tapes?”

I swipe a hand through my hair. “Stefan...is the most paranoid man you'll ever meet. He's absolutely convinced someone is going to stab him in the back after the way things went with our father. He tapes every deal he does for blackmail on the off chance he has to one up someone who works with him. Do you understand?”

Lacey bobs her head in agreement.

“I know the tapes are the key, but getting Stefan away from his office long enough to get them will be tricky. He's got them guarded and locked down, always under surveillance.”

“Wouldn’t Stefan be suspicious if you left at a dinner party he specifically wants you around for?” she asks. “There’s no way for you to slip out unnoticed, and definitely no way for you to excuse yourself altogether.”

“I know.” I never said the plan is foolproof, but it’s a direction.

“The evidence on those tapes will be the final ax.” She looks deliciously excited at the prospect. “There is no way for him to stand against the evidence on them.”

“Exactly why we need them,”

“Would you have access to them if you somehow managed to get away?” she asks.

“I know his combinations, and I know the layout of the mansion better than anyone else.”

“Then I’ll go too. I’ll work as a distraction while you snoop around.”

“No.”

Lacey blinks at me. “Well, don’t refuse me outright.”

“It’s too dangerous for you to come.”

She practically snorts. “Then why the fuck would you bring me into this? I’m an agent. I know exactly how to handle myself.”

“You almost got looped into a trap set for you by the Rat,” I toss back.

“Yes, and it wasn’t the best maneuver on my part, but I drank a little too much champagne. I’ll be going into this dinner wide eyed and aware with backup, should the situation require.”

“You bring in anyone else, and they’ll die, too.”

“So, what? You involved me only to watch you go down? I refuse to stay behind. I’ll go with you, and that’s the end of the discussion.” Her cheeks are flushed with anger and annoyance.

“This is why you’re good at your job, isn’t it? Why you lead task forces.”

Her expression smooths, like she’s more impressed than anything. “Wait, you researched me?”

“I’m willing to bet you researched me, too.” Her silence is my answer. “I’m a very dangerous man, Lacey.” I shift closer, take her by the elbows, and jerk her against my chest. “But you knew that already, didn’t you?”

Her breath catches in her throat, eyes heating as the tip of her pink tongue darts out to lick her lips. Whatever she saw, it hasn’t lessened the way she wants me.

I learned enough about her last night to know she’s a hard worker, driven but skirting the line between doing her job and overworking, right to the

bone. She's tense in my arms, but the first kiss I press to her lips has her shivering.

"What are you doing?" she whispers.

I back her up, step by step, until her spine hits the wall. Her eyes darken, and I lean back just enough to be able to watch her reaction while I kiss her, as I finally do what I've been wanting to do since I first saw her.

Eyes drifting shut at last, I kiss her hard, loving the way Lacey moans against my lips, how her body starts to loosen, hitching up closer to me while I lash my tongue against hers.

"We're finally alone," I mutter. I'm practically panting from the hunger I feel for this woman. It's driving me insane. "And I can think of a few ways I'd like to spend this Christmas before we have to leave."

She pulls back from me, and I drop my hands to her waist. Her eyes flick over my face, down to my hard dick jutting against her, practically on full display through the gray sweatpants. I graze my hand along the inside of her thigh and skim higher before pushing her legs apart.

I cup her clothed pussy. The heat against my palm drives me fucking wild, and I rub her there, creating friction until she moans softly. Those fantastic jeans have got to go. This isn't going to be the slow seduction I'd thought about doing to her last night. This close to her, all I can think about is bottoming out in that tight little cunt over and over again, hearing her scream my name, scream from the pain and pleasure ripping through her at the same time.

I want to destroy her, only to build her back up again, but this time, as mine.

I tear at her shirt, yanking it over her head as her fingers grab the bottom hem of mine and start to tug. She's not tall enough to get over my head, so I stop to help her wrench it off before lunging for her jeans.

"You are so goddamn beautiful, Lacey." Her petite rib cage only emphasizes her plush breasts, clad in a simple, white cotton bra. I've never seen anything sexier.

I pull away to tug down my sweatpants, well aware of her watching my every move. Her lips part, and her fingers fumble for the button on her pants, then the zipper. She pushes them down to her ankles, and I steady her while she kicks them away.

I turn her around to face the floor-to-ceiling window and bend her against the glass. "Spread your legs."

She does, and I slip past her panties to slide two fingers right inside her. Fuck, she's so wet. A growl of approve rumbles in my chest.

Below us, the city sprawls out, awake and alive with last minute preparations for Christmas. Right up against the glass, I flick open her bra and let it drop then drag those panties down with my teeth until she's full on naked overlooking the city.

Grabbing her hips, I help her up, our size difference a hindrance only until she braces her palms on the glass. I push a hand against her back, forcing her forward more, and when her chest presses hard to the glass as well, her red hair flowing over her shoulder, she moans.

I bet the view from the outside is spectacular because I know mine has my balls tightening, my dick so hard, it hurts.

"I've wanted to fuck this pussy since I tasted you in the car," I say. "Longer. Since I saw you walk into the convention center."

She glances at me from over her shoulder. "Then what are you waiting for?"

I cup her breast with my opposite hand, working my fingers inside her in time with the light massage. I circle her clit until she begins to pant, and her hips tilt to give me better access.

She's close. She clenches around me, but she's holding off her climax. I know it.

"I don't want your fingers, Marco."

"I know. You're hungry for my cock." Releasing her breast long enough to take my dick in hand and line it up with her dripping wet cunt, I drag myself up and down through her heat until she's begging me to take her, right here, where everyone can see. "But you are as beautiful as a Christmas morning, laid out for me like this."

"It is Christmas morning," she pants.

"Which makes this even more perfect." Everything inside me is screaming for her, but she's so small, there's no doubt I'll hurt her if I give her everything right away. So, I push inside slowly, grabbing her ass cheeks and spreading them to help ease any discomfort. It's not enough, though—her pussy clamps around my cock, stretching and squeezing, and I damn near come right then and there.

I have to pause and get myself under control. The base of my spine tingles with the need to slam home, to test her limits, to make her scream.

"You're holding back," she whispers harshly as she reaches back and

grabs my hand at her waist.

“I’m not.”

“You *are*,” she says. “Fuck me, Marco. Make me your mistress.”

Holy fuck. Her words. They shatter the last parts of my restraint. “I’m not sure you know what you’re asking. Not really.”

She wiggles her ass against me, teasing me, and God help me, I’m going to take that ass one day, I swear it.

“I do.”

I clench my teeth. “Fine. You want to be mine, Lacey? My little slut?”

She shivers. “Yes.”

I pull out, my dick raging hard, only to thrust it back into her, this time without care as she shrieks in both surprise and pleasure.

“Ssshit,” she hisses. “You’re so big.”

“Too big?”

She glancing at me again, and there’s a challenge sparking in her gaze. “Not a chance.”

Her fingers stretch out on the glass, and this time, when I pound into her cunt, she meets my every punishing thrust, hard and fast as I take her without mercy or pause.

I look down between us, where my cock is disappearing inside her sweet cunt. The sight will be imprinted in my memory forever. My heart is beating out of my chest as I bend to cover her with my much-larger body, biting the back of her neck as I thread my hand through her hair.

“Take it.” I plunge into her, all the way to the hilt. “Take it all, like a good little girl you are, Lacey.”

The fit is exquisite, her pussy tight enough to make me see stars when she clenches around me. I hold back my orgasm for as long as I can, the slap of flesh on flesh only pushing me closer to the edge.

Lacey soars first, screaming my name. I slam into her once, twice, before pulling out to come all over her back, my release ripping through me until I spill every last drop onto her skin. Her legs wobble when I reach for her, turning her around to face me, twin spots of red coloring her cheeks.

“Next time,” I say, wiping a hand across her chin. “Next time, I’ll be coming inside you.”

“Next time?” She stares at me, her chest heaving, as though she can’t quite believe we made it to this point.

“If we want to make this relationship believable, *really* believable, I’ll be

coming in you a lot.”

She blinks in disbelief but doesn't argue. Instead, she pushes up on her tiptoes and kisses me, sweeping her tongue into my mouth, and that's all the confirmation I need.



I've got Lacey in the shower, scrubbing between her legs, when the cell rings. I glance at the screen—fuck, Stefan. I click accept and wait in a tense moment of silence for him to say whatever it is he doesn't want to text.

“I need you at dinner tonight,” he begins.

