

SARAH DANIELS



ANCHOR

POINT



TORMENTED SYMPHONY: BOOK 1

Anchor Point

Sarah Daniels

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Cover Design by: Got Covers

Editing & Proofreading: Indie Proofreading

Print ISBN: 9798397893251

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Dedication

To all the Valentinas out there who have suffered at the hands of loved ones... I am you, I see you, I stand with you, and I'm always here for you. Stay strong, lovelies.



For my Uncle Albert. I'll love you forever. I hope you're making your open zipper fly "my pepito needs to breathe" jokes in heaven.

Trigger Warnings

This book contains subjects that may be disturbing and triggering to some readers. Please read with caution, your mental health matters.

This book contains the following triggers:

- * Sexually explicit scenes in detail.
- * Domestic violence
- * Rape and sexual abuse
- * Mental and physical abuse
- * Mental Health: Panic and anxiety attacks, PTSD, depression
- * Kidnapping
- * Gun, knife violence
- * Mentions of drug use
- * Mentions of suicide (no detail)
- * Mentions of miscarriage (no detail)

Anchor Point Playlist

- Left for Dead - Memphis May Fire
- Popular Monster - Falling In Reverse
- Just Pretend - Bad Omens
- The Fight Within - Memphis May Fire (Valentina's Song)
- Song #3 - Stone Sour (Justin's Song)
- Hurts Like Hell - New Years Day
- The Devil in I - Slipknot
- Hold Me Now - Caskets
- New Reality - The Word Alive
- Safe and Sound - Point North, The Ghost Inside
- I'll Follow You - Shinedown (Justin and Valentina's Song)
- Eye of the Storm - Pop Evil (My dedication to all the Valentinas out there)

Prologue

Anchor Point : An advantageous location, where a suppression operation begins. Usually a barrier to fire spread, anchor points are created to prevent a fire from burning around the end of a fireline. The anchor point is used to minimize the chance of firefighters being outflanked by the fire while trying to suppress it.



5 years ago

“So tell me, *Magic Mike...*” Valentina mocked, as we sat on the hood of my Mustang in our cap and gown from graduation. “You gonna spend all your time saving the kitties from trees and making middle-aged moms swoon? How noble.” She was fucking bold when she drank whiskey. I loved it.

“Well, Val, comes with the territory. Being a firefighter means lots of pussy,” I countered, snatching the bottle of Jameson out of her hands and taking a generous sip.

She scoffed at me, slapping my arm as she snorted out a giggle.

“So, why paramedic then? Isn’t being a hot firefighter enough?” She pulled my hand holding the bottle towards her, forcing me to help her take another gulp.

A whiskey-induced blush stained her pale cheeks as her silky brown hair blew across her face in delicate strands. Fuck, she was beautiful. The way she hugged her knees to her chest as she closed her eyes, raising her chin to the sky to feel the breeze on her face... I wanted to fuck her right then. I wanted to make her mine. I desperately wanted to tell her I was in love with her.

“Well, it seems like a helpful skill, you know. If I’m going to encounter a lot of pussy, it would be helpful to be medically trained. Mouth-to-mouth and all that necessary shit.” I winked playfully at her as I slid off the hood of my Mustang to stretch my legs.

“You’re awful!” She threw her head back to laugh, and in her whiskey filled haze, she lost her balance. I caught her, pulling her to me before she fell. We stood facing each other, my arms still around her as her fucking gorgeous hazel eyes went wide and looked into mine. Her perfect lips parted ever so slightly, and her cheeks were beet red in embarrassment with a hint of something more... I couldn’t quite put my finger on it.

I wanted to tell her then how I felt about her. I wanted to tell her to move away from California with me to Las Vegas where I would be training and working. I wanted...

My thoughts were interrupted by her pulling me down to her by the lapel of my graduation gown, and the feel of her lips on mine was even better than

I had ever imagined. I immediately cupped both her cheeks in my hands, feeling her hot tears fall as our tongues collided. Dancing within each other in perfect rhythm, like we were made for each other. She tasted exactly as I imagined; like whiskey, something sweet, and fucking heaven. I could get drunk off her for the rest of my life.

She mewled a small moan into my mouth that sent hot arousal straight to my dick as I backed her up to the closed passenger side door. We landed with a soft thud, and her arms shifted to around my neck as mine found her waist. I pressed my hips to hers, and she arched into me, humming in approval as my hardened dick pressed against her stomach.

The kiss became more desperate, more intense. We both had been dancing around being best friends since high school, ignoring the spark between us. We were finally giving in to what I'd wanted for so fucking long. As our breathing became more heavy and labored, I grabbed her ass firmly in my hands, lifting her as she wrapped her ankles around my waist. I carried her to the hood of my car and set her down.

We tore off our gowns and locked eyes. Her overwhelmingly beautiful hazel eyes were hooded, her lips swollen from our kiss. Her bare feet were propped up on the bumper of my car, and her soft pink, knee-length dress had slid up to her thighs. Black lace caught my eye, stiffening my cock even more in my slacks. I gently parted her legs, stepping between them, never taking my eyes off of hers as my hands trailed up her deliciously silky skin. My thumbs were dangerously close to her center, and her hot, wet arousal met the tips of my thumbs as I rubbed her clit on top of the lace thong.

“Justin...” My name in her mouth this way... It was heaven. She arched her back into my touch as I slid her thong to the side. Val reached forward,

undoing my belt and releasing my erection. Immediately, I felt her silky soft hand on my cock.

“Fuck, Val...” I hissed as she fisted and pumped me. In return, I slid her thong to the side and found her clit with my thumb, tracing wet lazy circles, reveling in the way she tried to grind her hips on my hand. I slipped two fingers past her folds, sliding inside of her. She threw her head back again, her brown waves tossing over her shoulder. Feeling her clench on my fingers made me groan in approval.

“Justin... Please...” she purred as she pulled my fingers out of her and lined up my cock between her folds. I held eye contact as I licked my fingers clean, and her sweet arousal coated my tongue.

“I knew you would taste like fucking heaven Val... Such a sweet pussy...” She moaned louder as her eyes closed, pulling my cock to her entrance impatiently.

“Val... Are you sure? I don't want...”

“Just shut up and fuck me Justin... Please...” She both interrupted and begged, and I obeyed. She was so tight as my cock entered her pussy, stretching to take me in, and I groaned in approval.

“Holy fuck, Val. You're so fucking tight, so wet, baby.” She lifted her face, keeping eye contact through hooded eyes, and the most delicious moan fell from her perfect lips as she raised her hips slightly to take me in.

She took all of my cock and it was the most perfect sense of euphoria I've ever felt. Once I was fully seated in her, I pulled out slightly and started to thrust into her. She pulled my mouth to hers, biting my lip, tangling her tongue with mine as she ground her hips into me, chasing her orgasm. I was happy to oblige and let her take what she wanted.

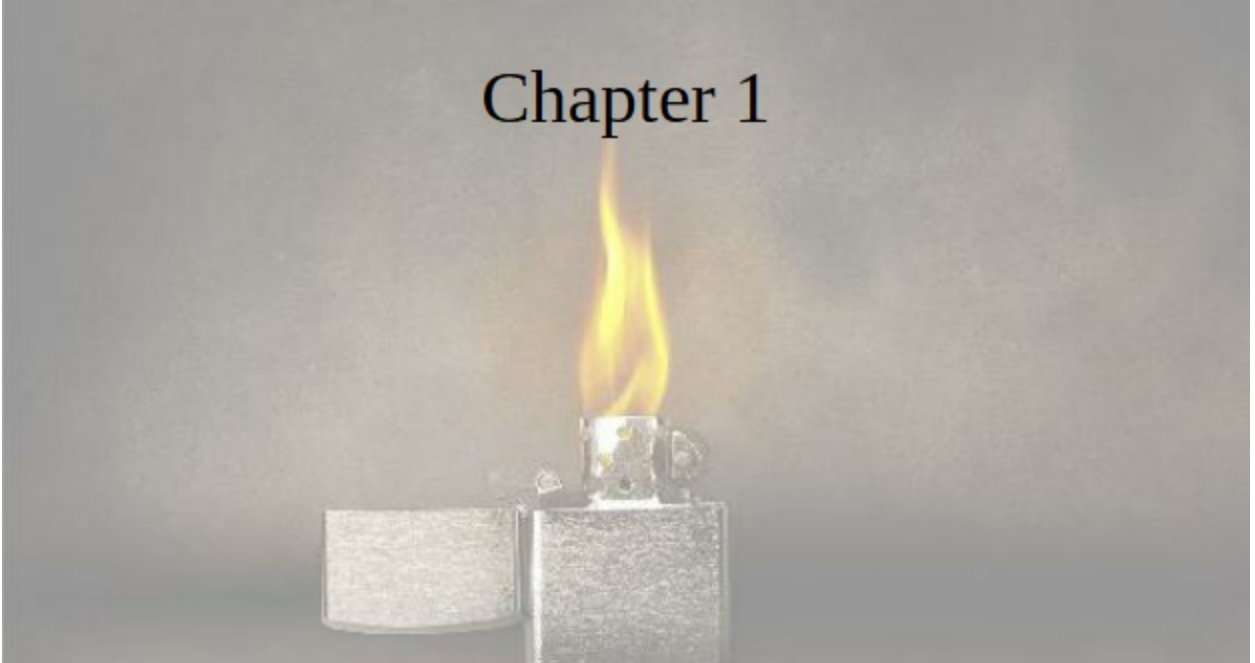
“Oh... Justin... Y-yes...” she moaned as I moved my hands to her hips

and met her movements, thrusting relentlessly into her. Bringing a thumb to rub her clit, her legs began to shake, and she clenched on my cock as her orgasm made her lose control. Mine shortly followed as she was coming down from her high, and I spilled myself into her. We were both panting, buzzing off the whiskey and sex. I leaned forward, resting my hands on either side of her hips on the hood of the car.

“I... I love you, Val... Move... Move with me. Come with me to Las Vegas.” The words just spilled out of my mouth. Her eyes went wide, and fresh tears began to form as she brought our foreheads together.

“Justin, I love you too... So much. I just...” She sobbed hard, and I kissed every tear that fell, cupping her cheeks. I was moving in a week, and she had just given me her answer without having to say the words... She wasn’t coming.

Chapter 1





Present Day

I fucking hate this house. I hate this stupid room. I hate this... I screamed in my head, as I picked up a Zippo lighter from Marco's nightstand and threw it across the room.

Crossing my arms, I closed my eyes and tried to take a deep breath to calm down my "brave me" that only exists in my mind. I called her Nikita. Because Nikita sounds like a strong, stable female that doesn't put up with shit from abusive men. Or men, in general; could probably kick ass too, who knows? My attempt at a deep breath caused me to scowl at the pain in my side. I guess bruised ribs took a while to heal. I tried to keep my composure and leaned on my mental bad bitch for strength as I stomped over to where the lighter fell at the foot of the bed and picked it up. Didn't want to risk forgetting it was there so I could avoid more bruised ribs.

I rolled my eyes as I stood slowly to my full height and looked around the bedroom to make sure I didn't miss anything. I crossed my arms across my chest and hugged myself. God, how I hated it here.

This room was a sad, bare nightmare. A queen-size bed was centered along the far wall, but don't worry, I made the bed right this time. Not a wrinkle in the boring, faded blue comforter, all the matching pillows in place. The two mahogany side tables on either side of the bed were dusted, and, yes, I made sure there weren't any streaks this time. There was a long dresser that came up to my hips on the wall opposite the bed, every piece of clothing in it was folded to perfection. The mirrored sliding glass door of the closet on the east wall was smudge free. The carpet was vacuumed, and the shadow boxes with Marco's military medals and awards were spotless.

I scoffed at all the commendations. *If the Navy only knew the man this prick really was...* I was only able to be this brave in my mind. *Don't fail me now, Nikita.* The last time I was brave enough to speak my mind out loud, I was rewarded with these bruised ribs and a concussion.

Trying to ignore the sting of shame deep in my chest, I looked up at the clock on the left nightstand. 6:37am... one more hour until I was free to leave and go to my interview with my pretty little mask on. Outside the house, I played the part of the happily engaged girl planning her dream wedding. If only everyone knew that the groom to be beat the ever living shit out of me every night, and whose favorite pastime was getting blackout drunk and fucking me until I bled.

With a defeated sigh, I tried to shut that door in my mind and focus on getting myself ready for my interview. I was looking forward to this librarian position at the public library. I swapped out the vacuum and cleaning supplies for a little stool from the mirrored closet and pulled out my sad little plastic bin of makeup with my tabletop mirror. I set my stool at the end of the dresser and sank down with a deep sigh as I set up my mirror and dug through the bin for my foundation.

Are you fucking kidding me? I cursed to myself as I desperately pressed on the pump to my full coverage foundation. Sad spurts of creamy makeup sprayed into my palm. Could this day get any worse? I stared at myself in my tiny, cracked mirror and didn't even try to fight the tears. They fell, and they fell hard. I looked away from my reflection and hung my head in shame as my shoulders bobbed up and down with my sobs. The stupid, empty foundation was that slightest nudge that pushed me over the edge, into a downward spiral.

I sobbed so hard my chest started to tighten. I got up from the stool I was sitting on and slid myself down the wall to the floor and hugged my knees. Each breath felt like I was suffocating, continuously stabbed by knives through my ribs, collapsing my lungs. I rested my forehead on my knees as hot tears soaked through my pajama pants.

The panic attack came at me full force. Everything tightened. The walls started closing in, and the bedroom got infinitely smaller as I desperately tried to stop the shaking. My whole body started convulsing as I tried fiercely to keep my grip on my sanity.

Just breathe... just breathe... Justin's words came to my mind. He was always the one that was able to help talk me down from panic attacks... God, how I missed my best friend...

Once my racing heart calmed, I turned my head to the side to look at myself in the mirrored closet door. My vision was blurry from the tears that stained my face and the inside of my black-rimmed glasses. Through the fuzzy lenses, I saw my ugly truth. My soul was broken, and my body was bruised. I needed the foundation to cover a fresh black eye around my left eye and the bruise on my right cheek just above my jawline. I had thirty minutes left to get ready for my interview, and now I didn't have a way to properly

cover the reality I so carefully hid from the outside world. The sad little spurts of leftover foundation now dried in my hands, and I hung my head in shame, holding my head in my palms and covering my eyes as the panic attack circled back for a second serving of my soul.

This panic attack was worse than the first. I couldn't breathe. I was panicking, hyperventilating, and my vision started to blur as my heart beat abnormally fast and hard in my chest. My body was starting to shake violently, and I leaned to my side, trying to lie down gently, but I collapsed with a thud, making the tears fall harder with the extra pain from my injured ribs. I curled myself up in a fetal position to protect myself as the tremor I felt down to my core threatened to consume me.

I blinked, and a shine caught my eye underneath the nightstand. I was suddenly reminded of the cell phone I hid from Marco for emergencies. It was duct taped to the underside of the nightstand, where he would never look. I ripped it from its hiding spot and turned it on, shaking and praying it had battery. It did, and once it slowly powered on and the main menu read, I hit the phone button twice for my auto dial. My shaking hands dropped the phone face up on the floor. I was still lying on my side, so I shifted myself slightly to lay my ear on it so I didn't have to use my hands.

Please, please, please... I silently begged to myself.

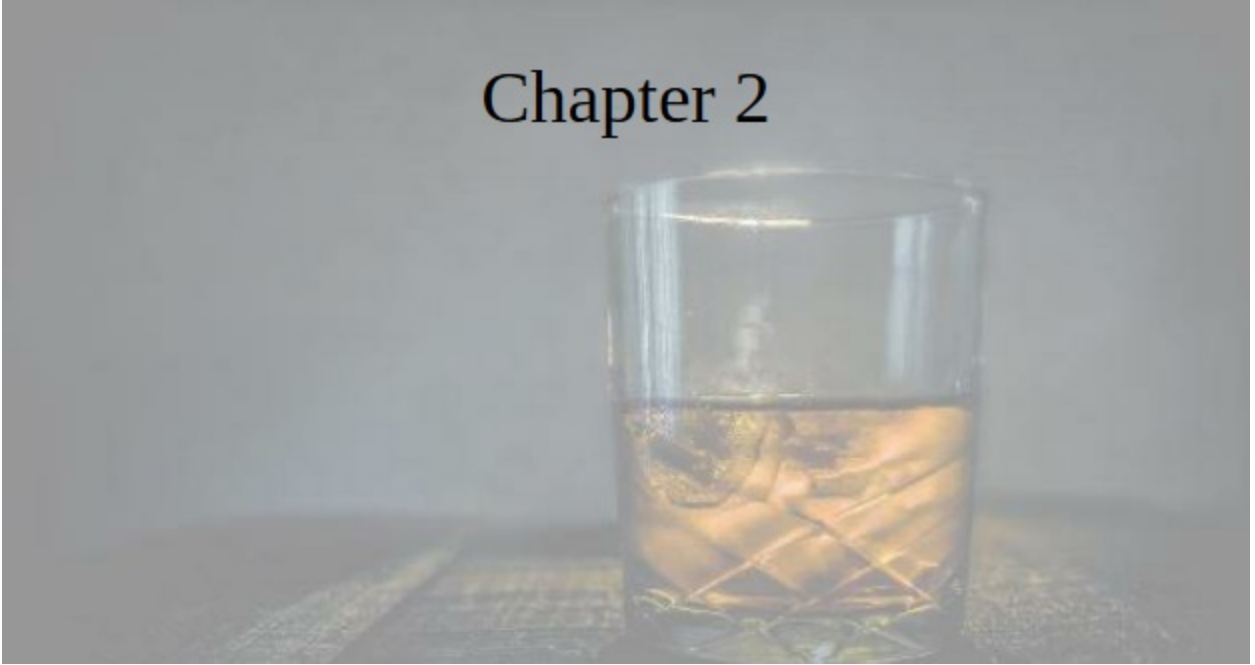
"Hello...?" Justin answered after what felt like an eternity. Thank God.

"Juh... Juh... Justin... Please..." My shaky voice forced out a breathy plea.

"Val? Oh my God, are you okay?" His voice was laced with worry.

"P-please... 1... 22... 7... Lan-Langdon Avenue..." I was getting lightheaded, barely able to force out my address, then the world went dark.

Chapter 2



Justin

“Come on, JC, that’s all you got?” Spencer taunted.

“What makes you... Think that...?” I forced out on an exhale as I racked my weights above my head and sat up on the bench. It was 6 AM - workout time here at the station for Spencer and I.

“Okay pretty boy, next time maybe add another 25 each side, huh?” Spencer winked at me, taunting again.

Spencer West, my partner and probably the best, but most psycho driver you’ll ever meet. As an ex-street racer, he got a thrill racing us around Las Vegas toward our next call as firefighter paramedics, and handled most of our driving on calls. He was a 6’2” combination of smart ass, whiskey, tattoos, and muscle. His shoulder-length brown hair pulled back into his man bun I loved to tease him about.

“Maybe next time you can kiss my ass, Spence.” I chuckled as I took a big sip of water from my water bottle. “Don’t mess up that pretty hair of yours, *pretty boy*,” I mocked, throwing his words back at him.

He waved me off dismissively, tossed his sweat towel over his shoulder and went to the leg press machine. He swayed his hips like he was a sexy woman walking down a runway. I tried not to let him hear me chuckle. I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of my amusement.

I reached down to grab my towel from the floor, which was folded up next to my phone and protein bar. Wiping the sweat from my brow and neck with the towel, I took another generous swig of water as the screen on my phone lit up. I placed the water bottle at my feet and picked up the phone, looking at the screen. It was a California area code, but not a contact I had saved in my phone. I was hesitant to answer; these damn telemarketers were ruthless. I guess it wouldn't surprise me to get a call at 6 AM.