I swallow over a groan. “I know.”

“The cartel leaders will be present. I want you and your mistress there before the others show up.”

His tone leaves no room for argument, but it's not like I plan on giving him any, despite the way an anchor pulls me low and my stomach drops.

“Why do you need her?” It's a stupid question, and I immediately regret it, wincing.

“To give me something pretty to look at besides your asshole ugly mug.” Stefan hangs up.

As much as I didn't want her to go, it looks like Lacey has to, or it will look suspicious. I glance up in time to see her turning the corner, a towel knotted between her breasts.

“Eavesdropping?” I ask.

“I'll be fine. I know how to handle myself.”

She might, but I'm worried about what I'll do. I've stepped too far over the line with her. Will I be able to play the part I'm expected to play?

I guess we'll fucking see.

## CHAPTER 9

# Lacey



I let Marco fuck me without a condom, and despite every shred of logic screaming at me for being a fool, I regret nothing, not when he claimed me in front of the window for the city to see.

Not when he took me again on the couch and I rode him to completion.

Today isn't for sex, though, and I have to stop him from going for round three to get into the right mindset for tonight.

Another night of playing pretend, and it's not lost on me that it's Christmas Eve. Not like the occasion means much to me anymore, but as I take a step over the threshold of the Zicari family mansion on Marco's arm, as I take two strides for every one of his in order to keep up, my insides refuse to settle.

Everything hinges on this dinner: this takedown, our lives, my professional future, any sort of future Marco and I might be able to claw out of the ruins of his brother's empire. Not that I'll allow myself to worry about it—much.

With every stray thought grappling for supremacy in my head, I still think about Mom.

She used to bring me down to the fire the night before Christmas. There were bells strung along the mantle and a single present waiting for me, far enough from the merry flames to be safe, but close enough to fill me with a sense of wonderment.

One present before tomorrow morning.

I shove the memories aside, focusing on the click of my heels along the pristine black and white marble floor.

All the pretty words in the world aren't enough for me to feel comfortable

about tonight. Marco offered several possible outcomes on the drive over, his hand resting possessively on my knee, the slit of the emerald-green wrap dress leaving most of my muscled leg bare, accessible for him to touch whenever or however he pleases.

This outfit is a pointed departure from the demure-yet-sexy lines of the velvet gown I wore to the ball yesterday. Marco wanted to make a statement, and I liked the maneuverability of the skirt, even though the material leaves me bare enough to have a chill. My coat might as well not exist.

There are also very few places to hide a gun, but I manage.

“Remember the plan,” Marco mouths.

I know the plan. We’ve gone over it enough times to have every step memorized.

Stefan stands alone in the formal dining room, waiting for us. He straightens further at the sight of his brother and me making our grand entrance, and although there is no more slow clapping—thankfully, because it got right under my fucking skin—there is definitely a sleezy air oozing out of his every pore.

“Good of you to actually listen this time.” Stefan directs the comment at his younger brother, and despite no outward reaction, Marco tenses beside me.

He inclines his head forward, a lock of stark black hair obscuring his features, his perfect lips pressed tightly together. “I’m your servant, as always.”

Stefan laughs, but the sound is somehow restrained. “Come now, brother. You’re going to embarrass me in front of our lovely guest. The business is shared equally between us, as our father intended. Natasha.”

I hold back my scoff. We both know the Zicari Syndicate is run solely by Stefan, who holds every inch of the reins in his hands.

I let Marco lead me closer to the table, let him slip the coat off my shoulders, let Stefan press a wet kiss to my cheek and linger way too long. His fingers drop to the small of my back and lower.

“Natasha.” He says my name again, the way a lover would. Possession lingers in every touch. “You’re even more beautiful today than you were last night.”

I shoot him a rattlesnake’s smile. “Thank you for the compliment, Mr. Zicari.”

“Please. *Stefan.*”

*Absolutely not.*

“The others will be arriving shortly.” He’s back to all business. “Please help yourself to drinks. We’ll eat once everyone arrives.”

Marco has stood by, saying nothing through his brother’s obvious display of power over us, over his little kingdom. Clearly, whatever is broken inside of him only reinforces his need to dominate. How much of a price has Marco had to pay for his brother’s actions?

From everything I researched about him, Marco has done his best to keep his nose clean. He deals in illegal weapons but hasn’t stepped off whatever path he set for himself. There’s goodness in him.

Marco practically vibrates with unrestrained anger, which won’t help us once the others arrive. I shoot him a silent look laden with warning to get his shit together. We’re too close to ending this for him to lose focus now, to allow Stefan to bait him into childish arguments.

I’ve got Wes waiting just down the road from the mansion, and although the earpiece is shot, he’s keeping a watch on things from afar, ready to move if necessary.

Let’s hope it won’t be necessary.

It takes no time at all for the guests of this dinner from hell to arrive. The cartel leader—only one, I realize, not the multiple I’d been hoping to lasso into this takedown—refuses to sit at the table, his men standing around him in a protective array. The tension in the room thickens with each heartbeat and makes breathing difficult.

Ermilo, also known as the Viper. He’s the third largest cocaine and heroin dealer in Kingstead. I manage to keep the surprise off my face long enough to accept the kiss he presses to my cheek.

Small talk is strained, the conversation relegated to the weather and the holiday. No one wants to look too closely at anyone else, and I wonder what’s going on in Ermilo’s head. Does he want to gut Stefan Zicari the same way I do, or does he have more colorful punishments planned if this dinner does not go his way?

Stefan lost a lot of product Ermilo expected to have. It’s actually a miracle he’s not dead already, that he’s been granted this opportunity to make things right.

I steel myself for what will come and sit at Marco’s side, close enough to leave no one with room to doubt that we’re an item. Yet, Stefan’s gaze is a physical touch the entire time.

*Branding me.*

Years of training keep the mask in place. Marco is the same.

He'd warned me what kind of person he'd have to play during this dinner, how he'd have to be the cold and ruthless asshole everyone thinks he is in order to handle Stefan.

Despite every mechanical bite we take, I see bits of him leaking through the façade. I speak when spoken to, answer any question with a vague sort of dismissiveness I imagined the real Natasha might use, the kind where the implications for poking me too closely are implied.

The moment I'm able to excuse myself to use the facilities, leaving Marco in a heated debate with the cartel leader, I go snooping. Less than five minutes; it's all the time I have.

It's got to be this way, I think as I hustle down the hallway, past the door to the powder room and further, right to where Marco told me the office would be.

Every second counts. Someone is going to find me if I'm not careful, which means every movement has to count, every breath I take.

The office door is locked, and the tapes are hidden inside, as Marco said. The camera attached to the opposite wall points at the door, a steady red light showing it as active. The keypad nestled above the doorknob gives a clear indication of just how heavily the room is guarded.

What other secrets are inside?

My heart flips in my chest, and I—

“My *goodness*, you are a curious little vixen, aren't you?”

Stefan's voice sounds from directly behind me, and I stiffen. Oh. Fuck.

“I didn't realize a trip to the ladies' room warranted an escort from the head honcho himself. Have you gotten lost, my dear?”

I turn and plaster a confident smile on my face at the same time.

“As you can see, this isn't the powder room, is it? It's my office, and you are the one currently staring at my keypad like you're trying to figure out what the password might be.” He steps close, his hands in the pockets of his suit jacket—easygoing to anyone who spares a glance at him, but I'm not fooled. “Curious...”

I've heard reports of exactly what Stefan likes to do with his hands, especially to women. Brutal things. Violent things. Unlike his brother.

I need to get away from him without causing any more suspicion. I harden my gaze, on edge, poised and ready to do whatever it takes to get out

of this situation. “A lady isn’t allowed to get lost in a big house?” I toss my loose, curled hair over my shoulder then move to step past him. “Excuse me.”

Stefan steps with me to block my exit. “You’re no lady,” he whispers.

Goosebumps erupt over my exposed skin.

“Not wearing a dress like this, and not from everything I’ve heard about you. How you and Mad Dog go at it like animals in fucking heat.” He draws in a long breath, smelling me. “And now you’re with my brother.”

Stefan uses his massive frame to back me against the door. The keypad presses into my back, the metal cold, and I swallow over a flash of pain. He slams his arms on either side of my shoulders, low enough to keep me from ducking underneath and bolting, loud enough to spook. His body wedges me into the wood, his leg between my thighs in a smooth, dominating movement.

“Does he fuck you raw? Does my brother make you beg for it before he sinks himself into that tight little cunt of yours?” He drags his nose along my neck, licking the lobe of my ear before jerking his hips forward, letting me know exactly how he feels about this moment.

He’s already hard.

“Except there are a few points I’m still unclear on, *Natasha*. I swallowed my pride and contacted Gerardo last night, and he says his mistress is being detained by law enforcement as we speak.”

Every part of me goes cold.

“What did you say?” The question bursts out of me before I can slam my teeth down to stop it.

Stefan chuckles, and I feel it through every portion of my icy body. “Didn’t think I’d do my research?” He clicks his tongue. “What little faith you have in me and my abilities. So, the question remains. Who. Are. You?”

I keep my attention on his eyes, but there’s nothing human about them. I see only a beast, ready to strike, to cause as much chaos and damage as possible, even if he goes down with me. I’m done. I’ve been figured out before I even got into the office. Those tapes are going to stay where they are.

“I’d be very careful how you choose to answer me.” Stefan slides his right hand along the door, down my shoulder, lingering at the side of my breast before pinching my nipple hard enough to make me gasp, at both the shock and the intrusion. “Tell me the truth.”

I glance down, gaze snagging on the hidden camera pinned to his lapel disguised to look like some kind of coat of arms.

Marco was right: Stefan records everything. He’s paranoid as fuck. Not

that I hadn't believed him, but a flash of vindication flashes through my blood, doing absolutely zip to thaw the ice.

“You actually believe Mad Dog versus what you see in front of your face?”

“I believe that *every man has been made by God in order to acquire knowledge and contemplate*. You know who said that, *Natasha*?” Stefan shakes his head, fully cupping my breast now in a punishing grip. He squeezes again, and this time, it's hard enough for me to lose my breath, disgust roiling through me.

“Take your hand off me.” The desire to nail him in the balls is strong, but any kind of offensive move will reveal me, so I hold off. Maybe I can still save this. Maybe—

“I've figured you out.” Stefan presses his erection against me and jabs it into my stomach. “Now it's time for you to fucking pay for what you've done.”

He slides his hand up to my neck and cuts off my oxygen. Then, he shoves me around and grabbing his gun at the same time.

“I haven't done anything!”

The gun points to the back of my head, accompanied by the click of a safety being flicked off. “Move.”

Only iron laces Stefan's voice, and I have no choice. Gun to my head, he pushes me a few steps in front of him, back to the dining room. He clears his throat once we round the corner, and Marco is the first to see us, the first to note the gun pointed at my temple. He jerks out of his seat, going pale.

“How fucking *dare* you.” It takes me a heartbeat to realize his question isn't being directed at his brother. He's shouting at Ermilo.

## CHAPTER 10

# Marco



**H**e thinks the *cartel* hired Lacey.

The cartels, not the cops, but the distinction makes no difference at the carefully disguised terror dancing across her face. My brother won't hesitate to shoot her out of spite, and if he feels like he's cornered, he'll do it without thought, without a care for the repercussions.

Either way, panic rises in a sharp, acid wave and burns every part of my esophagus on its way up. Lacey stares at me, and in her expression, I see fear, yes, but also a calm sort of resignation, as though she always planned to end up in this situation.

Well, damnit, I hadn't—I expected to be the one who fell under Stefan's knife, if it ever came to that.

The cartel leader rises from his seat, slower than the others. His men have already moved into position to block him, but with the table in the way, they can't physically accomplish the task. Any sudden movement to yank him back might result in gunfire.

“Is this some kind of joke, Zicari?” Ermilo Cirone isn't called the Viper for no reason. He keeps himself tightly composed, a snake coiled and blending in with his surroundings, ready to strike without hesitation. “Let the bitch go so we can return to our dinner.”

Does Stefan not see how close this situation is to exploding?

“You tell me,” he grinds out. “You're the one who sent a fucking spy into my house. For what? Because you don't trust me?” He jerks Lacey hard, a punishing move, and if he hadn't been so large and her so small, it might not have been as brutal as it looks from here. I practically hear her bones grinding together in whiplash.

“Your latest display is shattering any lingering trust I may have had in you and your operation, yes,” Ermilo answers. He smooths a finger over the slick black lines of his thin mustache, thin patience radiating from the gesture.

“Bullshit! Fuck you.” Stefan spits out every word. “You have no goddamn clue what is going on. You come into my house, under my hospitality, and you put a mole in place to undermine me!”

“Stefan, calm down. What are you trying to say?” I ask.

I catch myself stepping forward when he shakes Lacey a second time, pressing the gun hard enough against her skin to leave a mark. She sucks in a breath but keeps silent.

“I’m saying,” Stefan replies through gritted teeth, “that the Cirone clan sent this cunt in to play us for fools, Marco, to spy on us and sell our secrets. Did you think I was stupid enough to fall for it? I see right through the games you’re trying to play, and if you want to get one over on me, you’re going to have to do a whole lot better than some cheap fucking escort to do it.”

“That’s enough,” I bark out.

Lacey opens her mouth to protest, but my expression must say it all. It’s enough to keep her to stay silent. If he’s pressed the wrong way, then he’s going to go into tantrum mode, and there will be no way to salvage this situation.

“She has nothing to do with your delusions, Stefan.” Fury and fear spins through me. “She’s my guest. You’ll treat her with the respect she deserves.”

He turns to me at last, his shoulders sloped forward, his lips thin and bloodless. “She’s not Natasha Moretti!”

Ah, fuck me. “Then you let me handle things.”

“She was outside my office, Marco.” Stefan is insistent. “She’s snooping around, looking for a way inside, trying to sell us out! She’s working for them, and they’re trying to take the business from me.”

“We are here as a courtesy,” Ermilo cuts in. He doesn’t lower his firearm, and neither do his men. “To try and recover the product or cash owed to us. If you continue with these baseless allegations, then I will not be able to let the insult stand. I’d tread carefully from here, Mr. Zicari.”

“You’re insulted?” Stefan laughs, his eyes going wider yet. Crazy. He’s losing the plot quicker than he ever has before.

I keep my focus on Lacey, my hand out in front of me as I take a tentative step forward, then another. Stefan swings the gun on me and then back to

Lacey, unsure which one of us is going to be the bigger threat.

“I’m not sure what kind of trick you’re attempting to pull on me, Zicari, but I assure you, I’m not amused.” Ermilo’s men crowd around him, but I have a feeling he’s well able to take care of himself. He wouldn’t have gotten so far in his career without skills.

“You’re not amused. You’re insulted. You’re put out. Wow. Wow!” Stefan laughs louder and tightens his grip on Lacey to the point where her eyes go wide, darkening to navy as her spine straightens in a steely line.

“We need to settle down.” My voice is hard, unyielding. “Nothing is going to be solved with guns out. Put it away, sit, and let’s be rational.”

“Says the man too stupid to draw his,” Stefan remarks. “Did you think I wouldn’t find out you’re working against me?” He reaches a free hand down Lacey’s back and the discrete holster hidden beneath the bow at the back of her wrap dress.

He pulls her gun out, waving it around like it’s already smoking before tossing it away.

Every nerve in my body lights up at the same time. “Do you think I’d let her join me for dinner without being armed? I gave her the gun, Stefan, to make sure she has a way to protect herself.”

“Or,” he says, “Ermilo gave her the gun to use on me when the time is right. Maybe she hoped I’d find her in the hallway so she could put a bullet in my brain.” He yanks her close, breathless, seething. “Is that right, sweetheart? Do you want to kill me?”

A million thoughts rush through my mind, the most prominent one being that he’s finally cracked. He’s lost his fucking mind. Next are how much I wish Lacey had stayed back tonight, let me handle things, even when I knew I needed her.

Every part of me is on edge, wary, fingers itching to grab the gun from my holster and end it now by just shooting Stefan between the eyes. Obligation, family loyalty—both stay my hand.

There’s no way to signal Lacey’s partner outside. There is no way to get my own gun out without inciting his rage. One wrong move, and he’ll pull the trigger. Lacey will die.

Her safety is more important to me in this moment than any takedown, and so I draw in a deep breath and say, “No, I do.”

Stefan’s darkened gaze slides to me, and his jaw clenches so hard, the muscle at his temple jumps. “Oh? Is that so?”

I step forward. “You heard me, Stefan. I don’t know who you are, but you aren’t my brother, not anymore. The brother I grew up with died the moment our father did. You are a monster.”