I set the phone down, letting it ring as I adjusted my basketball shorts I liked to workout in, and rolled my shoulders and neck, getting ready for another set. Something I cannot explain pulled my eyes back to my phone again. It was still ringing, and it really was odd to get a spam call this early in the morning. I decided to pick up.

"Hello...?" I answered hesitantly.

"Juh... Juh... Justin... Please..." I almost dropped my phone. That voice... My girl...

"Val? Oh my God, are you okay?" I shot up to my feet, my response louder than I was expecting, getting Spencer's attention. He racked his weights on the leg press and rushed over. Concern laced his sweaty face.

"Please... 1...22...7... Lan... Langdon Avenue..." She was crying, and sounded like she was hyperventilating.

"Val, what's going on? Are you okay? Are you there? Val?!" I looked up at Spencer. Something was not right. My mind was trying to piece things together quickly while memorizing that address.

“Go, JC. Go to her. I’ll prepare the rig,” Spencer urged.

“1227 Langdon Avenue,” I announced.

He nodded at me, and we ran off in separate directions. I pocketed my phone and ran as fast as I could to my room. I used my body weight and momentum to ram myself into the door of my dorm. Not paying attention if I ripped it off its hinges or not. I frantically grabbed my wallet off my nightstand and keys from the hook on the wall. My hoodie was on the foot of the bed, and I grabbed that too, before I ran out to my car.

1227 Langdon, 1227 Langdon, 1227 Langdon. I kept repeating the address in my mind as I got in the car. I typed the address into my car’s GPS, cursing how long it was taking to load, and the directions popped up after what felt like an eternity. I drove as fast as I could to my best friend, who was only 15 minutes away.



12 minutes later, I pulled up in front of a clean, expensive looking home. The manicured lawn had a steep incline to a 3-foot brick wall separating it from the sidewalk. The house was a two-story white home, with black shutters and trim around the door and windows, and a black shingled roof. I could picture Val sitting in the large bay window opposite the front door, cozied up with her books, coffee, and one of those overly fluffy blankets.

I yanked myself from that perfect vision and remembered why I was here. I knew I was at the right house; her white Nissan Sentra was parked in the driveway with that obnoxious decal on her rear window of an open book with

hearts and flowers flowing from the pages. I ran up to the perfectly painted black door and knocked.

“Val? Val are you there?” No response. I knocked harder with the side of my fist.

“Val?!” I tried opening the door, but it was locked.

Fuck! I cursed at myself. I needed to find a way in without freaking out this prim and proper neighborhood. I looked around the porch and up to the roof. I didn’t see any security cameras, which was odd to me. A house this nice would have them, at least I thought so. I ran around the side of the house and found a side door that opened into the kitchen. I tried my luck, and it clicked open. I stepped inside, warily.

“Val? Are you here? Anyone home?” I tried to sound stern but casual, remembering how easily she panics. I didn’t want to cause any more worry if she was already in a panic attack.

I carefully but quickly made my way through the home, looking for Val. This house was clean, I mean CLEAN. Almost too clean, and it gave me the creeps. Nothing was out of place, not a speck of dust anywhere. I began to wonder if there was a housekeeper here.

“Val! It’s Justin! Where are you?” I called out. My anxiety started rising, and my mind flashed with an image of her lying dead on the floor. I quickly dismissed the thought of an image that would completely shatter me as I stepped into the last room, cursing myself for watching too much true crime with Spencer.

It was a very boring looking room. It reminded me of my room at my dad’s house. I was a military brat growing up, so we moved a lot until I got into high school. I never had posters on my wall, never had any photos up. Why have them up when we would move in a few months anyway? The awards

and Navy medals in 3 shadow boxes on the wall confirmed my recognition. This must be Marco's room, Val's fiance. I walked around the bed, and my heart broke at what I saw.

It was Val. My Valentina. Her pale face was stained with dry tears, she was lying on her side with her arm outstretched and her phone still in her hand. The way she had fallen had her beautiful chestnut brown hair strewn across her face, half covering her eyes. A small plastic bin of makeup was knocked over on its side on top of a long, short dresser, and a tabletop mirror had a crack in it. I kneeled before her to check her pulse, and she was still alive. I gently caressed her cheek, seeing if she would wake, praying she just fainted and wasn't seriously injured.

I brushed her beautiful, silky hair to the side of her face and an immediate, deep sense of rage hit me in the deepest corner of my soul. She was beaten. I saw red as I noticed she had a fresh black eye on her left eye and a bruise on her right cheek that was starting to yellow around the edges... How long ago did she get this bruise? I clenched my fists, trying to calm myself, returning my attention to Val.

"Val, it's me. Wake up for me, sweetheart." Nothing. I began to assess her immediately, dialing Spencer on speaker phone. I set my phone on the nightstand, speaker facing me as I reached up her back underneath her pajama shirt, my thumb and pointer finger on either side of her spine, feeling for any spinal injury.

"JC, is everything okay, man?" Spencer answered on the first ring. I could hear street noise and his siren, and I willed him to get here quickly.

"No, Val is on the floor, and she has a fucking black eye and bruises man. She needs to get to the hospital!"

"ETA 3 minutes," he replied coldly as the line disconnected.

Once I was relatively certain she didn't have any injuries to her back, the paramedic in me kicked in and I started assessing her injuries while keeping my ears open to hear Spencer arrive. Knowing him, he'd come lights and sirens blaring, waking up all these rich people in this godforsaken, pretentious neighborhood.

I gently laid her flat on her back, tilting her head up so her mouth was facing the ceiling. I did not hear any fluid or see anything in her nose or throat. I moved on to check her breathing; she was barely breathing, small shaky breaths but her chest was moving symmetrically, ruling out a collapsed lung.

I continued my assessment, checking her circulation. I needed my goddamn Advanced Life Support bag. I checked her pulse for her heart rate, and it was low, causing worry to set in. I was struggling to focus.

"Fuck!" I yelled out loud. I was unraveling, instantly forgetting all my medical training. All other assessments would have to wait until she got into the rig so I could check her pupils and blood glucose levels. I just scooped her to my chest and held her. Her hair brushed across my cheek as I shifted her into my arms. Taking in her soft rose scent instantly brought waves of nostalgia. She still used the same lotion as in college. I heard Spencer's siren coming in the distance, grounding me back to reality.

"Oh, sweetheart, I'm going to fucking murder whoever did this to you," I whispered as I gently lifted the back of her shirt to make sure she had no injuries on her back where I needed to carry her. She had bruises everywhere: across her whole back, her sides, and spreading around to her abdomen. New, fresh bruises and healing ones. All I could see was red as I held her close to my chest. Spencer was out front now and with two loud honks, he snapped me back out of my rage. I needed to get my girl to the hospital.

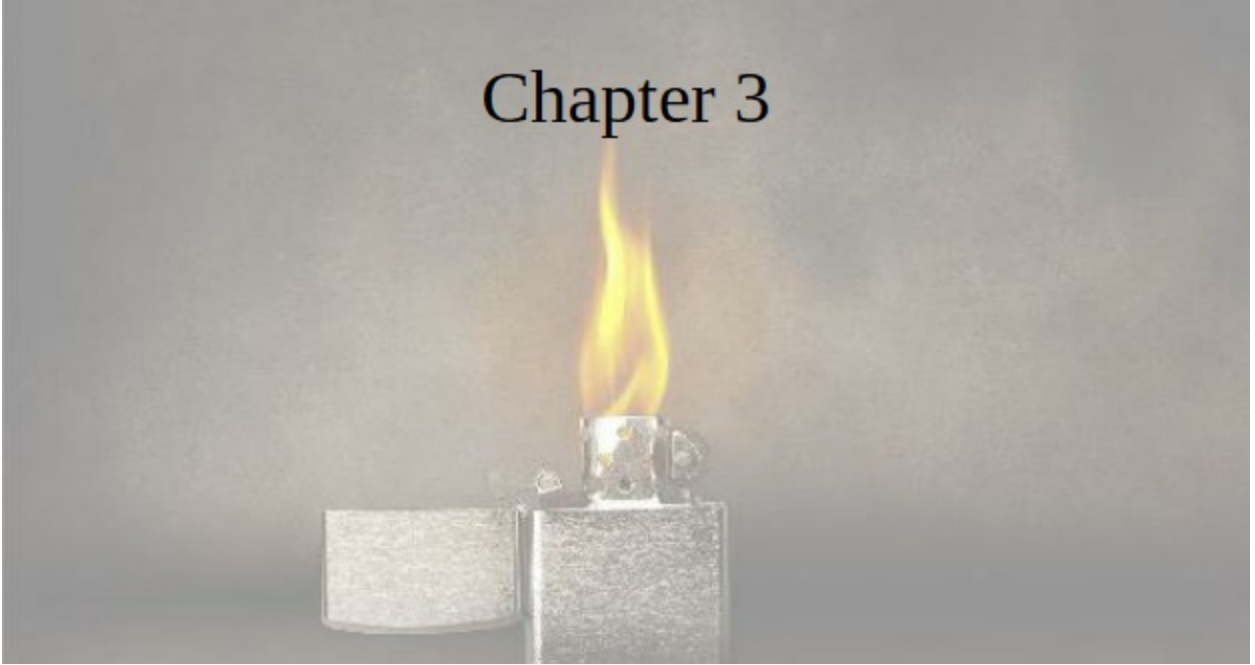
“Val, sweetheart, let’s get off the floor, okay?” Her breathing was shaky, but steady, like she was in a deep sleep. I reached for her phone and put it in my right front pocket, then grabbed my phone and shoved it into my back pocket. I got on one knee, holding her left forearm, and guided her to a sitting position with a hand on her back at her right shoulder. As gently as I could, I draped her limp right arm over my shoulders while wrapping my left arm around her upper back. Keeping her steady, I scooped my right arm behind her knees and stood to my full height. I took a brief moment to touch my forehead to hers.

“My beautiful angel...” I whispered to her as I placed a feather-light kiss on her cheek, trying not to succumb to the tears threatening to fall. As I rushed outside through the front door, Spencer was opening our rig, pulling out a gurney. Behind me, I kicked the front door shut, cursing under my breath.

Spencer ran up to meet us with the gurney, and I gently laid the secret love of my life down like she was the most precious gem that I didn’t want to risk breaking. My paramedic mask came on, and I tried my best to remain stoic and strong for Val.

We loaded up Val in our rig, and I immediately put gloves on and started her IV. I gently placed a nasal cannula underneath her delicate nose, looping it around her ears, being as gentle as I could. Spencer jumped into the driver’s seat, and we sped off to the hospital as I said a silent prayer to whatever God was listening to keep my sweet girl alive.

Chapter 3



Valentina



I opened my eyes to an unfamiliar room. Soft beeping drew my attention to my right, and through blurry eyes, I made out the outline of what looked like an IV stand and hospital equipment. I reached my left hand up to my eyes, feeling for my glasses, but they weren't there. My throat was sore, and I tried to swallow the lump of fear in my throat.

I was supposed to be at my interview. If Marco found out I wasn't there... I couldn't take a repeat of the night before last. The headache from the concussion my loving fiance gave me still pounded in time with my heartbeat. I shifted and let out a small groan at the thought, and felt a grip tighten on my left hand. It sparked a sense of fear in me, and I began to shake.

"Val, sweetheart, are you okay? What happened? Were you robbed at home?" Justin's handsome face was laced with concern.

The bags under his dark brown eyes told me he hadn't slept. His five o'clock shadow formed the outline of what a perfect beard would look like in my mind. His hair was slightly messy, probably from running his hands

through it like he always did when he was stressed. I couldn't help but notice he was in his gym clothes, and those shorts hugged him in all the right places...

"Val?" Justin's eyebrows raised with worry at my lack of response, snapping me back to reality. I hadn't seen him in so long, and I didn't want to reconnect this way.

"Justin... What are you doing here? How... How did I get here?"

Fresh tears welled in my eyes. His grip on my left hand tightened, his thumb moving in slow circles on the top of my hand as he tried to help calm my nerves. I hated that he held that hand. That god-awful ring was on my ring finger. A reminder of the hell I lived in now, and the even worse hell I'll live in once Marco figures out I'm not at my interview and in a room alone with another man. Against every fiber in my being, I yanked my hand out of his grip, cradling my hand. I couldn't stand to be touched...

"Val..." The muscles in his arm twitched at my quick retreat. He gently reached for my left hand again and placed the most delicate, intimate kiss on the top, at my knuckles. He looked at me like I was the most precious thing in the world, and my heart broke even more. How do I tell my best friend that I'm secretly in love with him, but there's nothing we can do about it...?

Just tell him. I heard Nikita nudge the corner of my brain as Justin handed me my glasses from the table.

My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a loud, aggressive throat clearing. I felt my face go pale, and I froze in fear. Marco.

"I don't appreciate the... *staff* placing hands on my fiancée unless it is medically necessary." Marco scowled, emphasizing his mocking tone for the word *staff*. I closed my eyes, bracing for my punishment, as Justin gently

placed my hand at my side. The immediate emptiness I felt as he stopped touching me broke me again.

You let him touch you. Nikita reminded me.

“I meant no disrespect, Marco. Val is my best friend, and I was checking on her,” Justin reminded him with a hint of aggression in his voice.

“Yes, yes, I know all about you Jonathan.” Marco rolled his eyes as he placed his briefcase down a little too dramatically on the chair next to my bed.

“It’s Justin...” Justin corrected, irritation settling behind his perfect brown eyes.

“Alright, well thank you Jeremy for taking care of my fiancée. Now that I’m here, you’re dismissed back to your...” Marco waved him off dismissively. “Medical work,” he finished.

“It’s Justin,” he corrected again as Marco rolled his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest. No one ever stood up to Marco, and I was worried about the consequences *I* would face if Justin didn’t drop it.

“Justin... It’s okay. You don’t have to stay. I’ll be okay here with Marco.” It was a lie. A complete, utter lie and the way Justin’s eyes darkened as he held my gaze told me that he knew I was lying. I dropped my eyes to my hands folded in my lap, avoiding the concern in my hero’s eyes.

What are you doing? Don’t let him leave! Nikita screamed in my mind.

“I’ll let the nurse know you’re awake now. She had some questions for you about your neurological history,” Justin said sternly as he checked my IV bag and monitors. He placed the tv remote with the nurse call button next to me on the bed before moving to head out of the room.

“By the way, *Marco,*” Justin said between closed teeth, as he stopped in the doorway.

I flinched and closed my eyes, praying Marco wouldn't take any of this out on me.

"Your fiancée was badly beaten. She suffered a severe concussion and has 2 bruised ribs. She will need extra care once they discharge her since she will have activity restrictions." Justin crossed his arms, nodding towards my bed as he leaned on the door frame.

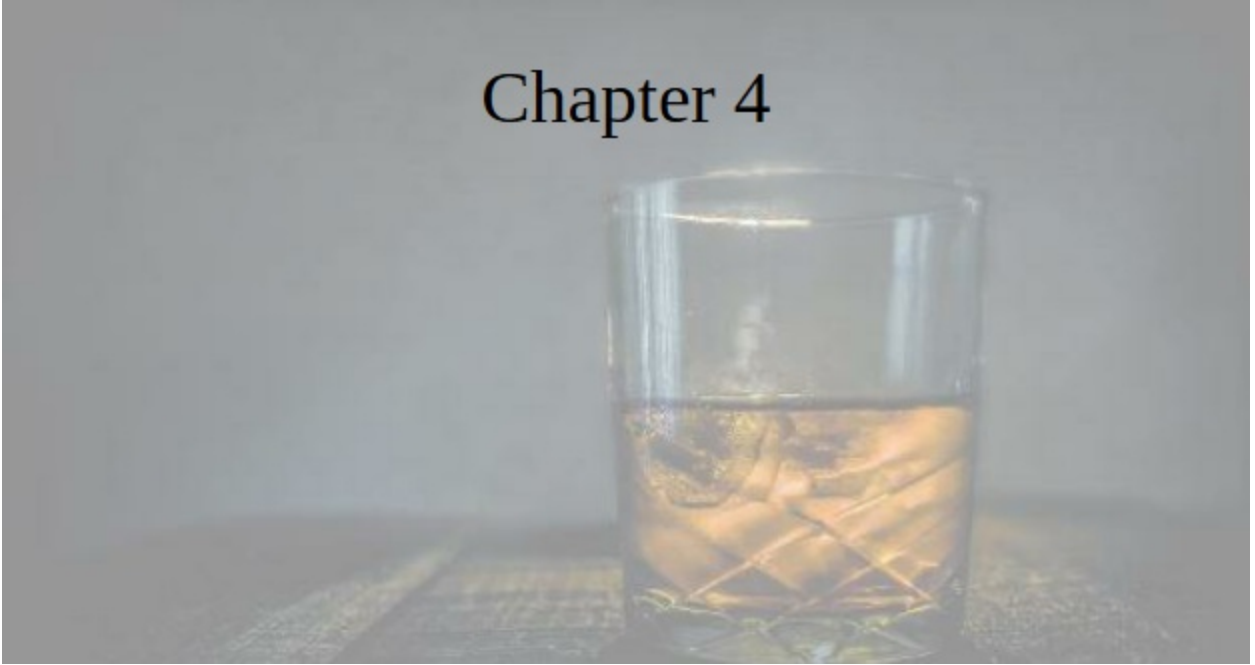
"I appreciate your concern, but I know how to take care of my fiancée. I don't need a... stranger telling me how I should take care of mine." Marco scowled, looking Justin up and down.

"Valentina, you call the station any time if you need any help," Justin said to me over Marco's shoulder, earning him the most evil glare from Marco I'd ever seen.

"Th-thank you Justin," I replied weakly, still trying to avert my gaze from him.

I raised my eyes again and nodded at Justin. Marco stepped in front of him to block my view before moving to my side, uncrossing his arms. For a very brief moment, Justin and I locked eyes before he left my line of sight. So much was communicated between us at that moment, and he definitely understood the ugly truth. My life was in danger.

Chapter 4



Justin

I didn't want to leave that fucking room. I didn't want to leave her there with that asshole of a fiance. That pretty boy Marco rubbed me the wrong way ever since I had the pleasure of meeting him last year. I bumped into him and Val at a grocery store, so she was forced to introduce us. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but something was off with that guy.

"Fucking prick," I hissed as I made my way down the hall to the waiting room of the ER. Spencer came back after his shift, and he looked over his book, catching my eye. He closed it and immediately stood up, coming to my side as we filed out of the emergency room.

"How is she?" Spencer asked, his cool blue eyes full of concern. I knew he saw how badly she had been beaten, and he knew what this woman was to me.

"It was bad, Spence..." I ran both my hands through my hair as we exited to the parking lot. I sighed as I recalled the rest of the trip to the ER.



“Fuck sweetheart, what happened to you?” All I could see was red as I cut off her pajama shirt and saw bruises varying in shape and size all over her midsection and sides. I saw a few fresh bruises on her back when we were at her house that I assumed were from her falling before I arrived.

This is too much bruising... If she has internal bleeding, she could bleed out before we make it... I snapped back to reality as the blood pressure monitor beeped. Her blood pressure was very high at 168/101, her heart rate was 134 while in this syncope episode.

I reached over for my handheld to radio into the UMC Trauma Center.

“UMC, this is Campbell with Rescue 5 calling.”

“Go ahead Rescue 5,” a male voice responded.