There’s a tense moment of silence that overtakes the room, everyone waiting for the other to make the first move so bullets can fly. My hand hovers on my belt where my own gun is holstered, waiting for the explosion, but instead of the boom, it’s Stefan’s manic laughter that erupts. He throws his head back, as if my confession is the funniest thing in the fucking world.

“You think I don’t know?” he says between wheezes. “You’ve been trying to undermine me for months now. Did you seriously think I wouldn’t figure you out? That you’ve betrayed me, repeatedly? I know every move you’ve ever made. But unlike me, you’re weak, Marco. You can’t take me down. You’re *weak*, just like Father.”

I another tentative step forward, and he swings the gun around on me, his finger trembling against the trigger. “I’ll do it.”

“This is fucking ridiculous.” Ermilo is not amused. If he decides he’s tired of the drama, then we might all die. “You’re messy, Zicari, and I don’t need your mess—”

“Why do you love her more than me?” Stefan ignores his every word; I’m starting to think he’s even forgotten Ermilo is in the room. His focus is set firmly on me.

“I don’t love her.”

“Liar!” he bellows, his face bright red. “You’ve made your choice! Your feelings are written across your face.”

Stefan’s is too far gone and utterly convinced of his rightness. He’s been too close to an absolute breakdown for too long, and this is the consequence. I’ve just been too distracted to realize.

His eyes drop to my hand, now wrapping around my gun’s handle. “You want to shoot me right now. I know you do. Come on, then. Be a big man and step out of my shadow. You want me to pay for what happened to our father? Tell me to my face, little brother.”

*Tread carefully.* Every part of me is awake and screaming to be alert, to find some way to keep him from doing what he always does, even when I know it’s impossible.

“Stefan—”

“What do you want from me? You want me to suffer for what I did to our father? That’s why you’re really here tonight: to try and change what’s

happening, to use your mistress to spy on me and bring me down.”

I’m about to pull out my gun when Lacey shakes her head, the movement tiny enough to be misconstrued as shaking, trembling.

He’s right. That mother fucker with the shriveled heart is right, because I do have feelings for Lacey, and there is no way I’m going to let Stefan get away with threatening her this way, with hurting her.

They both must see the resolve on my face, because Stefan fires off a warning shot that gouges the floor near my feet. Ermilo’s guards are already on high alert and cock their own weapons in preparation.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” I grind out.

“Zicari, let the woman go and stand down!” Ermilo shouts. “This has gone on long enough.”

“I’m going to stab you through the heart, Marco,” Stefan whispers. “Just like I did to Dad. I won’t make it subtle, either. I won’t make it look like an accident. I’m going to tear your heart out of your chest, and this time, the entire world is going to see the damage I can do.”

I open my mouth to argue, but it’s too late. All of it is too late. Stefan fires off a shot, and searing pain rips across my side, sending me down to my knees. In the distance, someone is screaming, but the sound is already fading.

## CHAPTER 11

# Lacey



**M**y scream is out in the open, a shrill screech of sound. So much blood, too much blood for it to be a surface wound, for it to be anything other than life threatening.

Marco goes down, his legs too weak to support his weight. His knees slam into the floor, his lips already pale, pressed in a tight line. He falls to his side without catching himself, and I can't stop. Can't stop screaming. Can't stop trying to get to him.

I have no idea where Stefan shot him, but the damage is done. There is nothing but a gaping pit of horror in my chest, as though Stefan has followed through on his threat yet chose my heart instead of Marco's. No. He has to be okay. He has to—

What the hell will I do without him? How can I care about it going too fast, all these feelings for him, when he's been ripped from me anyway?

Not fair.

It's not fair.

Every heartbeat slows, and time starts to skid to a sluggish halt. The world around me is nothing but slow motion, dull, my focus on Marco's curved body, fetal position style. From this distance, I can't tell if he's breathing or not, and my own breath thunders out of my chest.

I glance up and turn, every movement wading-through-cement slow, catching Stefan's gaze before the second bullet flies.

This one comes from Ermilo's side of the table and grazes close enough for me to feel the heat of the trajectory, even if it's only in my head. Even if

—

Gunfire rains through the dining room. Food splatters and wood splinters

—the beautiful furniture, the chair rail and molding, nothing but splinters. Bullets come from every direction, and only my training has me ducking away from Stefan, uncaring that he's still got his gun to my temples. He drops right along with me so that we're both crouched on the floor beside Marco.

Ermilo and his guards are a tight circle, shooting up anything and everything around them. Stefan's guards hardly have time to move to protect us when two of them go down, the bullets hitting home. They jerk, groan, drop.

Again and again.

Stefan grabs me by the back of the neck and forces me lower. The dining room table is our only defense at this point, and he wraps his arms around me and rolls—not to a safe place, but toward the long wooden buffet against the wall.

I wondered at the space behind it when I first got in the room. It's just large enough for two bodies, pushed away from the wall as though his paranoia had urged him to pull it, to create this semi-safe harbor.

But we can't hide and leave Marco out there unattended. A stray bullet might finish the job his brother started, hit several arteries, explode through muscle and bone and do all sorts of irreparable damage.

“No, Marco!”

I tug away from Stefan, the position too cramped for me to try and disarm him. My own gun is history at this point, and one move toward it will make me the target. I didn't intend to die today. Maybe I'd gotten my hopes up way too high, but I knew the risk when I accepted the assignment.

The only risk I hadn't seen coming was Marco.

I'm not thinking about anything else now. I'm thinking about the man on the ground. From my vantage point, I only see the tips of his shoes, the shine dulled by drops of crimson.

He's still not moving. He's been shot and he's not moving and something inside of me snaps loose at the sight, as though it's the final straw breaking the restraint keeping me still.

I'm going to make this piece of shit hiding behind the furniture pay for every single thing he's ever done, and most importantly, what he chose to do tonight.

Stefan lurches to peer over the top of the furniture and fires off a couple shots. They all go wide, but Ermilo's responding shot lodges in the wall only

a few inches above our heads.

My scream cuts off on a strangled gasp as I lunge for him, scraping at his face with my nails, ready to jam my elbow into whatever soft part of him I get to first.

Stefan is much faster as he reaches for me, his hand curling around the base of my neck and forcing me down. He cuts off my air with a practiced squeeze in exactly the right place before hissing out, “Say one fucking word, Natasha, and I am going to make you suffer.”

“You’ve done enough damage.” The words are strangled, but at least they come out with enough poison to give him a start. “When is it going to be enough for you?”

There is nothing sane in his eyes anymore, nothing left of any shred of humanity he might have possessed once upon a time. “It’s never going to be enough.”

“I’m going to make you pay.”

He drags me closer, glaring at me. “There’s not a goddamn thing you can do.”

He wants to bet? I’ll take the gamble and watch him eat those words, one way or another.

The gunfire ceases long enough for Stefan to sneak a look above the credenza. Ermilo and the others are striding toward the door, done with us, with this entire fucking affair, but I have a feeling it won’t be for long. They’ll never let Stefan get away with this.

“Where the fuck are you going?” Stefan screams out after their retreating backs.

His hold loosens on me, and I scramble after Ermilo, only to have Stefan grab me by the ankle and drag me back. My nails scrape across the floor and crack, but it doesn’t stop my backward momentum. Any new screams are trapped in the back of my throat.

He throws himself over top of me, covering my body with his. Rather than letting him push me all the way to my stomach and use his weight against me, I buck, taking him by surprise with the roughness of the maneuver as I push up to my knees and thighs. My tailbone hits somewhere in his lower abdomen, and Stefan grunts, hot air ruffling the hairs by the side of my face.

He’s got his gun out, but the position is too strange for him to be able to balance himself and use it on me. My focus shifts, narrows, the plan changing

on a dime to accommodate this new situation. Getting the gun away from him is my best chance at getting out of here. If I give him the chance to use it on me, then it's all for nothing.

And Marco is hurt. He shot Marco without hesitation.

I follow the bucking motion with an elbow to his side, really grinding it in, even when Stefan only growls. There's no time to second guess myself, to worry about all the things that have gone wrong. One step in front of the other, breathing even, attention where it matters the most.

He's always underestimated me because of my size. Most people do. They see what they want to see and relax their guards because of it. I'm about to show Stefan exactly what a mistake he's made.

I remember the press of the gun muzzle against my head, and I elbow him again out of spite, this time a little lower and without as much force, a warning shot for what's to come.

"Where do you think you're going?" He reaches for me, like this is all some kind of fucking foreplay. "You're so small. You think a skinny thing like you could actually—"

He left his front open, and there's enough room for me to whirl around and slam the palm of my hand up against his nose, breaking it in one move.

Stefan rears back with a roar, both hands going to the geysers of blood spewing from his nostrils. "You fucking little bitch!"

But the self-defense tactic works, and I'm able to wrangle the gun from Stefan's limp grip before he sends it flying. I point it right at his face with deadly intent. "My name's Agent Matthews, you fuckwad."

As he lunges for me again, I pull the trigger, the click of the empty chamber sinking my heart. I keep pulling it, listening to those meaningless clicks as a feral light gleams in his eyes.

"Agent?" he hisses.

I hadn't realized he'd fired off enough. Or maybe he'd only kept a few rounds in the chamber to begin with. It doesn't matter now; I throw the piece at his head, and he jerks back to avoid the hit, the gun clattering uselessly against the wall.

There's enough distance between us for me to make my escape and, *there*. Marco's gun, inches from his feet, dropped when he went down. He hadn't been able to use it, and I know he's got a full chamber loaded.

I'm going to blow the head off this asshole.

At least, I will if I can get to it before Stefan—it's a big if. Adrenaline

lights a fire under my ass, in my blood. I scramble for it, only for Stefan to move faster and tackle me, catching my dress under his knees to stop my crawl right before he hits. This time, he expects my maneuvering and counteracts my buck by slamming me down into the floor.

My chin hits first, blinding pain shooting up from the crack of bone against the hardwood. Stars dance in front of my eyes.

“Enterprising little cunt, aren’t you?” he growls against my ear. “What kind of tricks are you going to pull out of your ass next? Doesn’t matter, though. You’re not getting out of here in one piece.”

He manages to get on his knees, his hands on either one of my wrists as he hauls me onto my back. Rather than going easy on me, he slaps me across the face hard enough for those stars to explode into supernovas.

“You think you can take me down? Break my goddamn nose?” He slaps me again, and the darkness at the edges of my vision creeps closer. “I’m going to make you pay for it *all*.”

Not likely, and not if I somehow get out of this. There’s still a shot. *It’s Christmas...* I push the fear aside and set my sights on the goal, which is disarming Stefan. Even without a gun, he’s dangerous. He slams me down again, and this time, my head cracks to the side, my teeth snapping down on my tongue, and I taste blood.

Stars continue to spark behind my closed eyelids anytime I blink, tears ready to cascade down my cheeks. A second later, he’s got both hands wrapped around my throat and squeezing hard.

Stefan spits blood in my face. “You and my brother are going to die, here and now.”

I gasp, my lungs already burning, every part of me crying out for oxygen. I slap against him, but he’s immovable, his hold tightening like a vise.

“Merry Christmas to me.” His smile grows wider the harder I fight against him.

“*Fuck you.*”

The pressure releases on my neck at once, and I suck in a painful gasp, choking on the rush of air. Stefan sways on top of me as Marco strikes again, using one of the golden candlesticks from the table to bash in the side of his brother’s head a second time. More blood rains down on me, but Stefan finally topples and lands on his side, Marco looming over him—over us.

“You’re done,” Marco whispers.

I cough, every inhalation a struggle. The tightness in my chest is painful,

but Marco...is alive. He's okay.

Half a second later, the front door of the mansion explodes inward, with Angela Ramos leading the pack as the FBI storms the house.

## CHAPTER 12

# Marco



**B**ashing my brother's brains in took more out of me than I bargained for, and my legs, the traitors, give out on me once more. I join Stefan on the ground, my head spinning and the rest of me going light at the same time, but Lacey is there in an instant. Her entire focus remains on me, despite her work colleagues securing the premises.

"Marco. Listen to me. Hey, over here. Look at me." Her hands are on my cheeks, forcing me to turn in her direction, even when the movement causes pain to flicker through my torso.

Blacking out had been a real option for a minute there, when not moving made sense to avoid the hailstorm of bullets tearing the dining room apart. Somehow, I'd managed to open my eyes long enough to see Stefan pull Lacey behind the buffet table.

Ermilo leaving had been a stroke of good luck, the noise loud and obnoxious. It pulled me back from the edge, even though it took every last bit of my resolve to make it to my feet, to take advantage of Stefan's distraction while I grabbed one of the massive centerpiece candlesticks.

No hesitation, and he went down like a bitch.

"Marco?" Lacey is calling my name again, and the soft soprano of her voice is distinguishable even with the din of the agents in the room, calling for the scene to be secured.

They got here right on time but damn, a few minutes earlier wouldn't have hurt.

We're both breathing hard, staring at each other as though it's a precious moment we've somehow been given, to simply be alive together. My head spins like a kid shaking a fish in a bag, and the blood loss makes it difficult

for me to think straight, but I see Lacey kneeling in front of me, dragging her beautiful gown through the blood stains on the floor in an attempt to get to me. She trails her fingers along my face, down my front, over the top of the hand still clutching the candlestick until I drop it.

“Marco, are you okay?” she asks. “You’re still bleeding. Where did he get you?”

I groan when she pushes my shirt to the side, the change coming over her face in an instant. Worry is still there, but the cop has taken over control, her law enforcement mode engaged and all the logical, step-by-step crap at work again.

She pries my suit jacket down off my shoulders before she starts to unbutton my shirt. Once the fabric is pushed aside, she probes the area, noting the entrance wound in the lower part of my abdomen and the exit wound at my back.

It’s nothing terrible, I want to tell her. The shock is getting to me more than anything, since I hadn’t really expected to be shot tonight.

“Okay. We need to stem the bleeding before you lose any more blood. Right now, it seems to be a clean shot. Trust me on this.” She reaches down to rip off a piece of fabric from the bottom of her dress, uncaring about the stains on her as she winds the material around me. “I know what I’m talking about.”

Uncaring about the activity around us as the FBI secures the scene. A roar cuts through the confusion, and I turn my head in time to see a pair of officers hauling Stefan off the floor, maneuvering him around and yanking his arms behind his back to slap the cuffs over his wrists.

It’s a beautiful sight. A long overdue one, but beautiful nonetheless.

He had the same look on his face as he had earlier, smack dab in the middle of his tantrum, except he is covered in blood from my hits and Lacey breaking his nose. It’s almost poetic, in a way. Even if he tries to fight, there’s no getting away.

“I’m fine,” I try to assure her, but it does nothing to stop the small noise of concern and the clucking of her tongue as she studies me. “Don’t worry so much.”

The words come out, just barely, and definitely not with the insistence I’d intended.

“Of course I’m worried about you. Are you out of your mind?” She’s pale, her hair redder against the whiteness of her skin, her eyes such a deep

blue, a man could drown in them. Such deep waters, such a strong and amazing woman. Powerful, beautiful, compassionate.

How would anyone *not* love her?

Stefan, the prick that he is, had been right about one thing: I *do* have feelings for Lacey. It's a kick in the pants, but that love at first sight bullshit might actually be real.

"Lacey! Christ, look at you."

Her name is called from across the room, and a blonde-haired douchebag-looking dude steps up, wearing a black jacket emblazoned with the bureau insignia. He crouches in front of her and reaches for her, almost surprised when she waves him off.

"I'm fine, Wes," she insists. "We need medical personnel over here to look at Marco, though."

Wes splits his attention between her and me, his gaze volleying back and forth. "What the fuck happened?"

At the same time, Stefan explodes. He kicks out at one of the two officers holding him, wrenching his shoulders out of their sockets with the movement before trying to headbutt the second agent.

"You need a warrant!" he screams as they tackle him to the floor. "You can't come into my house like this. Where's your warrant? You can't—"

Much to my surprise, Wes—it doesn't take much of a guess to assume he's Lacey's partner—strides over and socks my brother in the gut. It halts the garbage spewing out of his mouth for about five seconds.

"We have enough warrants to sink your ass for good," Wes says. "Don't you worry about a thing."

"Fucking book his ass, Wes," Lacey says as she increases the pressure on my wound. "Get him out of here."

"You'll never pin anything on me! You'll never fucking take me. When they let me out of jail, I am going to sue you for everything you've got."

"We'll see," Lacey mutters.

"If he's going to run his mouth, get a gag," Wes directs the rest of the SWAT team, coordinated by an equally blonde woman who looks like she'd be more at home shopping. They send several more agents back outside to apprehend the wayward Ermilo and his goons.