“Good morning, UMC, Rescue 5 is currently en route at the paramedic level, with a 28-year-old unconscious female from her home. Possible concussion with bruising to the left lower eye and right lower jaw. Current vitals are: Heart rate 134. SPO2 98% on nasal cannula, up from 85% at RA. Blood pressure of 168/101. BGL 110 and temperature of 98.2. We have established a 20 gauge to the right A/C, running normal saline. We have obtained a 12 lead and have transmitted it to your facility with apparent sinus tachycardia. ETA in approximately five minutes, any questions or orders?”

“Copy Rescue 5. Upon arrival, proceed to room 2 where the trauma team will be standing by. UMC clear.”

“Rescue 5 copy, room 2. Rescue 5 clear.”

We arrived 4 minutes later, and the rest was a blur. They took my Val away from me while Spencer had to hold me back from going with her.

“Let them help her, man. We’ll wait here for her. I’ll go return the rig and bring the Mustang back.” Spencer tried to console me with a pat on the back shoulder. I watched the woman I loved being taken away from me.

If anything happens to her...

“Campbell, you can wait for her in the break room. I’ll page you when she is stable,” Nancy, one of the regular nurses, had offered, interrupting my thoughts. She had kind eyes, full of sympathy as she looked at me over her glasses, pointing to the opposite side of the hall. All the paramedics and EMTs around here called her Mama Nancy; she was like everyone’s mom. She had that mom look over her glasses that put you in your place, made you sit up straight and say “yes, ma’am.”

“Thank you, Mama.” I ran both hands through my hair, trying to shake off the worry. I knew she was in the best hands and at the best trauma center in Nevada. She gave me a sweet smile and placed a hand on my bicep, patting gently before going back to the nurse’s station.

Four hours went by as I tried to stay calm in the break room. I was on cup four of this god-awful coffee they have here. I paced back and forth so much, my watch alerted me with a “congratulations for reaching your daily step goal of 8000 steps”. I’d been texting Spencer off and on, keeping him updated on having no updates. I scoffed at my phone as I sat on a not so comfortable chair at a table and rested my head in my hands. Two hours later, Nancy came to get me.

“She’s still unconscious, but she’s stable, Campbell. She’s been moved to ICU room 122, and you’re free to see her,” Nancy said as she leaned her

head in the doorway. I immediately jumped up and rushed to room 122.

Valentina was still the most beautiful fucking thing I had ever seen. Her chestnut hair was haphazardly splayed out on the pillow she was lying back on, reminding me of a crown... She was royalty to me, the Queen of my heart. Her long, brown eyelashes curled slightly at the tip, and the hazel eyes I longed to see were closed as she rested. She still looked pale, and the bruises on her face were a stark contrast to her soft, pale skin. I pulled up a chair to her left side where her IV was not attached, feeling grateful they saw in my report that she was left-handed and kept her IV where I put it. Her glasses were left on the bedside table, along with the remote for the tv. I sat next to the woman I loved, the woman I would never have, and held her hand. I was finally able to sleep knowing she would be alright.

“Uhh hello! Earth to JC!” Spencer waved a hand in front of my eyes and gave a “yoo-hoo” whistle. I snapped out of my head and back to the present.

“Oh, shit. Sorry, man. Where was I?” I stammered in reply.

“You were telling me how dumbshit kept getting your name wrong. What a fucking prick.” He scoffed.

“Yeah... I’m worried about Val, Spence. She didn’t say it, but I have a gut feeling, man.” We got into my Mustang and I sat in the passenger seat, leaning my arm on the window frame. I used my hand to prop up the side of my face, staring out the window at the tree we parked next to.

“What’s the gut feeling? Who are we killing?” he joked. Spencer’s face went serious when he looked at me and saw me seething, staring at nothing out the window.

“I think Marco is the one hurting her.” The words made me want to vomit. Spencer’s eyes darkened in disgust.

“I’ll kill him if he did, that sick motherfucker. No one fucking raises a

hand to a woman.” he said as he looked straight through the windshield, his knuckles turning white while gripping the steering wheel, his eyebrows furrowed. I knew this hit home for him. His mother was a victim of domestic violence by the hands of her ex-husband, Spencer’s stepfather. There was something else in his eyes I couldn’t quite figure out. It almost looked like... guilt?

“I don’t want us to get too ahead of ourselves, but I think Val needs help. I need to try to see her alone to find out what’s going on. Maybe we can call Anna? I have a feeling she can get past Marco because she’s a woman. That pretentious asshole doesn’t like men talking to *what’s his*,” I said, trying to shake off that weird look Spencer had.

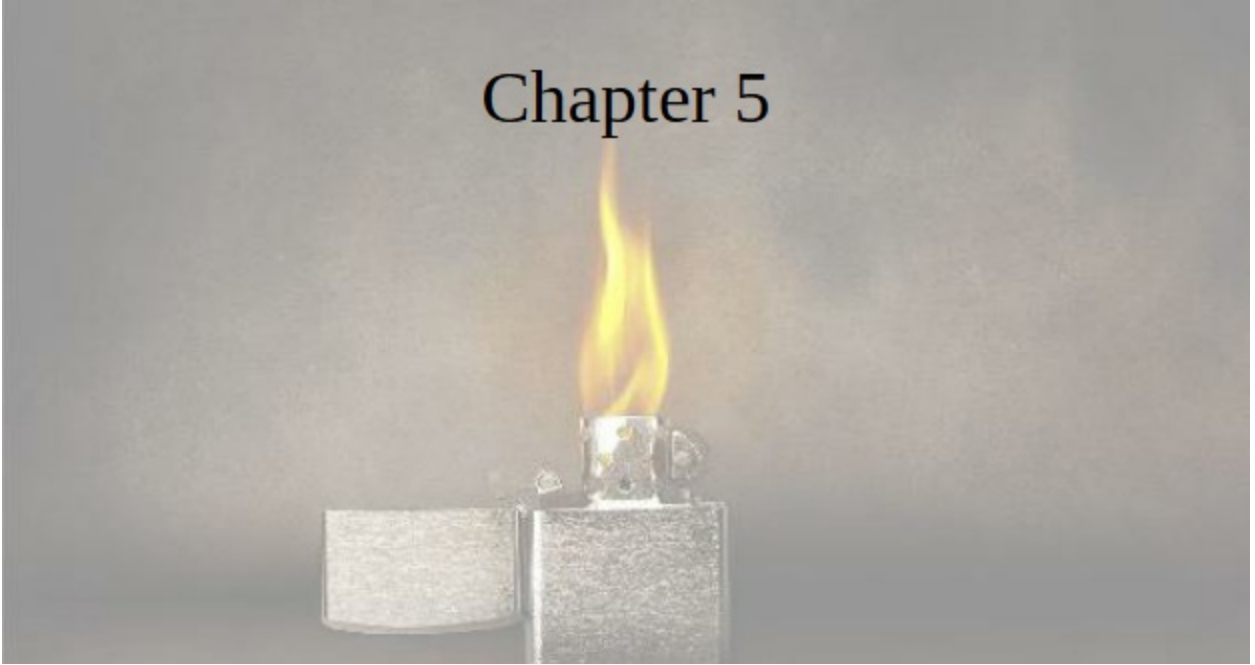
Another look of disgust from Spencer as I emphasized “what’s his” with a mocking tone.

“Yeah, because Val is his property.” He rolled his eyes. “Well, you know where to find me if shit’s gonna go down. I got your back, man. And Val’s.” He cut off my thoughts and began driving us back to the station.

“...I appreciate that, man. I know she would, too.” I returned my gaze out the window. Something was off with Spencer... I couldn’t put my finger on it, but something was off.

We sat in silence the rest of the trip back, and once we arrived, I called Anna. I needed her help.

Chapter 5



Valentina



As soon as Justin left the room, I shut my eyes. I tried to remember his hand on mine, and the little circles he traced with his thumb to help me relax. I hated being touched by men. But Justin was different... The absence of his hand left my heart feeling empty, hollow. I desperately clung onto that feeling of safety he provided from his touch with everything I had left in me; because I knew once Marco opened his mouth, all my hope would shatter.

“So, you didn’t make it to your interview, then?” he asked with a scoff in his voice, as he checked his cell phone.

Before I could answer, he turned around and drew the curtain, blocking the view of the nurses and doctors walking down the hallway. The door to my room was propped open, so he wanted a semi-private place to feast on what little dignity I had left.

Don’t let that motherfucker near us. Nikita said in my mind.

“I’m so sorry Marco, I don’t remember getting here... The last thing I remembered was getting my makeup box to get ready for the interview and—” He cut me off aggressively while reaching onto the table.

“Care to explain this, then? Where did *this* come from?” he hissed through closed teeth, trying not to be loud as he threw my secret phone at me. It missed my chin by an inch and landed with a harsh *thud* on my chest, making me gasp in surprise.

Fuck. I cursed simultaneously with Nikita in my mind. Justin must have left it for me with my glasses.

“I’m waiting for an explanation, Valentina. Don’t make me lose my patience.” He scowled.

“I was sorting through a box of things from... um... from my mom’s house, and my old cell phone was in there. I needed her... Anna’s phone number to call her to ask for help choosing the um... floral arrangements for the wedding. I... I knew her number was there.” I bit my lip, hating that I stumbled over my words. He would never believe the lie.

Marco tore the phone out of my hand, dropped it to the ground, and stomped on it until it broke into pieces. That was my only lifeline... My only connection to my mom and to Justin was gone in an instant. I cursed myself for not memorizing their phone numbers.

“Don’t forget who you belong to, Valentina,” Marco growled as he rolled up one expensive sleeve to the elbow. Tears started forming in my eyes as he roughly shot that hand under the blankets of the hospital bed and gripped my thigh hard enough to bruise. I threw my hands over my mouth, suppressing my yelp. The tremors in my body began as fear set in. I desperately clinched my thighs together as hard as I could. Please... No... Not again... I begged my body to be stronger than his grip. I moved my hands under the blanket to gently hold his forearm.

“Please Marco... Please... I can’t...” I begged him. I knew what was coming...

“That will be the *last time* you ever talk to a man without my permission,” he hissed as he slid my panties to the side.

“Marco... P-Please... Not here...” I shamelessly begged, whimpering. My body was weak from whatever cocktail of medications I was given in my IV. All I could do was turn my head away and force my eyes closed. Silent tears running down my face, soaking my hair and the pillow. I prayed for a nurse to come in, the housekeeper, doctor, anyone... I didn't care. *Please don't let him do—*

My thoughts were torn from me as two dry, harsh fingers forced their way into me. Marco's free hand covered my mouth as I groaned in pain, tears falling harder and soaking his hand.

“See this...?” He forced his fingers inside me until his knuckles connected with my entrance, then pulled almost completely back out. “This. Is. My. Pussy.” He growled, punctuating each word with a hard thrust. He continued his assault, punching and forcing his fingers in and out of me, harder each time. I was disgusted by the thought that I wished I liked it, so my arousal could provide the slightest lubrication, but it didn't. Every part of me hated his touch, hated him, hated the pain. I sobbed hard into the hand covering my face as sweat started to bead on his forehead. Every movement he made inside me felt like he was ripping me apart and rubbing me raw.

“If you want to act like a whore, you'll be treated like one. But, this is my fucking pussy, you hear me? Mine. No cocky *best friend*, or whoever the fuck he is, will stand in the way of what's mine,” He said so indifferently as he finally pulled his fingers out of me. They were coated in fresh blood, and my period had ended 3 days ago. He looked at his fingers, then back at me. A sadistic grin appeared on his face, and I prayed someone would just please come in the fucking room.

Marco lowered the railing on the left side of the bed, and pulled me by the leg, turning me, baring my blood-soaked panties in his direction. The look in his eyes was horrifying. A feral hunger that only a sadistic fucker like him would have. With his clean hand, he stroked his disgusting cock over his slacks. He was fucking hard as a rock. He took a paper napkin off the bedside table, wiped off his bloody fingers, and threw the dirty napkin at my face.

“I’m going to fuck you here since you want to act like a slut, Valentina.”

“Marco... Please... Please not here. What if someone walks in... What if...”

“I thought whores liked everyone to see them getting fucked,” he snapped, cutting me off. I shook my head slightly to let the soiled napkin fall onto the blankets.

“I swear... I never touched him, he was just here when I woke up... He...” I was sobbing, not even trying to be quiet anymore. I closed my eyes, praying this was all just one long nightmare, but I knew it wasn’t when I heard his belt come undone and his zipper yanked down.

He fisted his disgusting, pathetic cock in his hand, pumping himself as he gripped my chin, forcing me to look at him.

“You’re going to shut the fuck up now, Valentina, and take my cock until I’m repaid for leaving the office to come to this dump.” I couldn’t believe what was happening. I’m in the fucking hospital. How could absolutely no one know what was going on, How could no one hear?

“M-Marco...” I hopelessly begged.

Touch us with that pathetic excuse for a dick, and I’ll rip it off, then shove it down your throat. Nikita screamed in my mind.

He moaned as he let go of my chin to hold my knee up and open while still pumping his erection, never taking his eyes off the bloody mess he made in

my panties. He licked his lips as he hooked his free arm under my thigh, yanking me roughly to the edge of the bed. I shifted my right arm so the IV wouldn't pull out and hissed in pain.

“Now I'm going to show you what happens when you want to be a slut, Valentina.” He let go of his cock and slapped my pussy hard over my bloodied panties with his hand. I cried out in pain, trying desperately to close my thighs, but I was too weak.

All I could do was focus on making sure the IV and other cables didn't get pulled off or twisted. I leaned my head back in defeat as he moved my panties to the side again, trying to block out what was happening.

Marco parted my entrance with 2 fingers and positioned the head of his cock in place. I was still bleeding as he rubbed himself up and down my folds, coating his crown. With no warning, he thrust into me, forcing me to take him completely at once. At least this time, I had lubrication...

He fucked me hard, pulling me into him with the arm hooked under my thigh. His grunts disgusted me, making me feel sick.

“Dirty... Fucking... Slut... Yes... Take... This... Cock...” he grunted, each word a thrust. He decided to rub my clit with his thumb, and I was instantly overwhelmed with shame as my body betrayed me. The sensation on my bundle of nerves delivered a wet arousal, and he noticed.

“I knew you were a fucking whore, Valentina... You're so wet around my cock.” He groaned.

Two minutes later, after I dry heaved twice, he gripped my chin again, forcing my mouth open. He withdrew his pathetic excuse for a dick out of me and sidestepped two feet as he jerked himself off.

“Keep your mouth open like a good little slut. You're going to swallow this come, baby.” I squeezed my eyes shut, the tears stopped falling, and my

body went numb as he shot his release down my throat, making me gag. He forced my mouth closed.

“Swallow,” he commanded, as he put his dick back in his pants, zipping up and putting his belt back in place.

I did as I was told, and he positioned me back in my proper position on the bed, tucking me in. Almost like he gave a shit about me. My head lolled as my eyes glazed over.

“Clean this up.” He circled his mouth with his pointer finger, showing me what to do to my mouth, and pointed to the napkin on the blanket that he had originally cleaned his fingers with. Marco rolled his sleeve back down, buttoning it at the wrist, walking out the curtain to the door. That sick fuck handed a janitor a \$100 bill and nodded at him. He paid him to keep people away...

I was ashamed and humiliated. I wiped away my fresh tears with the dry side of the bloody napkin, then wiped the corner of my mouth. He walked back up and snatched it from me, putting it in his pocket so it wouldn't be seen by any nurses that came to check on me. As soon as Marco pocketed the napkin, because the world is a cruel bitch, the neurologist came in with a gentle knock on the wall.

“5 minutes too late, doctor.” Nikita said in my mind.

“Miss Fiore, it's Dr. Robinson, may I come in?” He poked his head through the right side of the curtain with a calm smile.

“Yes, please doctor, pleasure to see you again,” Marco answered for me and met him halfway, shaking his hand.

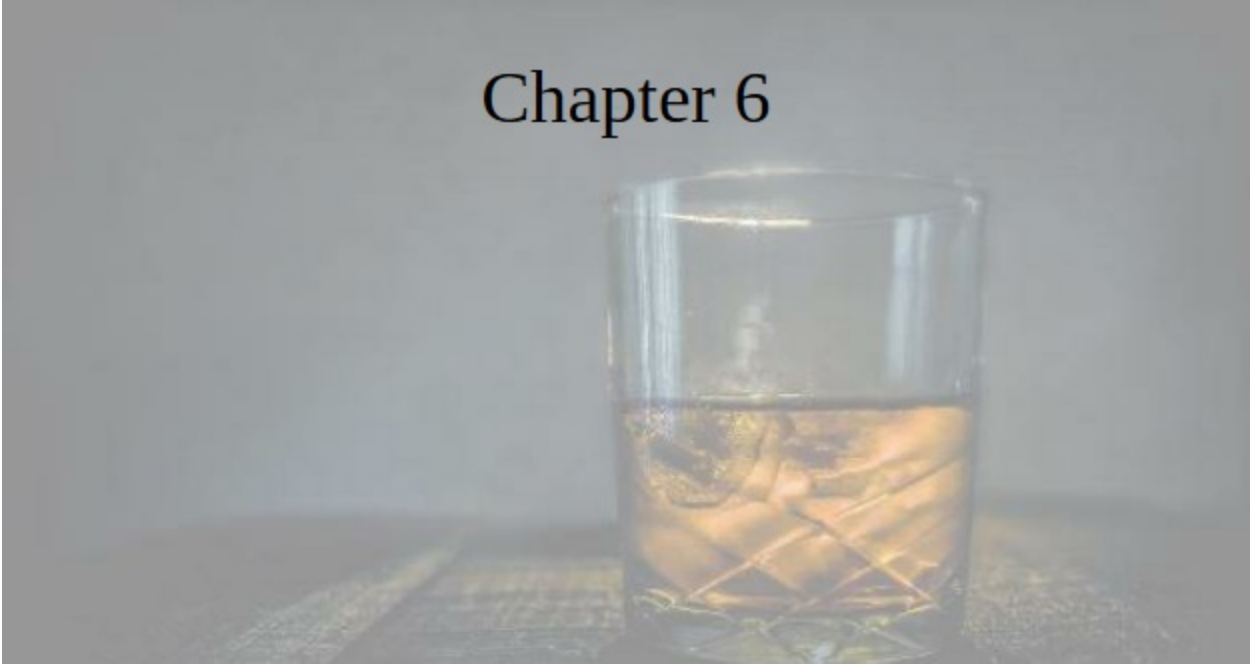
My “doting fiance” sounded kind and genuine, and it caused bile to rise in my throat as I dry heaved again. I couldn't take it anymore. My mind was numb and my heart started racing again as I felt sweat forming at my hairline.

My inner walls were throbbing. I was in so much pain, and I felt blood starting to pool in my panties. They're just going to assume I started my period... They didn't see how Marco just brutally violated me in a fucking hospital bed. I wish Justin could get me out of here. I just–

Nikita, please... Help me...

Dr. Robinson looked at me with immediate concern and the last thing I remember was him rushing to my side, yelling over his shoulder as my hospital monitors made strange, alarming sounds. My mind went blank mid-thought as the world went dark again.

Chapter 6



Justin



I sat on a bench outside this little mom-and-pop coffee shop with two to-go cups. Caramel macchiato for me, and vanilla latte with extra whipped cream for Anna. It was a long, restless night at the station after my run in with Marco. I checked my phone every few minutes, paranoid I would miss a message from Val.

Anna's long, blonde ponytail came into view, swishing as she walked towards me. I waved, and she gave me a nod as she held her cell phone to her ear, rolling her eyes behind her aviator sunglasses.

"No Stevens, just take care of it. The raid is tonight at 21:00... Uh huh... I left the file on your desk like *you asked me to.*" The sarcasm in her tone made me chuckle as I sipped on my liquid heaven. She hung up her phone and shoved it in the right-side pocket of her slacks. Her button-up shirt was wrinkled, and her suit jacket had flopped open as she put her phone in her pocket. Her badge was on display at the front of her hip, and her gun was holstered at her side. She looked like she had gotten as much sleep as I did.