At least, I hope they will.

"Don't worry about anything, okay?" Lacey tells me. She bites down on her lower lip. "The others will find them. No one is getting out of here."

“Even me?” We hadn’t actually discussed it.

“I’m pretty sure my testimony in this case is going to make sure you’re cleared for everything, as long as you weren’t keeping any dirty secrets from me.”

I fumble, reaching for her hand, and grip her palm. “Get the tapes. You’ll see.”

“Agent Matthews, can someone please explain to me what the hell is going on here? Your partner says it’s all in hand, but I’m not seeing an order to the chaos.” The booming voice cuts through even the mess in my head.

Heavy footsteps sound a second later, and a big chested man snaps a finger, looming over me. Two emergency responders head in our direction and address the situation with clinical efficiency.

“We need to stop the bleeding,” Lacey tells the woman on the left. “I’ve got the wound covered.”

“Agent Matthews? I’m waiting for your answer.” The barrel-chested man barks out the statement, but Lacey doesn’t flinch.

“Yes, sir.” She straightens and pushes to her feet, finally content to leave me to the mercies of the emergency responders. I can’t help myself—a smile creeps across my lips. Seeing her in work mode is...well, it’s hot as fuck.

“Stefan Zicari is in possession of video tapes of every single one of his illicit activities,” she says. “He keeps them under lock and key in his office. Once we have those tapes, there is no way Stefan will go free. He’ll pay for his crimes.”

The man scrutinizes her. “Show me.”

“I’m coming with you.” I lean heavily on the other EMT, the man large enough to take my weight and get me straight.

“I don’t think that’s wise—” he argues.

I glare at him. “I’ve handled worse.”

“You’ve lost a lot of blood,” Lacey snaps.

“And I’m still clear headed enough to join you.” I want to be in there when they make the discovery. I don’t even know Stefan’s password. If he’s not in the office, if he doesn’t extend an invitation, then I have no access to the room. What else is he hiding in there?

Lacey looks worried, but her boss gestures for her to lead the way. He doesn’t bother to introduce himself to me, and with every step taking my whole concentration and both EMTs helping to support me, I don’t give a shit. It’s not like giving him my name will make the situation better for me. If

anything, I'd be landing myself in a deeper pot of boiling oil. Maybe he already knows who I am.

Lacey keeps glancing over her shoulder to make sure I'm okay, but every step sees her more confident, more in her element. She shows her boss to the door, both of them glaring at the lock.

"What's the password?" she asks me.

I shake my head, the pain in my side down to a dull throb. How ridiculous, for me not to know. Another reason why Stefan had to go.

For what he did to our father.

For all the abuse I've taken over the years, and anyone else who came into contact with him.

"I'm not sure," I admit. "He changes it with enough regularity not to be able to figure out a pattern."

"Maybe he said something to you? Recently? Something out of place?" Lacey draws in a deep breath, the purple smudges on her neck already starting to stand out against her skin, all in the shape of my brother's hands.

I wish I'd done more to him before they carted him off.

"Actually, he said something really strange to me earlier, something off putting that's bothered me since he said it," Lacey mutters out loud.

"What are you thinking?" I ask.

It's lovely to see the others letting Lacey take the lead on this, rather than questioning her thought process. They might have told her she's out of her mind. Instead, her boss only asks, "What did he say?"

"He said *every man has been made by God in order to acquire knowledge and contemplate*," she repeats. "He asked me if I knew the quote."

I shake my head again. "No clue."

"It's Pathagorous," her boss answers. "The guy who figured out the Pythagorean theorem. He was a very influential philosopher."

"Stefan isn't smart enough to make his password something like that. He barely remembers his birthday," I say.

Still, Lacey refuses to let the subject go. She punches in a number, and the sensor beeps at her, a light flashing red.

"Has he been known to quote the ancient Greeks before?" Lacey quips. "Or is this some kind of fluke? Maybe he looked up several quotes before the dinner tonight to make himself sound smarter?"

I keep silent, working through it in my head despite the dull throb of pain from my side. Lacey types in a second number, and again, the red light

blinks.

“What sort of—” her boss starts.

“Actually, let me try one more thing,” she interrupts quickly. “The golden ratio. Right? It’s 1618.”

Is there anything this woman can’t do? Something inside of me shifts, lightens, then blazes into fierce pride when she types in the numbers and the light on the lock turns green as a beep signals the mechanisms disengaging.

“How in the world did you figure that out?” I ask under my breath.

“It was a gamble, and it paid off.” The relief on her face is clear enough—relief and something else. *Pride*. “Let’s get inside and find those tapes.”

I hear what she doesn’t say: we need to find them before I collapse.

But she doesn’t know *how* much worse I’ve already been through. This bullet wound? It’s basically a mosquito bite. It takes work, however, to let her enter the office first, followed by her boss, to know the feds are going to dig through everything in this room that used to belong to my father. The setup Stefan took over after he—

Later. It’s a problem for future Marco.

I sway on my feet and lock my knees to stay steady, trying not to feel anything except cold detachment as the others scour the room. Lacey flicks her gaze to me once, twice, scanning me top to bottom before her brows knot in concern.

“Please let the EMTs do their job.,” she says softly. “And I’ll do mine here. Okay?”

We’ve made it this far, and if I’m not careful, I’ll do more harm than good. I’ll implicate myself while I’m not thinking. Eventually, I nod at her before jerking my chin to the desk, giving her a starting point to search.

As the two first responders help me back down the hall, I hear her crow of excitement and the low murmur of praise from her boss as they find the tapes. It’s all the evidence they’ll need to be able to put Stefan and Ermilo away for a long, long time, but there’s nothing but a hollowed-out space where triumph should be. This is exactly what I wanted, and I guarantee Lacey will be moved up for this crowning achievement. All that good stuff.

There’s no remorse, at least, for what I’ve done, and there is only a minimal amount of worry for myself. It’s done.

Done. Over.

It’s almost too much for me to believe, and when the first responders set me down on a straight-backed chair to address my wound, I can hardly

breathe. I clench my teeth together to keep any small noise of protest to myself while the two work. Clinical, steadfast, proficient.

It's over, and I should feel something, shouldn't I? Especially with my house filled to the brim with FBI agents and Lacey searching for every last secret kept by the Zicari Syndicate.

## CHAPTER 13

# Lacey



The house slowly starts to empty, with Wes lingering the longest. He's such a mother hen. Even with exhaustion pressing down on me and the night outside dark and inching toward Santa's sleigh ride, I don't need him worrying his head off.

"Go home," I tell him with a playful grin. "There's nothing else for you to do here."

He claps me on the side of the arm and squeezes. "I'm proud of you, you know."

I roll my eyes. "For what? Doing my job?" I sigh, trying to expel whatever is left of my fear. "Come on, give me a little more credit than that. I always had this handled." *Mental fingers crossed behind my back.*

"For actually being here when it's your least favorite holiday." Wes shrugs. "For pulling this off. For forming the most unlikely alliance I've ever seen and having it be the thing that saves us."

I follow the trajectory of his gaze to where Marco stands at the door, watching several police vehicles take the lazy turn out of his driveway. He's been seen by the EMTs and patched up to the best of their abilities. Rest, they assured us, would be the key. Rest and no strenuous activities.

Good thing we got most of our exercise out of the way earlier.

"You know, he's actually a really good guy," I say, dropping my voice a little lower to make sure Marco and his fantastic hearing doesn't actually catch a whiff of me praising him. Not that he doesn't deserve it, because he does; it just feels like the kind of conversation the two of us need to have alone.

Wes stares at Marco's back for a moment longer before turning back to

me. "I'll have to take your word for it. I'll hold off on arresting him for as long as possible, but it's coming, Lacey."

For me, he did this. For me, he'll push off the arrest as long as possible. Gratitude is a living beast inside of me.

"Well, I know you wouldn't leave me alone with him if you thought otherwise."

Wes has always watched over me without any sort of sexual attraction or physical chemistry. It made us great partners, the ability to get close to each other without the complications. The trust is there, right where it needs to be.

"Go home," I urge again. "I'll follow right after you."

"You don't need a ride?" he asks.

"I'll find my own. It's not like we're out in the boonies. There are always driving services running at this hour."

He refuses to budge. "You're sure?"

"Go."