"Rough day, detective?" I joked as I held up the other coffee.

“That’s an understatement.” She sighed. Anna dramatically plopped herself on the bench next to me, greedily reaching for the coffee, wiggling her fingers like a kid reaching for candy.

“So what’s so urgent? Need help getting a cat out of a tree?” She winked at her overused joke.

“Ha ha ha... Very funny. But no, it’s about Val,” I said as I averted my gaze, looking at my hands as they cupped my coffee.

“How is she...?” Guilt laced her dainty features. I knew she had been swamped with cases and hadn’t been able to go see her best friend.

“It was bad Anna... She was bruised literally from head to toe. All across her back, her sides, her face...” Anger took hold of me as I heard the words come out of my mouth. I didn’t realize I was squeezing my coffee cup until it burst in my grip, spilling hot macchiato on my shirt.

“Fuck!” I exclaimed, standing up so quickly that the bench shifted back. I threw the coffee cup at the curbside trash can and held my forehead in my hands.

“Justin...” Unphased at my outburst, Anna placed a comforting hand on my bicep. “Let me go talk to her. I’ll make time today to see her. I already called ahead and they aren’t ready to send her home until she speaks with law enforcement anyway. The hospital is responsible for reporting any signs of abuse. I will make some calls and get the report assigned to me.” Always the voice of reason, Anna.

“I’m sorry, I just—”

“I know. You love her still. You don’t need to explain, hun,” she interrupted, pulling me into a warm hug.

“I know the meeting will be confidential, but please... If I can do anything...”

“Since when do I play by the rules, Campbell?” She smirked a crooked grin, raising up her coffee cup in a silent thank you as she walked away, putting her cell phone to her ear. I could hear her barking orders at someone as she rounded the corner out of sight.

With a sigh, I sat back down on the bench, not ready to head back to the station. I felt helpless, and all I wanted to do was protect her. I sat in my macchiato-stained t-shirt, hanging my head, diving deep into the pity party within my mind. With a huff, I stood up, dialing Spencer on my cell phone as I rounded the bench to get in my Mustang.

“Hey man, you get to see Anna?” he mumbled with what sounded like a full mouth.

“Yeah, she’s going to go see Val in the hospital. They don’t want to release her until she talks with the cops, since they suspect abuse,” I replied as I pinched the corners of my eyes at the top of my nose. I leaned back onto the headrest as Spencer chewed whatever he was eating.

“Sirens?” Spencer asked through yet another full mouth. I wasn’t able to do anything to help Val right now. Maybe breakfast with Spencer wasn’t such a bad idea. He was obsessed with Sirens, a little hole-in-the wall diner all the firefighters liked to frequent. I actually didn’t mind it, since it had pretty good food and a full bar.

“Aren’t you already eating, Spencer?”

“Nah, just a snack. I wouldn’t mind some fucking pancakes, though.” I couldn’t help but shake my head and chuckle.

“Alright man, head outside. I’m five minutes from the station.” I sighed as I hung up, placing my phone in the cup holder. My Mustang roared to life as I turned the key in the ignition, peeling off from the curb towards the station.



Thirty minutes later, I was sitting across from Spencer as he shoveled pancakes into his mouth like he hadn't eaten in months. I was nursing a shitty coffee and moving scrambled eggs around the plate with my fork. I had zero appetite.

"You need to eat, you know. You're a cranky bitch when you don't eat," Spencer taunted with a mouth full of pancakes, while circling his fork towards my plate of cold food.

"Yes, dear." I dramatically rolled my eyes as I took a bite of cold scrambled eggs. He chuckled and pulled his phone out to answer a text. I rested my cheek on my hand, elbow propped up on the table, getting lost in my mind again.

Five years ago

"That should be it," I said as I closed the trunk of my Mustang. Val stood by the driver's side door, hugging her arms. I packed the last of what little possessions I had in my dorm, ready for my four hour drive to Las Vegas.

"Guess so..." Val sniffled, a storm brewing in her hazel eyes as she looked down to her feet.

"Four hours is nothing, Val. Maybe I can convince you to come visit while I'm training?" Fuck, I didn't want to leave her.

"Yeah, maybe..." Her eyes grew distant as they clouded with guilt. Last week, we made love on the hood of my fucking car, and she was in a new relationship with Marco. They had just made it official a month ago, and I

could see the guilt in her eyes for her infidelity. I hadn't met the motherfucker yet, but the idea of another man touching the woman I love made me stiff with rage. I should have felt bad, but I didn't...

"No pressure, Val. I don't want you to stress. Just promise me you'll keep in touch. I'll send you updates on how my kitty rescue skills improve," I joked, desperate to see her smile before I left. I forced myself to push my jealousy to the back of my mind.

A small, shy smile curled up on one side of her beautiful face. She was fucking radiant, so perfect. My heart ached with so much pain as I walked to her at the driver's side door of my car.

"Drive safe, Justin..." she whimpered as her bottom lip trembled. Tears formed in her eyes and they fell as I pulled her into my arms.

"I'll message you every day, Val. I promise." I rested my cheek on the top of her head, my own tears falling as I tried desperately to memorize her scent, her touch, her everything. She pulled away first, hugging her arms again. Her eyes were red and swollen from crying. I knew I shouldn't, but fuck... I cupped her cheeks, and she leaned into my palm as if she was memorizing my touch as I was memorizing hers. I thumbed away her tears and brought her eyes back to mine. Fuck, I knew how guilty she felt, but I had to...

Before I could finish my thought, she pulled me to her by my hoodie, kissing me like it was the last time we were ever going to see each other. Our mouths crashed together as our tears fell. Her mouth parted as I nudged her lips with my tongue, and she granted me entry. Our tongues clashed and danced together as our breathing became heavy and desperate. She nibbled on my bottom lip, forcing an approving hum from my throat. My hands found her hips, sliding up her delicious curves, my thumbs grazing the sides of her

perfect breasts as I slid my hands up her body and back to her cheeks. She arched her body into me and pulled away slightly, exposing her neck. I trailed feather-light kisses from her jaw to her collarbone as she wrapped her arms around my neck and raked her fingers through my hair. My cock ached for her in my jeans and before I could go further, her warmth was ripped away from me as she stepped back.

She hugged herself again, then started sobbing. I pulled her back to me and held her, rubbing her back, trying to ignore the urge to make love to her before I left. Her delicious curves molded perfectly against my body like we were designed for each other... She completed me.

“Drive safe, Justin...” she sobbed as she averted her gaze from me and got into her little Nissan parked next to my car. As she quickly drove away, my whole world, my soul, fractured. I knew then I would never be the same.

“... Can you believe that shit?” Spencer’s words snapped me back to the present.

“I’m sorry, Spence, but what the fuck are you talking about?” I sipped my cold coffee and winced at the bitter, burnt taste.

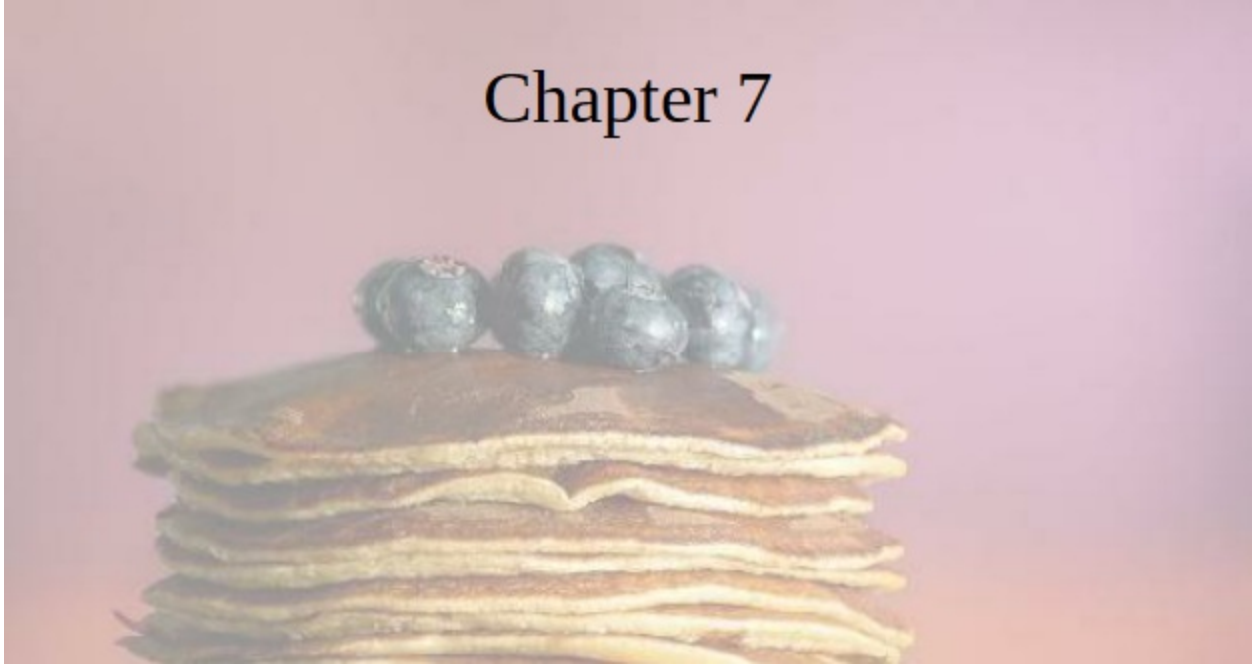
“Davis, dude, he cheated on his girl!” Spencer said, shaking his head as he shoved another bite of what seemed like endless pancakes into his mouth.

“I can’t believe that. I bet it was a downgrade. Mia’s hot.” I eased my way back into the conversation seamlessly, without Spencer noticing I was off in my own head again.

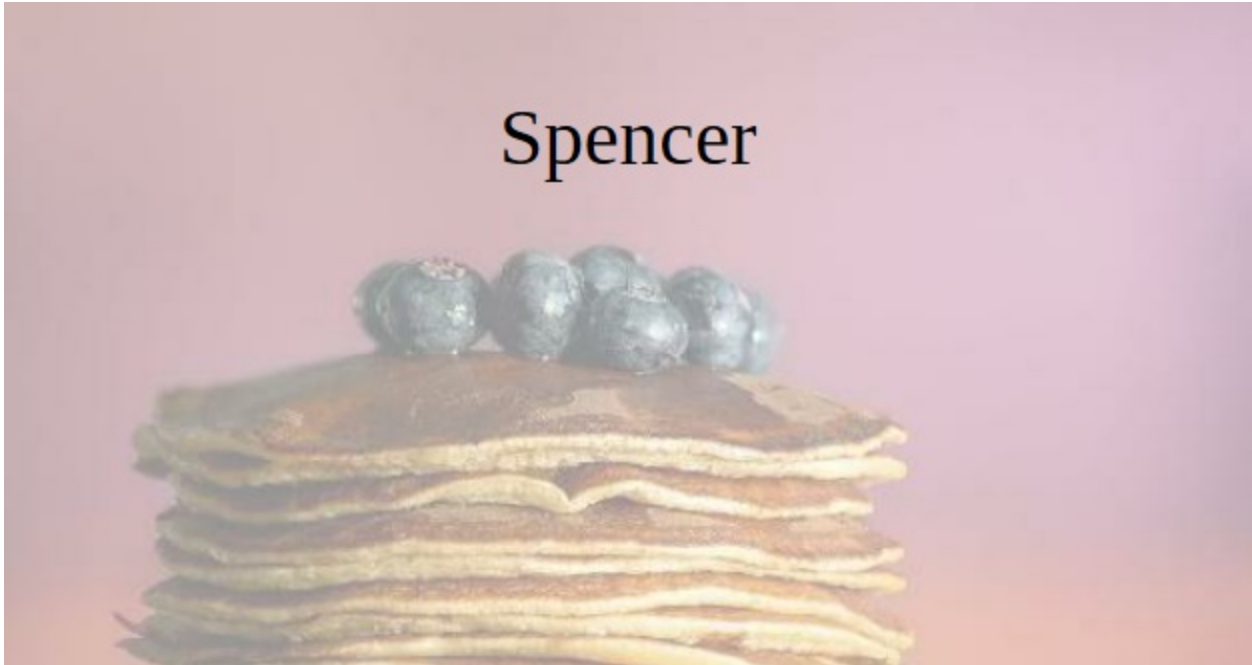
“Fuck yeah, she is. Maybe I should swoop in and snatch her up.” Spencer wiped his mouth and placed his fork down, patting his full belly.

“Yeah, yeah, pretty boy. Let’s get out of here.” I rolled my eyes, grabbing the receipt to go pay at the counter as Spencer readjusted his man bun.

Chapter 7



Spencer



Justin pulled his Mustang into his parking spot at the station and headed to his dorm to take a load off. I gave him a fist bump, thanking him for breakfast, and checked my phone. I sighed as I saw the message alert.

Office. 10:00. - M.D. The text message read.

I sighed, adjusting my leather jacket as I walked over to my blacked-out Harley-Davidson Iron 883 motorcycle parked in the corner of the lot. I sat on my bike, taking out the hot pink band in my hair, putting it on my wrist for later. I unhooked my black half helmet from its resting place and fastened it on my head. Reaching down behind me into my left saddlebag, I pulled out my black aviator sunglasses, placing them on my face with a scowl. I moved my phone to my inside chest pocket and started up my baby.

The roar of the engine calmed me. I leaned my head back, closing my eyes and hanging my arms at my sides. With my closed eyes to the sky, I tried to focus on why I was really here. Who I really was... What my objective was... But the only word that came to mind was *imposter*...

I huffed a sharp breath out, cursing at my anxious mind. I couldn't afford to be careless, not with them... I gripped the handlebars of my bike with more force than necessary and drove off to my meeting. The warm sun, coupled with the breeze from my ride, calmed me. There was a pull tugging at the corners of my soul. I didn't want this life anymore. I wanted to be a normal guy, like Justin. Fall in love with a girl, have a life. Fuck, I'd even take the god damned white picket fence if it got me out. But once you're in... death is the only way out.

I drove to my boss's office on autopilot, barely remembering the trip here. My mind went numb as I pulled up to a service entrance at the Paris Hotel and Casino. I parked my baby and unhooked my helmet, placing it back on its resting place on my bike. With a sigh, I scooped my light brown hair back into my man bun and pulled my Glock out of my saddlebag. I checked that it was loaded, put the safety on, and tucked it away at my back. I sighed as I checked my phone. 9:52... I hooked my sunglasses on the neck of my plain, white t-shirt and pulled the service entrance door open.

This service entrance was conveniently empty at all times. I walked into the room and gave my eyes a moment to adjust. It was always significantly dimmer in here than outside in the Vegas sun. This particular entrance opened to what looked like a commercial kitchen. Stainless steel appliances and countertops were along the walls, and the tabletop appliances had a thin layer of dust, since they were never used. I made a mental note to ask Bella to come down and give it a quick once over to keep appearances up in case anyone accidentally found their way in here. On the opposite wall, there was a large griddle and fryer next to it. I found myself wondering if I could figure out how to make pancakes like the ones at Sirens...

"He's waiting." My thoughts were interrupted by Damian.

Look at this piece of shit... I thought to myself. Fucking pathetic excuse for a hitman. He stood there like he was tough shit with his arms crossed across his chest, his too tight black shirt tucked into black skinny jeans, doc martens, and a toothpick in his stupid mouth. His fake ass tan looked fucking ridiculous with his 90s tribal ink down his arms. Fucker missed leg day, too. Apparently, he only knew how to work out his upper body, since his skinny jeans showed off his stupid, fucking chicken legs. Dumb motherfucker...

“Did you hear me, West? Move it.” He shoved me towards the hallway towards the boss’s office. I stopped in my tracks, turning to face him.

“Let me remind you not to fucking touch me, Damian.” I roughly pointed my finger into his chest, causing him to stumble backwards slightly. He fumbled for the gun on his holster, while mine, already loaded, aimed right between his eyes.

“Fuck you, West. You think you’re tough shit just ‘cause boss man uses you as his little errand boy bitch. You’ll never be one of us, puto.”

My finger hovered over the trigger. The thought of his stupid head exploding into a bloody pulp on the wall behind him was almost too good to resist. I was seething, staring at this pathetic waste of life down the barrel of my gun. My mind went black, hollow. My shadow enveloped me, and I gave in.

“That is quite enough!” an authoritative voice boomed from the hallway ahead. I clicked the safety back on and tucked my Glock back in place at my back. I flashed Damian a grin as I adjusted my leather jacket, making the little bitch flinch.

"Boss." I acknowledged him dryly, crossing my arms.

"Spencer. As always, I would appreciate it if you didn't threaten my men." He gestured down the hall towards his office.

"Maybe you need to keep your bitches in line, Marco," I replied indifferently. Damian rolled his eyes and started walking ahead of us towards Marco's office.

Following in line behind Marco, I walked down the dark hall towards his office. The walls and carpet were jet black, and there were gold sconces on the wall, lighting the way. We entered Marco's pretentious office through black double doors with gold trim. Everything in this room reeked of rich asshole. Tall mahogany bookshelves lined one wall, full of books he'd probably never read, and picture frames of what looked like his family in Colombia. There was a god-awful Persian rug on the floor, with his matching mahogany desk centered near a floor-to-ceiling window that gave a one-way view of the casino floor below. He motioned for me to sit across his desk, as he unbuttoned his suit coat to sit in his imposing wingback chair. He leaned forward onto his forearms, interlacing his fingers, as he nodded to Damian. He closed the door behind him, and I was grateful that prick was no longer in my presence.

"We seem to have a problem," Marco said flatly. I crossed my arms and leaned back in my chair.

"So beating Valentina is your answer? You realize I had to get the rig to your place without permission from the chief."

"She needs to be broken down for our plan to work," he replied indifferently.

"Our plan? This whole takeover you're planning is *your* plan. Not mine," I scoffed in reply.

"We're past the point of fixing your moral compass, West." He adjusted his jacket and reached into his desk for a file.

"Harm to Valentina got Justin's attention. You don't understand the lengths

that man will go to protect her. Even if it has been five years since they last saw each other."

"I'm well aware of that, and that's why you'll take care of it," Marco said dryly, as he pushed the file to me.

"Didn't I tell you I was done, and I'm not doing this again?" I slid the file back roughly towards Marco, not even opening it. It was obvious to me who Marco's target was, and I didn't need to see it to know he was fucking testing me. Standing up from the chair, I kicked it back violently, and it crashed into the wall behind me. As I turned to walk away, Marco tapped the file on his desk, ignoring my outburst.

"You don't get to walk away from this, West. After all that I've done for you, all I've done to protect your sister. You will take care of this or Damian will visit her in Chicago." I hesitated. *He wasn't supposed to fucking know about her safe house.*

"You even think about laying a finger on Cassie, I'll rip your throat out." I felt my shadows and my rage bubbling up to the surface.

"Your empty threats are amusing, West. Take the file. You have two weeks or else I'll be forced to pay Cassie a visit." He slid the file towards me again as he stood up, adjusting his jacket and buttoning it back up. I sighed as I swiped the file from his desk, storming towards the exit.

"Two weeks, Spencer. Don't make me force your hand," Marco said coldly as I placed my hand on the doorknob. I hung my head as I turned the handle to leave.

"Yeah... two weeks." I threw the door open, making that bitch Damian flinch. He grinned at me sadistically when he saw the file in my hands as I made my way down the hall.

"I'll be seeing your sister in two weeks, puto. I bet that's some fine ass

pussy, too. I'll be sure to fuck her real good before I blow her pretty little head off." I stormed back to Damian while he stood there picking at his nails, grinning like an idiot.