I swat him on the shoulder with no force at all, and Wes casts a final smile at me, a final assessing glance at Marco, before he adjusts the set of his coat. His gun is where he can access it easily, but he doesn't reach for it as he makes its way out past Marco.

The sudden silence is strange; a welcome relief, in a way, but also stifling and heavy.

It's time for me to go too.

The arrangement, the strange and complicated agreement we made with each other to see this thing through to the end, has come to a close.

It happened faster than I would have thought, like the pieces fell into place, a neatly knocked over line of cards leading to the entire house, and now there is nothing but a pile on the floor. The job is done, and if Wes is to be believed, the higher ups will no doubt promote us both for this takedown, one with minimal casualties.

Except I want to stay. I want to talk to Marco even though it's a terrible idea. He finally turns away from the door and sets me with a look, capitalized and potent.

"Where do you think you're going, Lacey?" he asks. "Or should I say, Agent Matthews?"

There's something sad in his tone, like it's official that our job is done, our fake-relationship over, and I'm his mistress no more.

I shrug on my coat, wrapping it around my front and making sure it's on

tight. It's ruined, just like the dress, covered in blood, but at least Marco is okay and I haven't sustained any injuries. The bruises on my throat will fade.

Let's hope the memory will too.

"I'm heading out, but I wanted to say goodbye before I left. And...and thank you."

Why is this so much harder than I thought it would be? I barely know the man. I don't know what kind of food he likes to have delivered if he's staying at home on a Friday night. I don't know what show he prefers to binge watch, or his favorite song. None of those things.

I like to think I'd started to see his heart, the goodness inside of it, the way he looks out for me and my safety. It counts. It has to count for something, because the feelings bubbling up inside me are real.

Fast, maybe psychotically so, but real.

He's staring at me with a hooded expression, and I can't tell what he's thinking anymore.

"You think this is goodbye?" Marco finally says. "Because the way I see it, we have a whole lot more to say to each other. I'm not sure I'm in the right kind of mood to let you leave without saying it all."

My heart leaps in anticipation—*foolish* anticipation.

I have no idea what he wants to talk about. For all I know, he's still unclear on what sort of trouble he's in. Hell, I'm not even sure how Wes is going to play this, but I do know it's going to be a lighter sentence for Marco, unless we can somehow spin it so that he gets no time at all. Already, the wheels are clicking inside my head.

"What would you like to say?" I sound breathless.

"It's Christmas."

Okay, definitely not the two words I thought would pop out of his mouth. His lips curve sensuously, a little bit of mischief finally playing across his face. Even wounded, he is the most handsome man I've ever seen. My heart flutters a little harder against my ribs.

"Yes, it's Christmas."

He takes a step closer and halts inches away from my face, reaching out long enough to brush a stray lock of hair from my cheek and tuck it behind my ear.

"I know you're not a fan of the holiday," he replies. "There is, however, a certain tradition I've been meaning to get back to, something that used to mean a lot to me."

He holds out his arm for me, the way he had at the charity event yesterday. Christ, was it only yesterday that I met him? It feels like I've known him my entire life. I take his offered elbow without hesitation, allowing Marco to lead me in slow, deliberate strides toward the living room, past the carnage of the dining room and all of Stefan's damage.

A quick turn, a long hallway, and then the living room opens to an entire wall of windows looking out on a night landscape. Stars twinkle in the distance, but the multicolored lights wrapping around the tree steal all my attention.

Marco bids me to stay in place while he walks to the fireplace, and the quick press of a button has the flames roaring to life. He flicks a switch, and the lights overhead dim to a distant glow. There's only the fire, the lights, and him, glowing brighter than everything else combined.

The flutter in my chest grows uncomfortable.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm perfecting the scene."

"For?"

"For gift opening."

I shiver at the dark intention behind those words.

He crooks a finger, beckoning me forward. There aren't any presents wrapped underneath the tree, and the setup is almost too flawless to be either him or his brother's doing. A decorator probably put it all together.

"I'm not sure you're in any kind of physical condition to open up presents tonight." I step forward and press my chest to his, lifting my hands to rest them on his shoulders and craning my head up, up, up to look at him. "You might be in good spirits mentally, but I shouldn't have to remind you that you got shot tonight."

He shrugs it off. "I've gotten shot enough times to get used to the pain. Besides, it's not important."

"Not important?"

"Not when I'm here. When this moment is here, and I never thought I'd ever meet a woman like you." The sweetness of the statement is unexpected, and part of me wonders how great a length this man would actually go to keep me safe.

*Any length*, a nearly silent voice whispers in my head.

"Oh, I'm sure you met plenty of ladies in your former line of work," I say, offering him a smile.

“I’m sure you’d like me to lie but it’s true. None of them were you, though, and they will never be.” He loops an arm around my lower back and drags me to him as his other hand lands on my ass and squeezes. “I don’t give a shit that we’ve only known each other for a couple days. There is a larger conversation that needs to happen here, but for tonight, you better strip.”

He pushes me back a step and waits for me to say something. Anything.

I point to the couch. “Sit.”

I want to take care of him, want him to rest and heal, because the last few days have been nothing but insanity. Except looking at him, at the desire flaring across his face, I know there’s no way to dissuade him.

He finally agrees, shifting to the edge of the couch and making himself comfortable, his arms across the back, sprawled and waiting.

Where the first time between us had been rushed and crazy, the second time a long and slow tasting, this time, I cherish every moment. Going slowly, I tear off the last bits of his ruined dress shirt. My gaze lingers on the stark white bandages against his golden skin before I shift to my knees in front of him.

Maintaining eye contact, I pry open the button of his pants, drawing down the zipper before I start to tug the material down past his hips, past his knees, until Marco wears only his boxers and a shit-eating grin.

This, I think as I twist his boxers off as well, his already-hard cock bouncing free, is what we fought for today, to share this time with each other and explore this connection.

Freedom.

Either way, I want us to be in this together from now on, to see where this goes and take it to the end.

I crawl up between his legs, fully clothed while he’s naked, and lean down to kiss him, laughing as I feel his smirk against my lips.

“You have entirely too many clothes on.” Without warning, Marco surges to his feet, his cock inches from my face before he strides over to the tree.

“You’re supposed to take it easy! Didn’t you hear what they told you?” Craning my neck, I stare after him as he grabs the end of a piece of ribbon wrapped around the tree base and starts to slowly unravel it.

“I heard,” he replies. “And I’m choosing to ignore it. Now, strip.”

I lurch to my feet and shuck it aside, the material such that I hadn’t been able to wear a bra today. The tiny square masquerading as underwear goes next, and I kick them over toward Marco.

He points to the floor, the plush rug set in front of the tree, and when I actually do as he tells me, he yanks my arms over my head, wrapping the ribbon around me. He starts at my wrists, then down my arms. He grabs another piece of very red ribbon and wraps the other arm, maneuvering me so I'm wrapped, my breasts pressed together on full display.

The ends are tied around my waist in a half assed little bow, and Marco widens my legs, trailing his mouth down to one nipple and laving it before he moves to the other. I'm dripping wet for him already.

"The best present I could have asked for, all wrapped in a bow," he murmurs, trailing his mouth lower until I'm ready to do whatever he asks, as long as he actually touches me.

How will I ever be able to deny him anything?

Even concern for him takes a back seat to the hum in my body, the way my pussy clenches as he teases everywhere without actually touching my clit. I tilt my hips up to give him better access, wanting his face against my wetness. Instead, he dips his fingers over my pussy and pushes in until my inner muscles clench around him.

"Please."

Hard or soft, fast or slow, I don't give two shits. As long as he takes me right here. I'm begging for his nearness, and it doesn't matter what else he says: he's the wish I never thought I'd get, the one I made on every Christmas night. Well, once I got old enough to want these kinds of things.

The romance.

The heat.

Passion that scalds and soothes.

Marco rubs his thumb in tight circles around my clit, lifting one of my legs to his shoulder with the opposite arm and balancing on his knees. He has to yank me forward to get me to line up with him, and once he does, he rubs himself along my wetness, adding to it, working me with his fingers and his cock until I buck against him, dripping.

He stares down at me dark eyed, knowing exactly what he does to me, even though I'm wrapped too tightly to touch him. He twists his fingers around my clit again until the orgasm ricochets through me, coming quickly and all over both of us. When I'm done, when he makes sure I'm watching him, he lifts his hands to his mouth to clean his fingers with his tongue.

He tugs me again, rubbing the head of his cock against my cunt until I can't take it anymore. Then, he slides inside fast enough to make me scream.