"The next time you talk about my sister that way, I'll rip your dick off and shove it down your throat." I threw my fist forward, punching a hole into the wall inches away from his head. He flinched and tried to hide his fear, but he shook like the bitch he was.

"...Yeah, we'll see about that..." he stammered and stormed off towards Marco's office. I watched him scurry away like an insect before heading back down the hallway to get out of this hell-hole.

Still fuming from this bullshit meeting, I quickly turned the corner back into the kitchen bumping into someone.

"Oh!" a small voice squeaked.

"Bella! Oh shit!" I caught her by the arm before she stumbled over, pulling her close to me to prevent her from falling backwards. We stood there for a few moments, her forest green eyes widened as she held my gaze. Her jet black hair was pulled up into a messy bun on top of her head and a few strands fell into her face, and her plump, pink lips parted slightly. She was fucking gorgeous. Still holding onto her upper arms, I grinned at her.

"Spencer, are you alright?" she almost whispered.

"I'll manage, Bella. I'm sorry for bumping into you." My thumbs involuntarily rubbing her arms gently.

Suddenly she was pulled out of my hands.

"I told you *never* to interfere with my employees," Marco hissed. She pulled her arm out of his grip.

"Fuck you, Marco." She held her head high as she stormed away. I tried to fight the grin forming, but I couldn't help it.

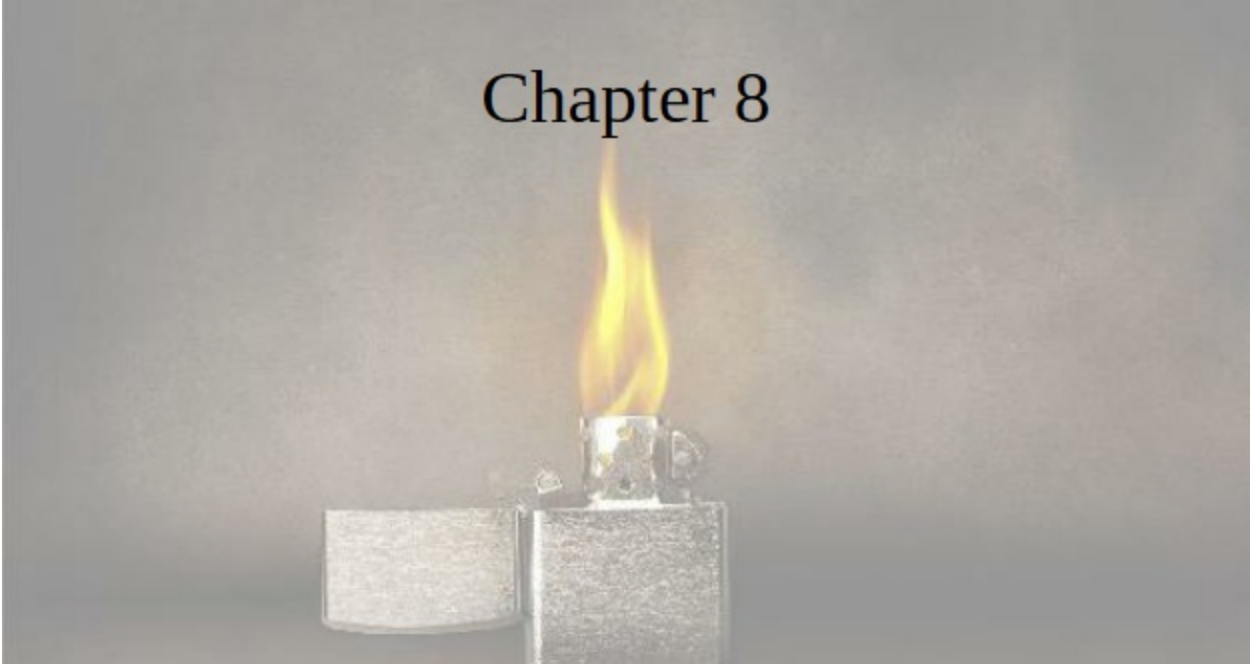
“You keep your hands off my sister, or...”

“Like she said, fuck you Marco,” I interrupted.

I ripped my aviators off of the neck of my shirt and put them on before kicking open the door to the service entrance. The hot Vegas sun beat down on my already hot skin. I put my gun and the file in my saddlebag, untied my hair, and put my helmet back on. I needed to get out of here.

“Fuck!” I yelled out loud as I rubbed my eyes. I didn’t know what to do. My mind was racing in circles, jumping from Cassie to Justin and back again. He’d become my best friend, my brother. Now I had to be the one to kill him. I had to find a way out of this. I had to move Cassie here with me so I could protect her. With a heavy sigh, I brought my baby to life and sped off down Las Vegas Boulevard back to the station. I needed a drink, a *really stiff* drink.

Chapter 8



Valentina



I was awoken from a restless sleep by a gentle knock on the wall of my hospital room.

“Val? Are you awake?” Anna asked, almost whispering.

“Hey Anna,” I squeaked out. My throat was dry and scratchy, but I couldn’t stomach anything in my system... Even water.

Anna wore a sympathetic smile as she came to sit next to me.

“How are you feeling? Can I get you anything?” She brushed some stray hair out of my face and took my hand. It made me jerk away; I couldn’t be touched... Not again. Anna quickly withdrew with a look of both apology and understanding.

“I’m okay... I just want to go home. Hospitals give me the creeps,” I said weakly, trying to quickly get the attention away from my inability to be touched. Adjusting my glasses, I picked up the bed remote to raise the backrest of the bed.

“Well, I’m here on official business, you could say. The hospital was concerned about abuse, so I need to take a report so they can feel comfortable

discharging you.” Anna pulled out a notepad and pen.

I can't tell her. I thought to Nikita in my mind. *No one could know... If she knew, I would just get hurt again, and my body can't take much more of Marco...*

“Val?” Anna’s eyes were laced with concern.

“Sorry, I just have a lot on my mind. I can answer your questions if it helps me go home quicker.”

“I’ll make it quick, I promise. Okay, did this bruising around your eye and jaw happen in your home?” She readied her pen at the blank page of her notepad.

“Yes, sort of? It’s not really home-home, if that makes sense. Marco owns that house, and we came for a week to visit while he gets some business affairs in order. I’m also interviewing for a librarian position at the public library here. We’re planning to move here permanently from California once Marco figures out his business matters,” I replied with a sigh.

“Did you know your attacker?”

“No,” I lied. “It all happened so quickly. I don’t think they expected anyone to be home.” I closed my eyes, praying she bought the lie.

“Did you get a good look at them?”

“No, like I said, it just happened so quickly...” Anna was looking at me like she could see right through me. I felt a single tear form and fall down my cheek.

“Val, I’m so sorry this happened to you. You don’t deserve any of this...” I know she desperately wanted to hold my hand but also understood I would resist her touch. She shook her head, regaining her composure before continuing. “How did you get in contact with Justin Campbell?”

“I found an old cell phone while going through a box of things.” Another

lie. “I had Justin’s old phone number saved from college and just tried it. I wasn’t expecting him to have the same phone number when he moved here.” Anna’s eyes found the bedside trash can and saw my phone broken in pieces.

“That should be enough information on my end, Val. I don’t want to push you. Get some rest.” Anna closed her notepad and put it in her back pocket.

“Justin... Is he okay? Marco was pretty rude to him when he was here.”

“He is, for the most part. Just really worried about you, hun. I know he was excited you were in town. He wouldn’t shut up about running into you at the grocery store the other day. He just didn’t want to see you after so long under these circumstances.” Anna motioned to all the medical equipment to my right.

“I don’t know what I would’ve done if he didn’t come. I.. I...” Another panic attack was coming and I couldn’t fight it. Anna saw it happening, ran to the door, and yelled for a nurse. I felt like my heart was beating out of my chest, my lungs got tight and I couldn’t breathe.

“Anna?!” I could’ve sworn I heard Justin’s voice.

“Justin! Get in here! Where the fuck is the nurse?!” Anna yelled out the door as she rushed back to my side, looking at my monitors, not knowing what to do.

I couldn’t breathe, and everything started to sound muffled in my ears. I got lightheaded, and I knew I was about to faint. All I could see was Marco punching me, the look in his eyes when blood started running down my face... He enjoyed every minute of it. Then what he did to me here. I gasped, trying to breathe as warm arms enveloped me, causing me to panic more.

“Val sweetheart, it’s okay. I’m here, I’m here.” Justin’s cheek was at my temple as he held me through the attack. I knew it was Justin, but all my

mind could process was Marco. *He's back; he's going to hurt me again.* I jumped back, away from his embrace, curling up away from him.

“P-please don’t... don’t hurt me. I can’t... I can’t... no more... Please...” I cried into the hospital pillow.

“Val, it’s me. It’s Justin...” He tried reaching for me again and I shook away, shrinking to the railing on the opposite side of the bed. My monitors were beeping a harsh noise as a doctor ran in.

“Miss Fiore, we need you to calm down.” I barely heard the doctor’s words as my whole body started to convulse. He shouted orders to a nurse, and she ran off to get medication.

“She doesn’t need fucking medication! Don’t just drug her up, she’s panicking!” Justin’s voice boomed across the room.

“Val, please. We’re all right here. Nothing will happen to you, hun,” Anna tried to say calmly.

Justin came to the other side of the bed, where I was facing, and sat down in a chair a few feet away. He placed a beautiful little vase of sunflowers on the table and leaned towards me with his forearms on his knees.

“I’ll be right here, sweetheart. I won’t touch you until you’re ready, I promise. But you need to calm down, please. Breathe with me.” Justin exaggerated an inhale, then an exhale as he raised and lowered his arms. I tried desperately to match his breathing.

“I-I... can’t. He’s... he’s gon-gonna...” I said through shaky breaths.

“No one will ever hurt you again, Val. I’m here. You’re doing fine, sweetheart. Just focus on me, breathe with me again.” Justin exaggerated his breathing again for me to follow, and I obeyed.

God, I missed you, Justin. I thought as I followed his breathing. *Please take me away from here... Save me...*

I focused as hard as I could on Justin's breathing as I forced myself to match it. The overwhelming beeping from the hospital monitors started to quiet down.

"Good on you, man. I will check back in a few now that her vitals are more stable," the doctor said with a warm smile as he left us.

"Val, hun, I'll check back in a little bit, okay? Give you two some privacy. I need to get this info to the doctor and nurses so they can see about getting you out of here. I know your phone... broke, but I'll leave my card with Justin that has my personal cell on it. You call me if you need me, okay?" She handed Justin a card, and I nodded my head, my eyes still closed.

"You take care of her, or else I'll come back for you." She nudged Justin as she headed out the door.

I tried to focus on my breathing, getting lost in my thoughts.

Last Week: Long Beach, California

“Miss Fiore, I’m sorry we have to meet again under these circumstances.”

“It’s nice to see you again, Raul,” I said through a sniffle. My eyes burned from crying, and I knew I looked like a train wreck.

“Your father was a dear friend, and I’m so very sorry to hear about the car accident. I can’t imagine how difficult it must be to lose both of your parents so suddenly,” Raul said as he looked at his hands folded on top of his desk. We were sitting in his office; my family’s lawyer had my father’s will and some other paperwork I had to sign.

“It’s been difficult, but we’re hanging in there.” Marco’s half-assed sympathy made me cringe as he placed a hand on my thigh, making me flinch.

“Well, Miss Fiore, you were your father’s sole beneficiary. I have his last will and testament here to review with you and some paperwork to sign regarding his and your mother’s funeral.” Raul placed open palms on a manilla folder with all that was left of my mother’s and father’s life.

Marco’s phone rang, and he peeked at the screen and excused himself. I guess work was more important than my parents, but I should have expected that from him. Although, part of me was happy he wasn’t in the room. I didn’t want him to have anything to do with my father’s will. It was the only thing I had legal control of, and he couldn’t take that from me.

“Sorry for his rudeness, Raul.” I scoffed, motioning my head towards the closed door to his office.

“To be quite honest, Miss Fiore, I don’t care for the man. I hope he’s better to you at home than how he is here. But that’s besides the point. Let us begin before he comes back and taints the conversation.” He winked at me, and I couldn’t help the little smile that I tried to fight from forming.

“I’m ready to dive into this. I want to make sure to take care of my parents’ affairs properly.” I tried to hold my head high, but new tears started to form. Removing my glasses, I dabbed at my eyes with a tissue, desperate for my makeup to hold up. With a sigh, I put my glasses on, glancing at the file on the desk.

“You don’t have much to worry about, Valentina. Your father was well prepared, and his financials are secured. He did leave his business to you, but you need to take a little trip to Las Vegas.”

“I didn’t know he still had business in Las Vegas. I thought he worked from here, in California.”

“Well, your father was an influential man. His reach in Las Vegas was... undeniably powerful.” Raul seemed to be leaving something out. My father never told me about his work, he hardly let me know about anything. He always said he wanted to leave work at work, so he could be fully present at home.

“What am I getting into in Las Vegas?” I asked. My curiosity piqued.

“Well, you want to try to visit sooner than later.” He handed me an envelope with a few business cards and airplane tickets. “These are open tickets that you can use anytime to fly to Las Vegas from LAX. When you arrive, contact Rico. His card and address are in the envelope there, and he will take you to meet with your father’s business partners to discuss where the... company is at, and what needs to be done.” Why did he hesitate with company? That was odd.

“Sounds awfully cryptic, Raul.”

“Quickly, put this in your handbag before Marco returns. This is for your eyes only, and that man seems like trouble.” He motioned to my purse, and I quickly folded the envelope in half, placing it in the safety of my purse.

“I’m sorry for him—”

“Don’t ever apologize for a man that doesn’t treat you right.” Raul cut me off. I gave him a shy smile as Marco came back into the room.

“Sorry about that, important business matter,” Marco said as he unbuttoned his suit jacket to sit back down. I rolled my eyes and stared at my hands in my lap as I turned and twisted the tissue I’d been holding.

“It’s alright, young man. We were just wrapping up. Valentina, dear, once you return from Las Vegas, please meet back with me to discuss the rest of your father’s will. It was in his instructions to have you take care of business in Vegas first, then the rest of the will can be discussed.” Raul stood, and Marco and I stood with him, taking turns shaking his hand. Marco’s phone rang again as he gave a two finger wave to Raul before stepping out of the office. I shook Raul’s hand, and as we let go of each other, I thanked him.

“Thank you, Raul, for all you’ve done for my father and our family. I’m so grateful to have you through all this legal stuff.” I forced a smile.

“I’m more worried about you, dear. That man reeks of trouble. You call me if you need anything at all. I saw how you flinched when he touched you.”

“I’m okay... I appreciate it, Raul. It will be nice to see Rico again, as well. It’s been so long since I’ve seen him. Since I graduated high school, I believe.”

“He is quite excited to see you, dear. You take care now, and remember what I said. Anything at all, any time too. You call me.” He gave my hand a firm squeeze, and I nodded my head before walking out of his office to Marco pacing back and forth on a phone call. I rolled my eyes as I followed him to the car, wondering if it was even possible to go to Las Vegas without him...

“Val? Are you okay?” My thoughts were interrupted by Justin’s worried tone.

“Yeah, I’m sorry. Just thinking...”

“Anything I can help you with? I hear thinking’s hard work these days.”
He grinned, trying to lighten the mood.

“Actually, maybe. I need to get in touch with my father’s business partner... I can’t have Marco there... Maybe you can give me a ride sometime this week? If you’re not busy?” I asked hesitantly.

“Of course, Val. Anytime. I’m so sorry about your parents. I heard about their car accident online.”

“I miss them so much.” I tried to hold back the tears forming, but couldn’t and they fell.

“I’m so sorry Val.” Justin looked at me with genuine concern as he reached out to wipe tears away. I flinched and jerked away from his touch on instinct, and I hated that. I didn’t want to be scared anymore.

I wanted him to touch me. I wanted him, and I never stopped wanting him. I wanted him to just burn it all. Consume all my pain and burn me to death, so my cold, dead heart could be reborn from the ashes into the girl he deserved. I never felt good enough for Justin; he deserved someone that could be a light in his life, when all I would bring is my darkness. Even if I was able to be free from Marco, I would just be a numb, empty shell of a person. Justin deserved better than that, better than me...

I looked up at Justin, seeing the hurt in his eyes as I flinched away from his touch again.

“I’m sorry... I...”

“You don’t have to explain anything, sweetheart. Take your time, I’m a patient man. I will wait as long as it takes to feel you in my arms again.”

His words made me shiver with... desire? I hadn’t felt this since our after graduation hook up.

“Don’t you have to get back to work, Magic Mike?” I couldn’t resist the grin that formed on my lips as I desperately tried to change the subject.

“Well, too bad for those kitties and middle-aged moms, it’s my day off.” He winked at me, remembering my joke from graduation. It made my heart skip a beat.

“Thank you for the sunflowers. They’re my favorite.” I blushed, nodding my head towards the table to the cute little vase of flowers.

“What kind of man would I be to forget such an important detail?” He smiled as he straightened a few of the flowers in the vase on my little side table. My heart skipped a beat. Marco never remembered little things like this...

“Miss Fiore, it looks like you get to go home my dear.” an older nurse said as she came into the room. “You need to meet with psych to discuss some coping techniques for the panic attacks, but we called your fiance, and he’s on his way. I’ll prepare your discharge paperwork and prescriptions, then you’ll be good to go once psych is done.” I nodded a thanks to her.

“Guess that’s my cue. I don’t want to deal with that mess again.” Justin sighed. I wanted him to stay, but I didn’t want any more trouble from Marco.

“Thanks for coming, Justin.” I tried to smile.

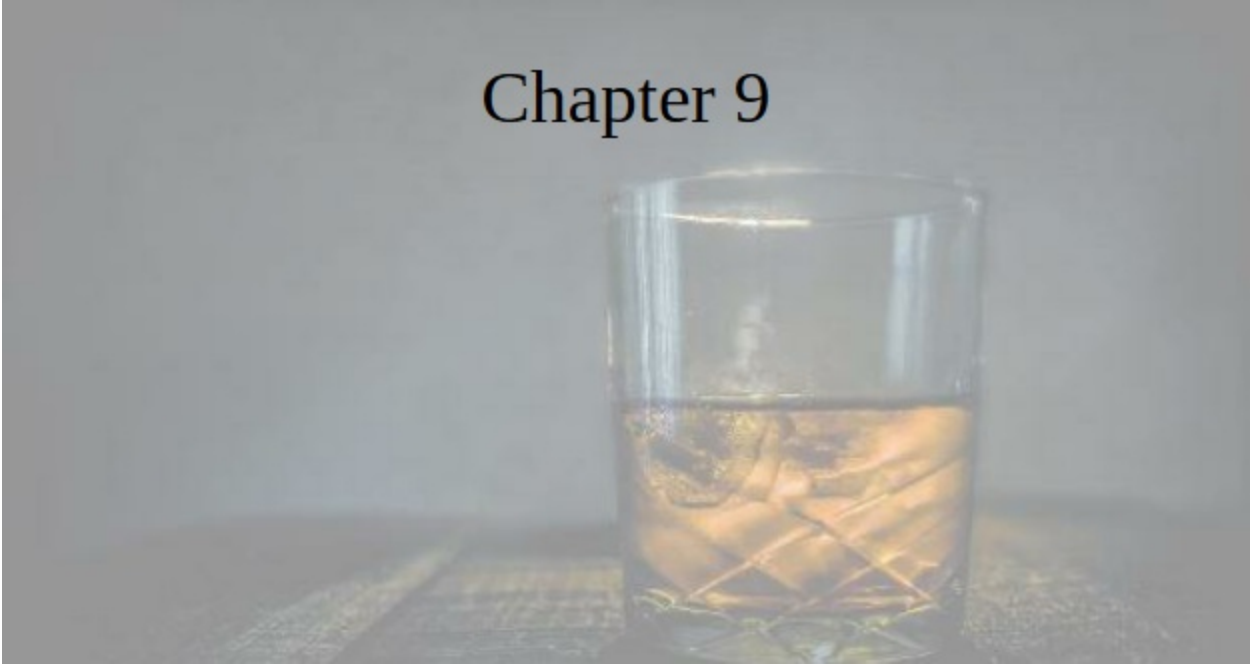
“Anything for you, Val.” Justin stood up, and I could see the hesitation in his chocolate brown eyes. He placed Anna’s business card on the table by the sunflowers and took out a pen, writing his cell phone number down. “Please call me on the hospital’s phone if I need to come back, if you need me, or just for anything, Val. I’ll always answer for you.”

I nodded shyly and dropped my eyes to my lap. When I looked back up, Justin blew me a kiss as he left the room. As soon as he was out of sight, that emptiness consumed me again.

Come back, save me from this life. Please, Justin. I heard Nikita beg in my mind.

“I know, I wish, too,” I said out loud as I sat up with a sigh, trying to prepare myself mentally for Marco’s arrival.

Chapter 9



Justin



Sitting in my Mustang in the parking lot, I was hesitant to leave Valentina. *That son of a bitch was hitting her, I just know it.* I wanted to protect her, never let anyone else ever lay hands on her again. Keeping my eyes on the front door of the hospital, I sighed as I waited. At least I can make sure she gets in that prick's car okay before I leave. My fingers started to ache from gripping the steering wheel too tight.

Forty-five minutes later, a black Audi with ridiculously tinted windows pulled up at the front entrance and a man who must have been Marco's driver got out from behind the wheel. He rounded the back of the car, opening the rear passenger door as Mr. Pretentious Asshole Marco got out, buttoning his stupid, expensive suit jacket. He waved off the driver as he walked into the hospital, making me scoff.

"Fucking asshole," I growled as I shoved a stick of gum in my mouth. My phone vibrated in my pocket, and I pulled it out to see Spencer's name on the screen.

"Hey Spence." I answered with an unintentional hint of attitude.

“Why are you being all creepy, stalker-like, Campbell?” Spencer chuckled. I looked around and saw him leaning on his bike at the curb of the street waving at me with his phone to his ear.

“I could ask you the same.” I chuckled and hung up as he started to walk my way. He opened the passenger door and sat down in a huff. He looked troubled, catching my attention.

“You cool, man?” I asked, turning my eyes back to the hospital door.

“Yeah, just... Some mess I have to take care of. I’ll figure it out, just weighing heavy on me, I guess.” He slouched into the seat.

“Anything you need, Spence, just let me know. I’ll do whatever I can to help take a load off. You’ve done plenty for me since I’ve gotten here.”

“Yeah... Thanks man...” He sounded so distant. It made me wonder what had changed since breakfast.

My thoughts were interrupted by Marco leading Valentina out of the hospital with a hand on her back. Her eyes were on the floor, and he had a plastic grocery bag that had her sunflowers in it in his other hand. As Valentina approached the Audi, Marco threw the bag into a trash can. I tensed in my seat, and Spencer followed my scowl to Marco.

“Marco! Those were mine!” I could barely hear Valentina’s soft voice.

“Get in the car, Valentina.” Marco gripped her arm above the elbow and the flash of fear in her eyes and the indentations his fingers were making in her skin had me seeing red. I was seething, and I wanted to kill this mother fucker for hurting my Val. Spencer’s firm hand gripping my wrist snapped me out of it.

“Don’t get involved, man. Let Anna take care of it. She’ll get him.”

“Get the fuck off of me, Spencer! He’s hurting her!” I tried to pry my wrist from his grip, but failed.

“Sorry man, I’m not letting you risk losing everything over that piece of shit. We need to be smart about how we handle this. Don’t jeopardize everything when—”

“I don’t give a fuck about my career, my morals, fucking anything! *She is everything.* I have to help her!” I yelled, interrupting Spencer as the Audi drove off. I went to turn the keys in the ignition to chase after the Audi, but Spencer waved the keys near his eyes, away from me.

“Sorry JC, I’m not letting you drive like some Fast and the Furious movie shit. We’ll handle it, man. I’ll help however I can. I know he’s a piece of shit, but we need to be smart about this.”

He wasn’t wrong, and I couldn’t argue. It had been five years since I’d laid eyes on my Val and knowing she’d been hurt by another man’s hands had me losing my fucking mind. I decided then and there that I would take care of him myself. Marco sealed his fate the moment he decided to mark her skin. Every bruise he put on her perfect body, every tear she ever cried in pain at his hands... I’d make him beg for his life like I’m sure she begged for hers. He’d beg for death once I got my hands on him, but I wouldn’t grant that motherfucker the luxury. His death would be slow, painful. I’d resuscitate him as many times as I’d have to so I could kill him over and over again... until his pathetic soul begs for mercy...

“Earth to JC. Don’t be killing him in your mind yet, man. Let’s get to the station first. I’m starving.” Spencer tossed the keys on my lap as he got out of my Mustang, sauntering back to his bike.

I fumbled with my keys, my hands shaking with anger. Finally getting them into the ignition, I started my car and followed Spencer the 5 blocks back to the station. I parked next to his bike as he was taking his helmet off

and fixing his man bun. We walked side by side into the station, ready to get some dinner.

As soon as we walked in, the lights lit up and the fire emergency alarm went off. We immediately took off towards the bay to get our gear on, joining our station mates. Spencer and I ran to our truck as everyone quickly got into their vehicles. It was a full house response.

“Fuck! So much for dinner,” Spencer joked as he jumped into the driver’s seat. He cracked his knuckles and flipped on the lights as the bay door opened.

“Corner of Tropicana and South Valley View, MVA with injuries and a downed power line that caused a structure fire. Unknown size. Do your thing, Spence.” I was desperately trying to hang onto reality, especially since there was an emergency now... Saving Valentina would have to wait.

Spencer pulled out of the bay, sirens blaring as we raced towards the scene of the car accident. He was laser focused on the traffic, expertly weaving in and out of cars, and cursing at the ones that wouldn’t merge to the right. We were the third vehicle to arrive. Fellow station mates were already at one car, with the battalion chief yelling for the jaws of life. We rushed to the second that had flipped multiple times and was upside down on its roof.

We jumped out of the truck, grabbing our gear and racing over to the car. I knelt down, peering into the passenger’s side window to see a freaked out teenager frozen in place.

“Hey, man, my name is Justin. What’s your name?”

“M-M-Mike,” the teenager replied. He was visibly shaking, with a streak of blood dripping down his nose, and some at his hairline.

“Alright, Mike, we’re going to get you out of here, okay? Do you hurt anywhere?”

“My head... my head hurts, but I think... I think because I’m stuck... stuck upside down,” he stammered.

“My partner, Spencer, is going to come to the other window to help you get down, alright? We need to cut your seatbelt. We got you, man.” Spencer nodded to me as he peered into the other window and looked around.

“JC, I’m gonna try to open this door.” Spencer yanked on the driver’s side door and it opened slowly, scraping on the ground.

I ran around to help, and it took both of us to pull the door open with enough room for the backboard to slide in.

“Alright Mike, let’s get you down, huh?” Spencer said calmly as he stuck his front half into the car. “I’m going to cut here first, and you lean on me, alright? I’m not going to let you fall.”

“O-Okay.”

“JC, got that collar?” Spencer reached a hand out of the car as I handed over a cervical collar.

“I’m ready when you are, Spence,” I said as I positioned the backboard directly behind where Spencer was kneeling.

“Okay Mike, here we go. Let’s get this annoying thing on your neck so you don’t get hurt, eh?” Spencer got Mike to chuckle. “Okay good, good. Now I’m going to cut here, then you need to grab around my shoulder, alright? JC will help hold you up from my other side while I cut here...” He pointed to the lap belt as Mike nodded in reply.

Spencer cut through the shoulder portion of the seatbelt, and Mike held on as instructed. When he cut the lap belt, Mike was able to slide gently down, with our help, to the backboard, where we were able to pull him out and lift him onto the gurney.

“West! Over here!” our battalion chief called out to Spencer.

“Go, I got him,” I reassured Spencer as he nodded and took off towards the other car.

“I got you, JC.” Another ENT rushed over to help me assess Mike. I nodded at her in thanks.

“Was anyone else with you in the car, Mike?” I asked him as I checked his pupils with my flashlight.

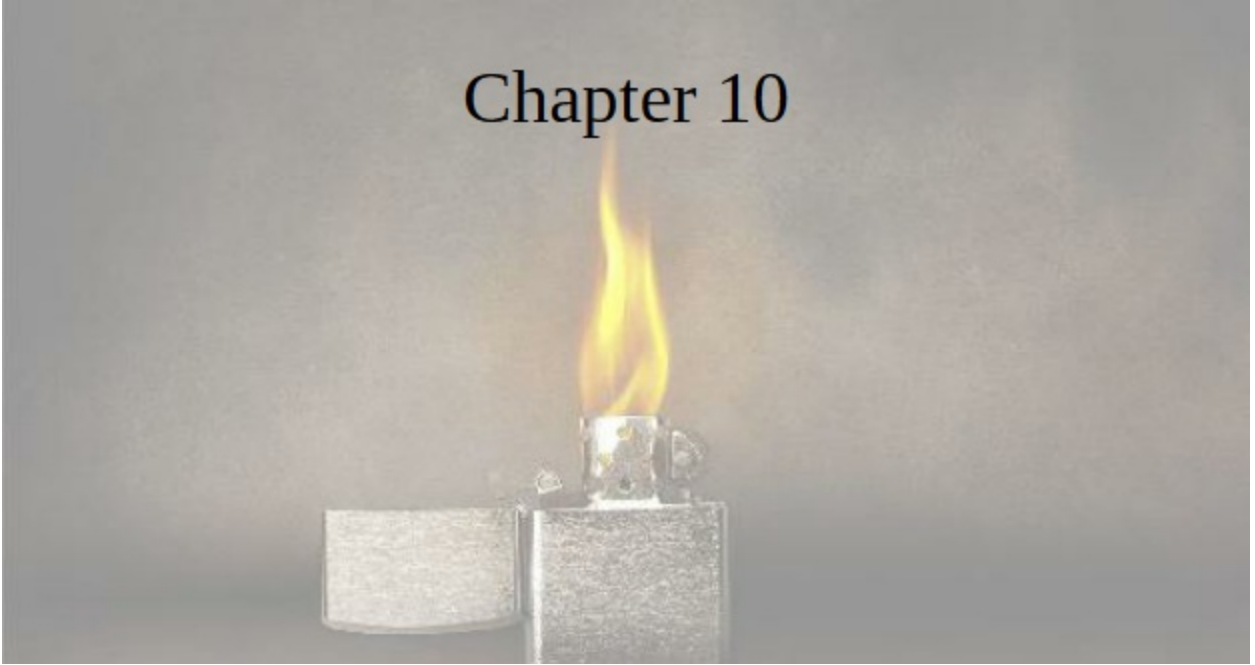
“No... Just me.” He winced as I checked his back. I pulled out my trauma shears and began cutting his shirt off to find any injuries we couldn’t see.

“Okay, we need to get you to the hospital. Let’s get going.” I tried to give him a reassuring smile, as I strapped him into the gurney.

All of a sudden, I felt a sharp pain on the side of my head. *Why was it so hard to open my eyes? What’s going on?* Once I was finally able to open them, the world was sideways and blurry. The sensation of something warm, and wet on my cheek caught my attention. Spencer’s eyes widened, and met mine as he ran towards me.

“Campbell!” Spencer yelled as I lost consciousness.

Chapter 10



Valentina



Last Week

Marco and I had just gotten to Las Vegas this morning, and were getting a few essentials at the grocery store. We drove non-stop for 4 hours, and I was exhausted. I wished that I could've made this trip alone, but Marco had "business to see to" out here, as well.

Real estate is a big market, but it seemed like the universe was playing a cruel joke on me with Marco's second home and business ventures in the same city I needed to be in to settle my father's affairs. How stupid of me to assume I would be able to go anywhere without him...

I felt a tear form, and I quickly pulled out my compact from my purse, making sure my foundation and concealer were intact. With a sniffle, I checked every detail to make sure my fresh black eye was well hidden. The bruising was so bad around the top of this one, I had to do a smokey eye makeup. I looked ridiculous—like I was ready to go to the club, but in jeans and a sweater at the grocery store. At least my glasses helped hide this

ridiculous makeup. Scooting my cart over to the side of the coffee aisle, I put away my compact and began to look for my favorite coffee.

Found it! I cheered in my head. Also, because the universe is cruel, my coffee was just out of my reach. My eyes found Marco standing about twenty feet away at the end of the aisle, growling into his cell phone; not that he would help anyway.

Cursing my short stature, I pulled out a long box of spaghetti noodles from the shopping cart. I got on my tip-toes and reached up with the box to nudge out my coffee. I reached as high as I could, willing myself to get a few inches taller, when a warm, familiar, masculine scent reached my nose. A tattooed arm reached over my head to get the coffee, handing it to me.

“Thank—”

“Val?”

“Justin?” Okay, maybe the universe wasn’t that cruel after all...

“I can’t believe you’re here in my grocery store. What are you doing out this way?” His chocolate brown eyes were the same as I remembered. He had gotten more muscular, more defined, more tattooed.

“Wow, hi! It’s good to see you!” I plastered on my fake smile as he cocked an eyebrow at me.

“Let’s go, Valentina.” Marco came up behind me, startling me as he grabbed my arm above my elbow to lead me away.

“How about you ease up on that grip, yeah?” Justin’s eyes darkened as Marco scoffed at him.

“How I hold my fiancée is of no concern to you.” Marco spat.

“Oh, Marco, I’m assuming.” Justin rolled his eyes and met my gaze as if he was silently asking me if I was okay.

“I-it was good to s-see you, Justin. Take care.” I desperately tried to send

him all the mental messages I could: Save me, help me, please...

“You too, Val. Let’s catch up sometime. It’s been too long.” My heart sank at the confirmation that my self-proclaimed psychic powers didn’t work.

“That won’t be necessary. A real man should know it’s inappropriate to spend any time with another man’s fiancée,” Marco hissed as he pulled me away from Justin and towards the checkout stands.

I looked over my shoulder, begging him one more time in my mind, praying he got my message. His eyes looked concerned, as we held eye contact as long as I could.

That encounter cost me another black eye and a bruised jaw...

My thoughts of the past were interrupted when Marco’s driver drove up to the house I dreaded returning to. I was so grateful that Marco was on the phone for most of the drive. Just the thought of having to explain where the sunflowers came from that he threw away, made me cringe. The ten minute trip to hell was spent in my mind, trying to piece together a plan, anything. It was time to get away from Marco for good... I had to, and I still had to find a way to meet with Rico... *Shit.*

Call Anna. Nikita whispered in my mind. I looked down at my hands folded in my lap with a sigh.

“Get out of the car, Valentina,” Marco said dryly.

“I’m not ready to be back here, Marco...” I kept my eyes on my lap, cursing my sudden moment of bravery.

“I don’t care what you’re ready or not ready for, Valentina. Do as I say.” Marco leaned into the car, grabbing me above the elbow and pulling me forcefully towards the open door.

“Let me help, Mr. De La Rosa...” Marco’s driver saw the look on my face as Marco added new bruises to my forearms.

“I didn’t ask you, Julio. I don’t pay you to stick your nose in my business,” Marco snapped at his driver.

I crawled out of the car, giving Julio a look. I glanced back to the seat where I left Anna’s business card, then raised my eyebrows to him, praying he would get my silent message as Marco pulled me behind him into the house. I looked back to see Julio holding the card as Marco slammed the door closed.

Still looking down, I tried to walk past Marco to take a shower. I wanted to wash everything about the hospital off of me: why I was there, what he did to me, Justin walking away...

My thoughts were interrupted by Marco grabbing my wrist as I tried to walk towards the bathroom. “I didn’t say you could walk away from me, Valentina.”

“Marco, please... I just want to shower,” I pleaded, looking up at his cold eyes. He reached up to my cheek, and I almost thought he was going to brush hair behind my ear.

Don’t fucking let him touch us. Nikita screamed in my mind.

He grabbed my jaw roughly, forcing me to look away from him as he nipped and bit a trail of pain up my neck to my ear. I whimpered with each prick of pain, trying to pull out of his grip.

“M-Marco please...” I weakly cried as my hands found his chest.

“You made me wait two days, Valentina. I’m owed some of my pussy after you decided to defy me and go to the hospital,” he hissed as his other hand found a handful of my hair. He twisted his fingers in my long strands, gripping harshly as he led me to the bedroom.

I was still sore from his assault at the hospital... I couldn’t take any more... I was so tired that I wasn’t sure how much fight I had left in me... I

prayed that Julio was calling Anna or Justin and that they would come to help me.

Marco dragged me into the bedroom by my hair and only let me go as he kicked the door closed behind him. He carefully unbuttoned his shirt, taking it off and draping it across the top of the dresser. I sat in the center of the bed, hugging my knees to my chest, as I quietly asked Nikita to help me find any strength I had left.

My leggings and tank top stood zero chance as he pulled my ankle to drag me towards him at the edge of the bed. His perfectly styled black hair was starting to fall free from the gel as his hungry eyes scanned my bruised body. He bit his lower lip as he ripped my tank top off, staring at my naked breasts like he was a starved mad man.

His hand came up to grip my right one so roughly, it made me yelp in pain as his disgusting cock hardened in his slacks.

“Fuck yes, Valentina. I love my perfect tits,” he groaned through heaving breaths. I wanted to vomit. He spread my legs on the bed and stood between them, my eyes at his beltline. He grabbed me by my hair, forcing me to look at him.

“Now you’re going to take this cock out and suck it like a good little whore.” Hot tears fell down my cheeks as I squinted my eyes closed, willing myself to be somewhere else. I was instantly snapped back to reality as he backhanded my cheek roughly, knocking my glasses to the mattress. I brought a shaking hand to my cheek and looked at Marco with a new-found fear. He was pointing a gun at me.

“I will not stand for defiance today, Valentina. You will do what I say or you can join your parents in hell.” I was frozen in fear, my body involuntarily starting to tremble as he lifted my chin with the barrel.

“Now, you’ll do as I say and suck this cock, and be grateful I’m giving you any attention at all.” My hands were shaking as I reached for his belt, fumbling with the latch. Once it was open, I pulled the zipper down and he impatiently yanked his slacks down, freeing his disgusting dick as it stuck straight out in my face.

“Begin,” he commanded, pressing the gun against my temple.

Nikita please... Help get through this...

He didn’t wait for me; he forced my mouth open and thrust himself inside. I gagged, choking on him as he held my hair in a tight grip. The gun fell to his side as he thrust harshly into my throat. Placing the gun on the nightstand, he gazed down at me, taking his rancid cock in my mouth.

“Fuck yes, Valentina. You love this cock, don’t you?” He groaned as I choked, getting light-headed. He withdrew and continued to hold me by the hair. Bending down over me, he reached his other hand down my leggings, dragging his fingers up my folds. I tried to clinch my thighs together, resisting his hand.

“P-please Marco... I can’t... Not after the hospital...” I pleaded to deaf ears. He ripped my leggings down and flipped me onto my stomach, and lifted my ass in the air so I was bared to him. Spreading my legs with one of his, he guided the head of his dick to my entrance and slammed his way inside me, forcing me to take him fully before he withdrew.