I fight against the bindings. I want to touch him. I want—

Every single thought leaves my head as he fucks me, hard and fast, my leg over his shoulder to avoid rubbing his wound.

But damn, the man moves like he hadn't gotten shot hours ago, going faster with each thrust, not holding anything back. Fuck, but neither will I, not when lust and pleasure rocket through me. Not when the feeling of his girth stretches me from the inside out, his hardness branding my goddamn insides.

“Yes. Let's see what you can do. Let's see how loud you can scream for me,” he urges me on.

If this is some kind of punishment, it's the best damn punishment of my life.

He leans forward, stretching me, keeping my legs above me so that I'm contained beneath him even when I come apart. He presses into me even deeper, close enough to steal a kiss. He drives into me, telling me what a good little dirty girl I am, how tight I am. I come around his cock a second before he thrusts in balls deep and pulses his own release into me.

“Look what you do to me, Lacey,” he whispers.

Except I can't look, because I'm barely able to breathe. I have to learn how to keep my heartrate from going so sky high, it makes me dizzy. Then, Marco kisses me. I'm sweaty, covered in blood and ribbon, and I've never had a merrier night. Seeing his face light up brighter than the tree, I know, whether we'd actually taken down the syndicate or not.

We both won.

# *Epilogue*

LACEY



**M**rs. Folders made her special marzipan for this occasion. I'd gotten used to the taste and the texture, although it took me a little bit to get there, having never tried marzipan before in my life. My mouth waters when I lift a piece to my lips. Wes watches every move with an eyebrow quirked, like he can't possibly understand why I'm enjoying the treat.

"Because it's good," I say out loud, popping it between my lips.

"What's that, dear?" Mrs. Folders holds a Christmas ornament between her thumb and index finger, a smooth globe in swirling colors of red and green, dangling it in front of Wes' new baby girl while his wife bounces the child on her knee.

I glance over at Marco, seated close enough at my side for his body heat to seep into me, and I roll my eyes. This picture of familial bliss is a little crazy, and I want him to know exactly how I feel.

"It's absolutely nothing," he answers for me. "Lacey thinks she's being funny, except she actually has no sense of humor."

Mrs. Folders is only half paying attention to us anyway, too focused on the baby to mind the conversation around her. She's got a handful of grandchildren of her own to spoil, but she's carved out a few hours for us today, for this impromptu party before everyone goes their separate ways for the big day.

This year, the apartment is decked out in a dazzling display of decor, things I personally saw to myself. There's a massive tree at the window where Marco fucked me the first time, strands of white and colored lights decorating each bow, along with ornaments from my childhood and his,

things we'd both held on to for nostalgia alone and decided, at the same time, to share with the other.

Every available space is adorned with greenery, and there are bells on the door that jingle anytime someone goes in or out.

It's a secret apartment no more, one I've been mostly living in these days. On the couch across from me, my mom sits sandwiched between a couple of other neighbors. She catches me watching her and offers a brief smile, one I return once I've swallowed the marzipan.

Not easy.

Nothing between us is easy.

It's not like things are back to the way they used to be, either. They'll never be that way again, but I like to think we've both come far enough for this to be new, for us all to want that new chapter rather than repairing and making like the past never existed.

I'd reached out to her a few months after the takedown, urged by Marco to start healing other areas of my past, because unlike him, I still had a mom, and my grievances were not large enough to keep holding onto the grudge as tightly as I did.

The first call ended poorly.

The second, a little better.

Now, Mom and I try to have lunch together once a month. Slow to heal, but we're on our way.

"Maybe Lacey is still thinking about what happened last year, when she had to pretend to be your mistress," Wes jokes. "It was a fun joke around the agency or a while."

"She played the part well enough. She certainly had me fooled!" Mrs. Folders clasped a surprised hand to her chest, but we all know better. The old woman is a mischief maker.

"I never tried to fool you, I'll have you know," I say, "I was only being polite and helping you."

"Well, I thought you were involved romantically with this one." She winks at Marco. "Who wouldn't be? Look at his face!"

Wes' wife murmurs her agreement and earns a sour look from her husband.

Marco loops our hands together and lifts mine to press a kiss against my knuckles. "She is now. Romantically involved, I mean."

"And I did what I had to do for the job," I say. "Wes knows. I'm nothing

if not loyal to my job and anything it entails.”

Wes and I have finally been on our upward trajectory. The last year has been a whirlwind professionally and personally for both of us—a new baby daughter for him, and a promotion for us, as partners.

A move for me, and a whole bunch of my toiletries joining Marco’s in the bathroom. He isn’t too happy about having to share the closet space, even though most of my outfits are jeans and long-sleeved t-shirts, besides the occasional ballgown I like to try on to seduce him.

Those are the nights when Natasha Moretti makes another appearance in our lives.

Healing. Happiness. Loving the way things are playing out. Thriving the way we all hope to thrive. It’s such a change from this time last year, and as I crowd even closer to Marco, snuggling against his side, I can’t imagine anything else for me. It’s like every path, every setback and stumble, led to this exact point.

Where I’m meant to be.

It’s a point where Christmas music plays softly from the stereo, where presents are heaped around the lower boughs of the very real tree.

“My excellent skills at pretense are what saved Christmas. Or didn’t you hear?” I have to be careful what I say, because Mrs. Folders, the neighbors, and my mom have no idea what actually happened, or the integral part I’d played in the takedown of Stefan and the rest of the Zicari Syndicate.

Marco excluded. He’d managed to get off any pending charges on technicalities. Another miracle. Wink, wink.

“You might be a good actress, love, but you don’t ever have to play a mistress again,” Marco says with a swipe of his thumb over my knee.

I turn to Marco, confused. “What do you mean?”

“I mean I want you for my wife.” In Marco’s next breath, he’s down on his knee in front of me, holding my hand with one of his and reaching into the pocket of his pants. “Lacey—”

“Oh my god!” Wes’ wife slaps a hand across her mouth. “You owe me fifty bucks!”

“A real Christmas miracle, more like,” Mom says in a hushed tone, warning the others to quiet down as her eyes go teary.

The rest of the room fades away until it’s only me and Marco, the two of us together in this bubble of absolute bliss. He finagles the black velvet box open, the diamond nestled inside shining.

“Lacey, you came into my life in the most unexpected way. We started this thing by playing pretend, but it quickly turned into something real. Very real. Now, I know you’ve got your work husband,” he says. Wes chuckles a little, but the sound fades into the background as well. “But I want to be your actual husband. I want you to be my wife. Mine, forever.”

Tears prick the backs of my eyes until they leak out, trailing down my cheeks.

I’m too cynical to believe in happy endings, or the happy ever afters that fairytales promise, but I’m damn sure going to make this life count.

“Is that a yes, Lacey?” Wes shouts. “Don’t torture the poor guy.”

I peer down at Marco, feeling drunk on the absolute happiness flowing through me. “Yes. Of course. I mean, yes, I’ll marry you.”

Grinning, Marco slides the diamond onto my left ring finger before standing again and lifting me into his arms. I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him as everyone claps and cheers around us.

It’s hard to believe it was just last Christmas that I was pretending to be a mafia mistress. And now, by this time next year, I’ll be an ex-mafia’s wife.

I’ll be Marco’s *actual* wife.

Damn.

A Christmas miracle indeed.

*The End*

# Pretty Little Things



***They say there are two sides to every story...  
Now both sides want to own me, claim me as theirs.***

I'm a professional thief. High security to picking pockets, doesn't matter. I'm an expert.

So when I'm hired to steal a priceless necklace by a wealthy stranger, I don't hesitate to take the job. Little do I know, the seemingly normal task will put me in the middle of two of the deadliest gangs in The Quinate.

And their leaders might just kill me.

Hendrick Agnossio and Jac Miller are the heads of their families—both young and handsome, but violent and brutal killers who see me as their new prize.

Their bloody rivalry is generations in the making, and I've been thrown right smack in the middle of it.

Even though I refuse to be part of their games, I can't escape them. They're everywhere, poisoning my thoughts, under my skin, heating my blood...

I may be a thief, but they've stolen my life.  
Maybe even my heart.

*Also by Brooke Harper*

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## About the Author



Brooke Harper creates dark and sexy worlds for her characters to play. A lover of strong coffee and old tombstones, she spins dark tales of sex and sin, pain and passion, and misery and madness that'll have you flipping the pages and begging for more.

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