“God, I love your tight cunt on my cock, Valentina.” He spit onto my folds as he forced his way into me again and again.

My mind went numb. I was in so much pain I couldn’t function. I lay there for thirty minutes while he fucked me every way he could. Once he was done, he left me on the bed, covered in his come, as he went to shower and go about his evening. I covered myself with my torn tank top, trying to keep

my fractured soul together. I couldn't take this anymore. *Maybe Marco is right about one thing... Maybe I should go to hell or wherever my parents ended up. Death had to be better than this.*

I was interrupted by Marco stepping out of the shower.

“Get cleaned up. I don't want your mess on the bedsheets. I have some business to see to this evening. You are not to leave or speak with anyone until I return. Understand?” he ordered as he put his gun in his back at his waistline. I was so frightened by that. Since when did he have a gun?

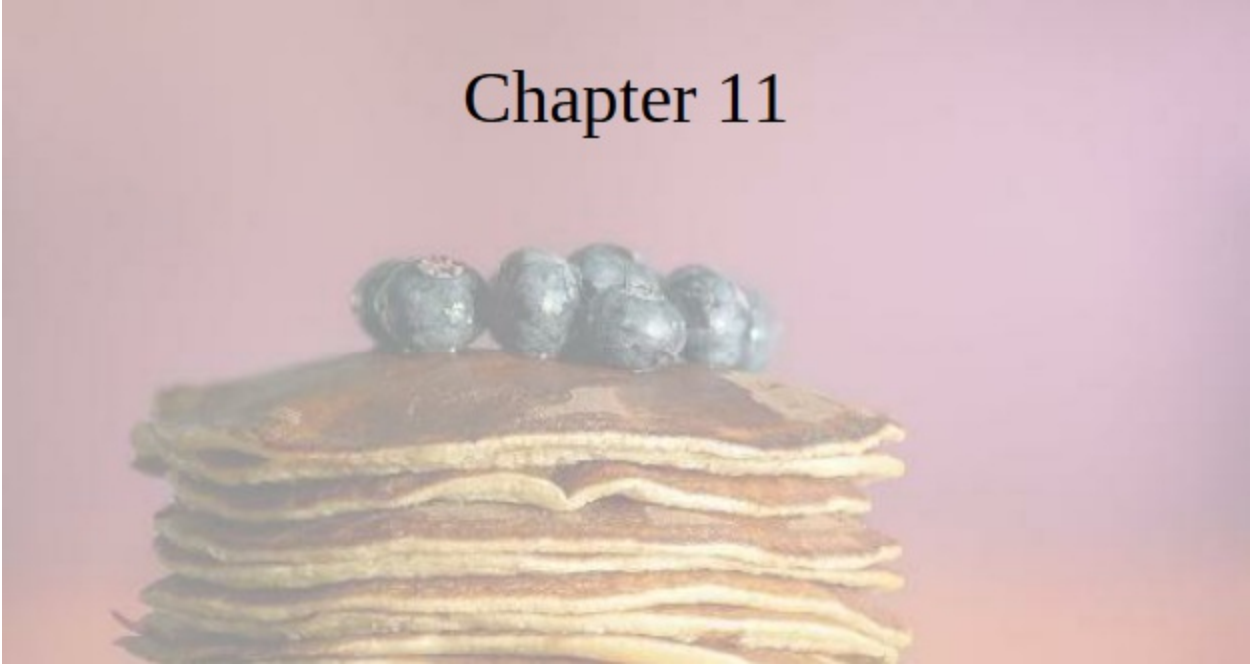
I nodded obediently as Marco got dressed and left the room.

I waited for him to leave before I started the shower. Turning the water to the hottest setting, I sat on the floor of the walk-in shower and let the scalding water fall on me, desperate to wash this entire day off of me, wash Marco off of me... Everything was throbbing and sore, the hot water stung where he backhanded me, and, my god, it hurt to pee after he was done.

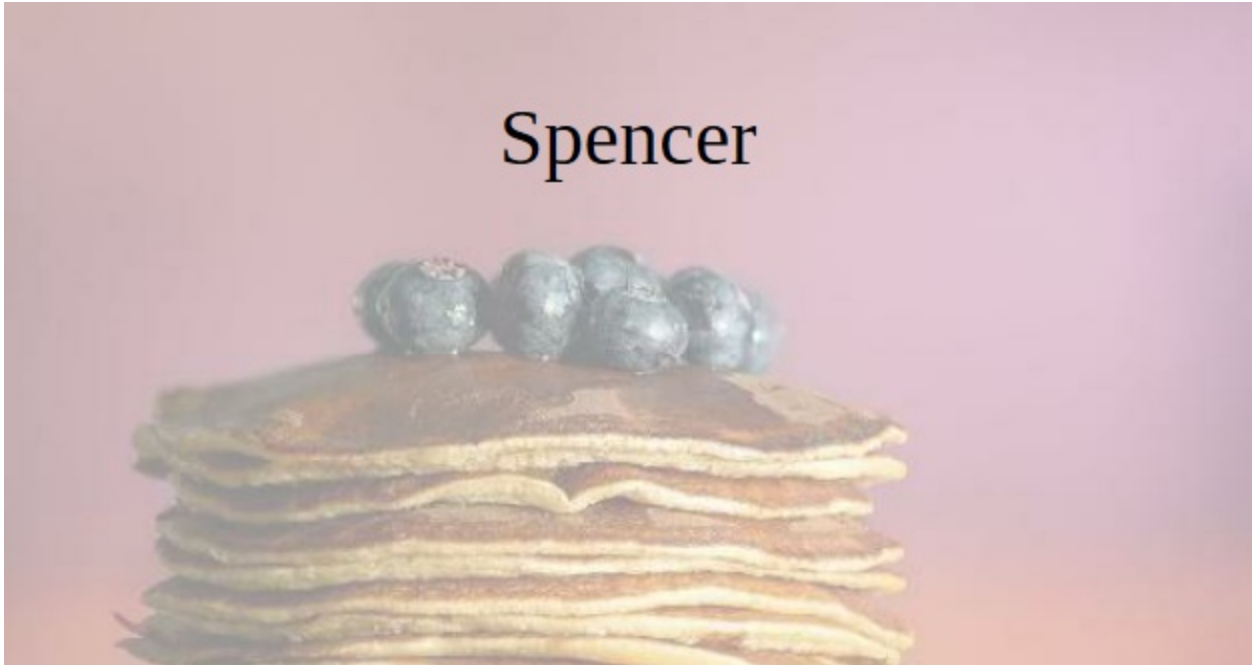
I can't do this... I can't do this... I can't do this...

I sobbed harder than I ever had before. I held myself through the panic attack, trying to remember Justin's voice guiding me, but he was lost. I was broken, and there was no going back.

Chapter 11



Spencer



“Campbell!” I roared as I took off in Justin’s direction the second I saw him hit the ground. Blood was starting to pool around his face. The police officers that were on scene were yelling into radios as they set up a perimeter to find the shooter. I knelt before my friend, checking his pulse. He was still alive, thank god.

“Someone get me a fucking gurney! We need to get Campbell to UMC now!” I screamed. The EMT that was helping with Mike was already taking off to the hospital and our chief whistled at Jenkins, another paramedic newbie, and he ran over, pushing his gurney.

“Help me get him up here, then you’re driving us to UMC as fast as you fucking can, you got it?” I barked orders at the newbie as he nodded stoically. Together, we quickly got a cervical collar on Justin, and I put pressure on his head where I saw what looked like a bullet wound. We quickly loaded up the gurney, and Jenkins ran to the driver’s seat while I stayed with Justin in the back.

I was on autopilot. I didn't remember radioing into the hospital. I didn't remember wrapping Justin's head. I didn't remember rushing him into the hospital barking orders to the trauma doctors and nurses. I didn't remember getting back to the station. I didn't remember getting on my bike and showing up at Marco's office. But I do remember my entrance.

I kicked open the service entrance to the Paris Hotel and Casino I hated using. The door flew off its hinges into the fake commercial kitchen. I was still in my bunker gear. My firefighting pants were stained with my friend's blood, but my jacket was off. My white t-shirt was dirty from sweat and gravel from the accident we responded to. Justin's blood was smudged across my chest and arms, and I was livid.

I stormed through the kitchen towards Marco's office when I heard what sounded like footsteps running in my direction. I was ready to fight. Two of Marco's men ran towards me in the hallway, meeting me halfway to the office.

"Back off, West," one of them threatened with his gun drawn as he stood in front of me, blocking my path.

"De La Rosa. NOW." I growled through my teeth. My hands were in fists at my sides, and my shadow I always kept at bay... The killer... I let him take over my body.

"That's not how this works, West." The other one of these assholes stepped to my left, circling to get behind me with his arms crossed.

I sized them both up as a third set of footsteps came up behind me, cracking his knuckles as I heard a familiar voice chuckling.

"Fancy meeting you here, West."

"I didn't come here for Marco's pussy man bitch, Damian. I need Marco. NOW." I was losing my patience. I cracked my neck, preparing to fight. I

could smell the mixture of fear and sweat from all three of these assholes, and it made my shadow ache for their fear, their screams... For their blood.

Clap... clap... clap... clap. Damian clapped slowly and exaggeratingly loud.

“I already told you before, puto. You don’t run shit here. Get your ass out of here before you leave in a body bag,” he threatened, as I stood my ground. “Did you hear me? Get the fuck out of here. The only reason you’re still alive is because Marco gets to use you as his little bitch to do the dirty work for him.” He chuckled.

I wasn’t even listening. I was sizing up both of these motherfuckers around me. I’d seen them all fight before, been in fights with them before, killed with them before. I knew everything about how they fought, and I was confident I could take both of them. Damian was a pussy, and I knew he wouldn’t put up much of a fight. He would run to his boss and cry about it.

I had to get this tall asshole with the gun disarmed first. He always hid behind his gun and didn’t like getting his hands dirty. The one behind me with his arms crossed was a knife fiend, but was out of shape and got winded quickly. This would be too easy.

I let my mental walls down to allow the darkness that I so desperately hid from the world in. I let the shadows consume me. I closed my eyes, inhaling a deep breath, and opened them straight towards the gun pointed at my chest. I felt a wicked grin form as I stalked towards the gunman.

He hesitated for a split second, and that was all I needed. I gripped the barrel of the gun forcefully, forcing him to aim away from me. The sudden movement caused him to stumble forward in surprise. As he tried to steady himself, he looked up at me, and my opposite fist hit his temple, dropping him to the floor, unconscious in one blow.

I grinned as his body landed with a harsh thud at my feet. Marco's other thug immediately ran towards me. I spun to face him, raised my arm, and pulled the trigger on my newly acquired gun, shooting him in the middle of the forehead. He crashed to the floor and blood started to pool on Marco's pretty black carpet.

"Marco needs to stop letting his tools do all the blow... They're getting slower." I stood in place, glaring at Damian as his eyes darkened with rage.

The taller thug I knocked unconscious started to stir, getting Damian's attention. I looked down at him as he started to come to. I almost felt sorry for him... almost.

"Get De La Rosa here now, Damian." I aimed the gun at the man on the ground, turning to face him again.

"You still don't get it, West. He doesn't answer to you. He—" I shot the man on the ground, interrupting Damian mid-sentence.

"Well, maybe he will now, since you let his cousin die." I nudged my chin down towards the man on the floor at my feet. Fresh blood tickled the edge of my steel-toe boots as Damian stood there, stunned.

"Get him here. NOW!" I roared after him as he turned on his heel and took off, locking himself in Marco's office like a coward.

My hands fell to my sides, the gun hanging towards the floor. I looked around at the two bodies at my feet and felt a cold sweat form on my forehead. I pinched the bridge of my nose in between my eyes, unable to fight the memories that were forcing their way to the surface. All the gunshots, the mortars, the explosions... *I'm not in the war, I'm home. Make it stop...*

2 years ago

"You're the worst, Spencer!" my sister, Cassie, punched me in the arm as

we walked down the strip.

“It’s not my fault I’m a god with the ladies, Cass,” I said smugly, making Cassie snort a giggle.

“God, my ass! You got so shot down! Did you see how disgusted she looked?!” She stopped in front of the Bellagio’s big water fountain show to bend over and hold her knees, laughing.

“Well, she just couldn't handle all of this.” I traced my hands down my body with a shimmy like I was a sexy dancer, making her laugh even harder. I was walking her to work for her shift at the Hell’s Kitchen restaurant outside Caesar’s Palace Hotel and Casino. She had only moved in with me 2 weeks ago, and I was concerned about her walking alone down the strip. There are too many creeps and perverts here that would try to pick up on her, and I wouldn’t have any of that.

“I do wish you would find someone, Spencer. You seem lonely since you got out of the Marines.”

I sighed as we walked around the restaurant towards the back entrance. Cassie finally caught her breath, holding her sides while trying not to giggle. I was on high alert, as two men were standing about 50 yards away making some kind of transaction. On instinct, I grabbed Cassie’s hand, pulling her close to my side as we approached the back door to the restaurant.

“Well, what do we have here? Ain’t you a beauty.” One of the men walked towards us. Cassie’s hand flinched in my grip.

“That’s enough, man; we’re just passing through,” I said through clenched teeth.

“You work here?” he nodded towards the restaurant, his disgusting eyes looking my sister up and down. “I can get you a better job with a body like that, baby.”

“Back off.” I stepped in front of Cassie, blocking her from this sicko’s view.

“Luciano, let’s go.” The other asshole in his fancy ass suit said as he walked up next to him.

“Not until I get a taste of this sweet pussy...” He reached for Cassie, and I punched him square in the jaw, causing him to stumble backwards and fall.

Luciano fell and hit the back of his head on a parking stone, and blood started to pool around him.

“Oh my god!” Cassie shook with fear, as I kept her behind me trying to keep her from seeing Luciano.

“Go inside, Cassie. Call 911.” I pushed her towards the back entrance of the restaurant and she ran inside, sobbing.

“Well, now this is an interesting predicament,” the other man had said coldly. He approached me with both hands in his pockets, looking down at Luciano indifferently.

“Who are you?” I asked the mysterious, sharp-dressed Hispanic man.

“My name is Marco De La Rosa, and that man,” he motioned to Luciano, “was Luciano Fiorelli.”

I froze hearing the name “Fiorelli.”

“M...mafia Fiorelli?” I stammered.

“One and the same. Your companion caught his attention while we were discussing important... business matters. Now, it seems we have a problem.” Marco adjusted his tie.

“Problem?”

“You see, he was my contact with the Fiorelli family... My cartel supplies their drugs. Now, you’ve killed him. Killed the heir to the Fiorelli family throne,” Marco said calmly.

I held my forehead in my hands as sirens started to draw closer. The fucking mafia. I killed the prince of a fucking mafia family? It was a death sentence for Cassie and me. My mind raced with panic as Marco just stood there calmly studying me.

“Luciano was a rodent, an immature weasel playing mafia virtuoso. Quite frankly, I’m not sorry you killed him. But, you realize you and that little girl of yours will have prices on your heads.” I was still stunned speechless as Marco continued, “I can offer you and that pretty little thing protection under my cartel’s care. But in return, you work for me. Whenever I say. Day or night. You belong to me.” He sounded like he’s made this deal a million times. I was going to be his pawn, his errand boy. But I had to keep Cassie safe... no matter the cost...

“Done... You have a deal.” My eyes met his as he held out a business card in between two fingers.

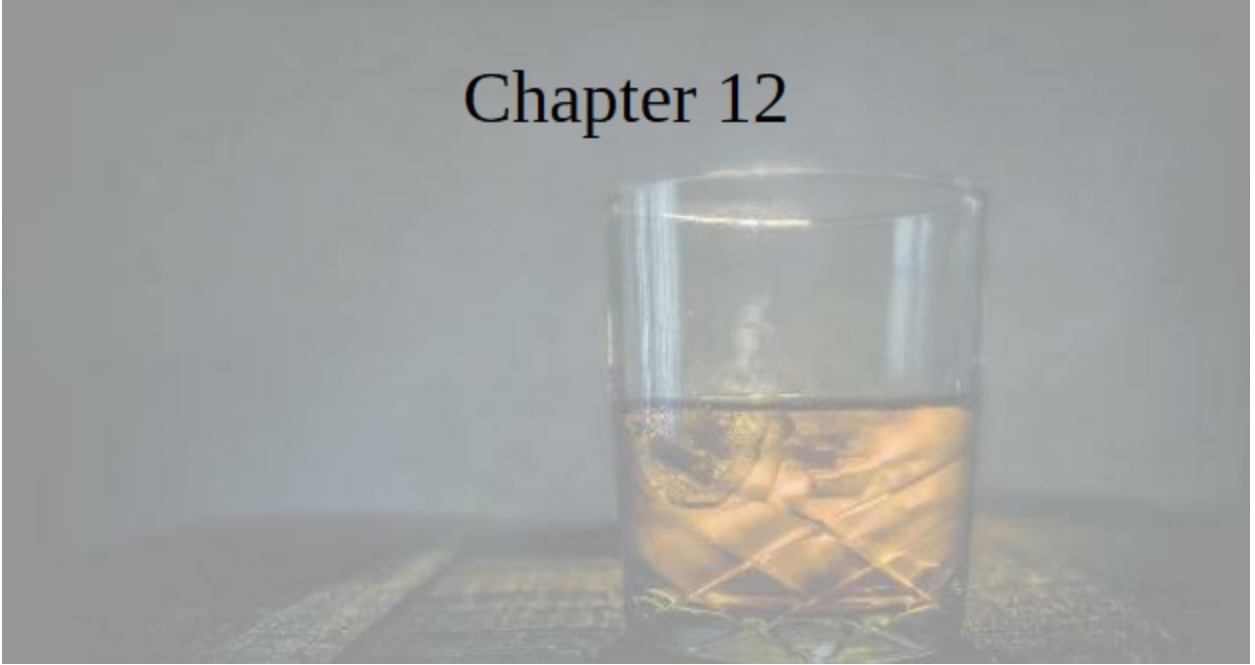
“Be here in one hour. Eleven a.m. sharp. Don’t be late. You go to the cops, the girl dies. You disobey me, the girl dies.” He turned his back to me, walking away, but now he had my soul to keep him company instead of Luciano.

I ran inside the restaurant to find Cassie and pulled her into a tight embrace. Fuck that guy, I’m not having Cassie here for this. I’ll find her a safe place far away from here, far away from the mafia.

I shook my head, forcing myself out of my memories. I heard Damian’s panicked voice talking to someone on the phone in Spanish.

“That’s right,” I said out loud. “Bring that motherfucker here so I can end this fucking contract with him once and for all.”

Chapter 12



Justin



It was grocery shopping day for the station, and it was my turn to pick up the weekly load for the guys. I just had to get coffee, then I was ready to pay and get back. Turning my cart down the coffee aisle, my eyes found a petite figure reaching up for a box of coffee pods. They were inches away from her fingertips and she reached into her shopping cart to use a long box of spaghetti noodles to help. I chuckled to myself and made my way over to help.

Her wavy brown hair reminded me of Valentina.

I reached up over her head and grabbed the box of coffee pods for her. She turned and looked up at me with wide, familiar hazel eyes.

“Thank—”

“Val?” I was stunned.

“Justin?” My name was still fucking heaven coming from her lips.

“I can’t believe you’re here in my grocery store. What are you doing out this way?”

“Wow, hi! It’s good to see you!” Valentina’s fake smile caught me off guard and made me a little concerned.

“Let’s go, Valentina.” Some pompous asshole came up behind her, causing her to jump slightly as he held her arm a little too tight.

“How about you ease up on that grip, yeah?” I was trying hard to control the anger building inside of me.

“How I hold my fiancée is of no concern to you,” this motherfucker spat.

“Oh, Marco, I’m assuming.” I couldn’t help but roll my eyes at him, then looked back at a scared Valentina. Red flags were going off in my brain; I wanted to keep her from going with him.

“I-it was good to s-see you, Justin. Take care.” Valentina’s weak voice was foreign to me. There is no way my feisty Valentina is okay if she’s talking this way...

“You too, Val. Let’s catch up sometime. It’s been too long.” Her face twisted in defeat.

“That won’t be necessary. A real man should know it’s inappropriate to spend any time with another man’s fiancée,” Marco hissed as he pulled Valentina away from me.

Valentina looked over her shoulder at me. I didn’t like her walking away with that prick. I saw the panic on her face when he touched her. She flinched when he made contact with her skin... I held eye contact as long as I could until she was out of my sight.

Soft beeping sounds pulled me out of my dream of last week’s encounter at the store. I tried to open my eyes, but fuck, my head hurt.

“Justin? Are you alright, principino?” A strong, firm hand grasped onto mine.

“Uncle Rico?” I blinked, trying to force my eyes open, but damn, the lights

were bright in here. “I haven’t been your principino since I was a kid”

“Always will be, my boy. How are you feeling?”

Reaching my hand to my face, I felt bandages wrapped around my forehead and a stinging pain at my right temple. I looked over to the side, seeing monitors and an IV stand. *How did I get to the hospital?*

“What happened? I was supposed to be helping the kid from the accident... How did I end up here? Where’s Spencer?”

“One thought at a time.” Uncle Rico’s calm voice eased my anxiety, and I took a deep breath.

“You were at the accident site with Spencer, but you were shot.” Uncle Rico’s face shifted to pure hatred and anger.

“Who...?”

“Calaveras Negras,” Uncle Rico interrupted. “You have been targeted by De La Rosa’s crew. We have much to discuss once you leave the hospital, principino. You need to come back.”

“You know my mother will hate it if I do.” I leaned my head back on the pillow of the hospital bed and looked at the ceiling. “She tried to keep me away from the Family for so long.”

“I know, my boy, but now you need protection. Whoever took a shot at you was either a poor shot or just trying to scare you. How did you get on their radar? Did you get into it with one of those twisted assholes?” Uncle Rico scoffed in disgust.

“No, I never... wait... De La Rosa’s?” I felt my face go pale.

“What is it, boy?”

“Valentina... her fiance is Marco De La Rosa. Is he...”

“He’s a swine. Filthy woman beating pig, that man,” Uncle Rico spat.

Valentina... How did you get involved with the Calaveras Negras? She

can't have known... right? My Val would never want that life...

My thoughts were interrupted with a light knock on the wall. Uncle Rico and I both turned our attention to the doorway at the same time.

“I thought I told you to take care of Valentina. Isn't getting yourself shot very un-fucking-helpful?” Anna chuckled with a crooked grin as she walked in with her partner.

“Anna. Please meet my Uncle Rico. Uncle Rico, Anna Graham. Las Vegas Metro's finest detective.” I said mockingly.

“Miss Graham, a pleasure.” Smooth-ass Uncle Rico kissed the top of her hand, stroking Anna's already excessively inflated ego. “It's not every day I get to lay my eyes on such beauty with a gun.” He gave her a flirty smile.

“I like him.” She winked at Uncle Rico, then turned towards me. “You remember my partner, Gabriel Swiftwater?” Anna motioned with her chin over her shoulder.

“Yeah, I remember. Good to see you, man.” Gabriel gave me a silent nod in return. Uncle Rico nodded at him in greeting, as well.

“Alright, you know the deal, Campbell. Spill.” Anna pulled out her notepad and clicked the top of her pen with her thumb, ready to write.

“I honestly don't know what happened, Anna. I was getting a patient from a flipped car strapped into the gurney while Spencer checked in with the chief. I blinked, and I was on the ground and woke up here. Where is Spencer? Is he okay?”

“Spencer brought you here, then left after bossing everyone around.” Anna gave me a soft, sympathetic smile.

“Did anything seem out of the ordinary at the scene of the accident you responded to with West?” Gabriel asked pensively.

“I was more focused on the kid we were getting out of the overturned car. I

wasn't aware of anything that seemed off." I rubbed my temple, trying to remember what happened.

"Do you have any beef with anyone? Is there anyone that would want to harm you?" Gabriel asked.

I looked to Uncle Rico, expecting him to bring up the Calaveras Negras, but he was quiet with his head down. One hand was in the front pocket of his slacks, while the other was holding his phone, scrolling through something. He tapped his foot twice, which I remembered was my command to shut the fuck up.

"No, man, not that I can think of. I'm mainly only at the station unless I'm out to eat with Spencer during down time." I shrugged.

"I'm sorry, JC, just standard questions," Anna apologized. "I'm just glad you're alright, and I'm glad that fucker was a shitty shot." She nudged me with a fist.

"Is Val doing okay?" I couldn't help but ask.

"I went by her place earlier, and she was hiding in bed. Poor thing. Her black eye is looking better though; it's fading." My heart ached knowing she was suffering alone.

"I know you have Anna's number, but just in case something comes up, or if you remember anything that can help us catch this guy, please call." Gabriel said as he handed Uncle Rico his business card.

"Thanks, detective." Uncle Rico handed me Gabriel's card.

"I'll meet you in the car, Graham. Take care, Justin." Gabriel gave a nod to the room, and a knowing glance at Anna, before walking out of the room.

Anna put her notebook back in her back pocket and crossed her arms. Something was eating at her.

"Your turn. Spill it, Anna," I joked.

"I'm really worried about Val, Justin. I can't say too much, but the rumor around the station is that she's in with the Calaveras Negras..."

"What?! That's ridiculous! There's no way!" I raised my voice louder than I intended to.

"Shut the fuck up! Are you trying to get the attention of the whole damn building?" Anna hissed and gave me a death stare. "I'm just fucked in the head about it. Something is off about her fiance, and my gut is never wrong." She crossed her arms and shifted her weight, looking out the hospital window. "He's hurting her, I just know it. You need to fucking get her away from him. I can't get involved since her case is active..."

"I need to get the fuck out of here first. It was just a graze. I'll get her somehow; I still have the address to that asshole's house in my GPS." I sat up with a grunt.

"Just be as clean as you can if you need to... start shit. I can't help if there's a fucking warrant out for you, JC. I can only turn a blind eye to a certain extent," Anna whispered, trying to keep her voice down.

"Since when have I ever been messy, detective?" I flashed her a million-dollar smile.

"My point exactly. Don't be fucking messy. Stay off Metro's radar. I already confirmed two deputies to be working for Calaveras Negras. I don't need you going all psycho fucking vigilante murderer and getting yourself arrested by them."

"He will be careful," Uncle Rico stated, as he adjusted his tie. "He knows how to be careful."

Anna flinched; she forgot Uncle Rico was in the room. She quickly turned to face him, and her blonde ponytail almost whipped me in the face, her mouth slightly open in shock.

"Don't worry, dear. Anything said in this room stays in this room. The Calaveras Negras have hurt my family more than I can say. They can all rot in hell as far as I'm concerned." Anna nodded in response.

"Justin, do you know anyone named—" Anna shuffled through pages in her notebook. "Julio Cardenas?"

"Julio... No, I don't think so." I looked up to Uncle Rico, and he had a similar puzzled look as he shook his head no.

"Who is this Mr. Cardenas?" Uncle Rico asked, while crossing his arms.

"He got my number from my business card in his car. He's Marco's driver and fucking saw him throw Val around. She must have found a way to sneak my card out of her pocket to get help."

My repressed anger started to rise up in me. I quickly ran through multiple scenarios in my mind where I made Marco suffer—Uncle Rico's hand on my shoulder snapped me out of my mind.

"Let me know when you are on the way. Swiftwater and I will conveniently be in the neighborhood in case anything goes south." Anna turned to leave, stopping at the door. "Just get my Vallie out safely... No matter the cost." She sniffled as she continued out of the room.

"Here, principino. Get dressed." Uncle Rico tossed me a bag of fresh clothes. "I will go get you discharged."

He left the room to take care of that, as I carefully removed my IV and shut off the monitors. Shuffling through the bag, I found my phone, powering it on, as I stepped into clean boxer briefs. I untied the hospital gown and tossed it on the bed, and pulled on my jeans and t-shirt. Sitting back down onto one of the guest chairs, I put on my socks and low top black Converse.

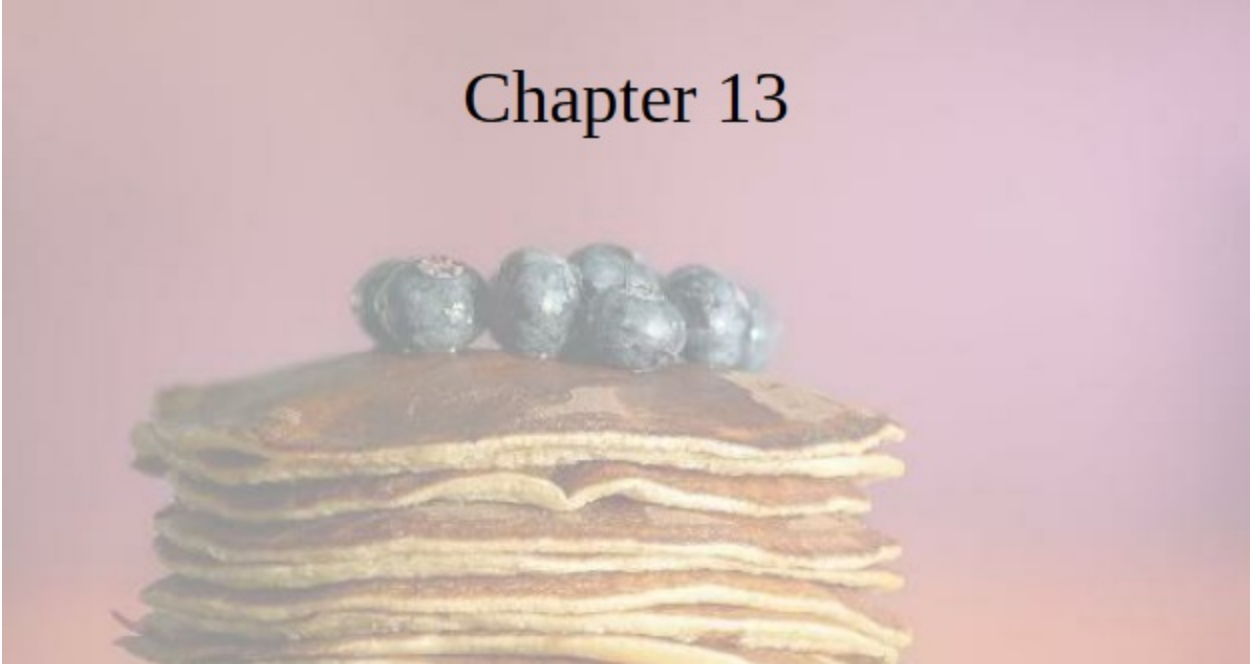
I found a tabletop mirror and carefully peeled away the wrap around my head to assess my wound. Removing the bloody gauze, I saw just a graze

wound and four stitches. Cursing under my breath, knowing it would scar, I grabbed a clean package of gauze that was left on the table. With a sigh, I unrolled some, placing an absorbent pad down and taping it all down, avoiding the full head wrap again. With a sigh, I ran my fingers through my hair then placed both hands palm down on the counter. Hanging my head, I played through different scenarios in my mind and pictured my Valentina safe in my arms again.

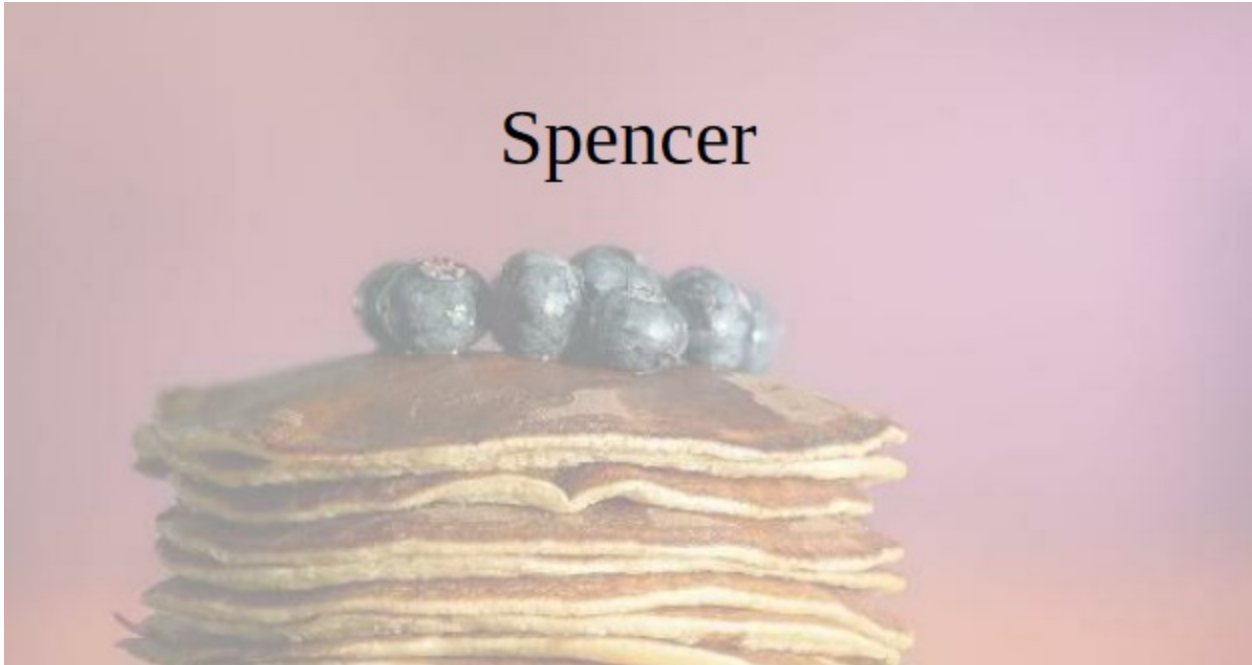
"Let's go, principino." Uncle Rico stuck his head in the room as I put my phone and wallet in my back and front pockets, following him out the door.

I'm coming, Val. Please hang on...

Chapter 13



Spencer



2 Years Ago

"I don't want to go to Chicago , Spence." Cassie started sobbing while trying to zip up her suitcase.

"I know, Cass, but it's the only way to keep you out of this mess. That creep was bad news, and I don't want you caught up in anything." I was sitting on the edge of the bed, trying not to cry with her.

"But it was self-defense! How can they put a hit out on you when you were defending me?" Cassie sobbed into her hands. I stood up and held her tightly, her tears soaking through my t-shirt.

"It's the mafia, Cass; you can't reason with people like that." I sighed.

"This all sounds like a bad movie. This can't be real, it can't—" Her sobbing started again as I hugged her tighter to me. I knew this was probably the last time I would see my little sister, and I was breaking.

"That detective, Anna... She said this was a safe house. You'll have the place to yourself and if you get lonely, they can have a roommate join you." I cleared my throat, fighting the tears that were threatening to fall.

"I don't want this Anna cop. I want you, Spencer. Why do you have to stay? Come with me!"

"I can't risk it, Cass." The tears came. "I can't lose you, too. At least... at least I'll know you're safe. I'll come straight to you once it's safe for me..."

We stood in the guest room of my house, hugging and crying, until my phone vibrated in my pocket.

"They're here." I picked up Cassie's suitcase and wrapped my arm around her shoulder. We walked to Detective Graham's car together in silence.

I put her suitcase in the trunk of the car, and Cassie clung to my middle. I hugged her tightly and kissed the top of her head. Her red hair was haphazardly thrown on top of her head with her favorite neon pink hair tie. She sniffled as she took her hair down and slid her hair tie onto my wrist.

"This... this is m-my favorite one, you know." Cassie sobbed.

"I know. You should take it with you, Cass."

"It's my favorite one, so you need to make sure you take care of it for me until we see each other next. So I can get it back." She got on her toes and kissed my cheek before getting into Detective Graham's car.

"Bye, punk." I tried to smile, but my tears fell.

"Bye, asshole." My whole world, my whole heart, shattered at my feet as I followed Detective Graham's car with my eyes until I could no longer see it.

The sound of a slamming door snapped me out of my mind. Damian was talking a mile a minute, telling Marco what I did, as I stood in the same place I had been. A pool of Marco's cousin's blood now fully surrounded my feet as I let my darkness consume me again. Footsteps drew closer as my grip on my gun tightened.

Marco turned the corner and faced in my direction, adjusting the cufflink on his right sleeve.

“Well, what have we here?” He placed his hands in the front pockets of his slacks nonchalantly.

“He fucking killed Eddie!” Damian swiftly pointed in my direction, like a child tattletelling on me to his mother.

“As I can see.” Marco stepped closer, unbuttoning the buttons on his suit jacket. He stopped a few feet in front of me and surveyed the two dead men at my feet—not even afraid of the gun I was holding. “He should be dead if he can’t protect his kin.” Marco nudged the other dead man with his foot as Damian turned on his heel and went back towards Marco’s office.

“Justin was *my* job,” I growled. “Why was some other motherfucker on my target, De La Rosa?”

“Do you really think I’m stupid enough to trust you to go through with it, Spencer? You don’t think I have eyes on you at the station?”

My body began to shake with rage. I wanted to kill this motherfucker. The grip on my gun tightened as I raised my arm, aiming right between Marco’s eyes.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you, Spencer.” Marco flashed a devious grin as he motioned with two fingers over his shoulder. I kept aim at Marco, as one of his men shuffled into the room with a petite figure draped over his shoulders. She had a bag on her head, and her limbs were tied together with a thick rope. Rope burns were showing as her arms dangled over this asshole’s shoulder. I caught a glimpse of red hair, and I dropped my gun in shock.

Marco’s man dropped her to the floor, letting her fall harshly at Marco’s feet. Her head bounced off the floor, and Marco reached down, ripping the bag off Cassie’s head. Her red hair was a tangled mess, with patches of dried blood on her scalp. She had a split lip, a black eye, and her sweatpants were torn with blood stains between her legs down to her left knee. My whole

body began to shake with rage as my darkness began to overwhelm my senses.

"Ah, ah, ahh." Marco grinned, waving his pointer finger back and forth.

"She has nothing to do with this. Every mark you and your filthy fucking dogs put on her will be a bullet in your fucking face," I growled through clenched teeth.

"I had to remind you where you stand in this Spencer. You can't run from me; you can't hide that sweet pussy from me. Did you really think you could hide her in Chicago?" Marco motioned to Cassie with a nod of his head. "Those cops work for me, you imbecile!"

"Graham..." I growled. *I let her go with Graham. She fucking promised Cassie would be safe.* Rage began clouding my vision, and I felt my control slipping.

"Ah yes, Miss Anna Graham. I've been trying to employ that hot piece of ass for five years. She plays hard to get. Even after we killed her husband..." Marco chuckled and motioned for his thug to come over.

"Yes, boss?"

"Take this one to the Red Room. Have Bella clean her up and get her ready for me. I have things to attend to at home, then I will return to deal with her." He flashed me a disgustingly wicked grin.

"You won't lay a fucking hand on her, Marco."

"Well, of course not right now. I like my women to be conscious *and* compliant." He buttoned up his suit jacket again.

"She's coming with me. I'll fucking kill you and everyone else in this shit hole." I whipped out my Glock from its hiding place at my back and aimed at the back of Marco's head as he turned to walk away. His thug was holding

Cassie in his arms, her limp arms hanging, and her head rested against his chest.

“Now, now West, no temper tantrums.” Marco chuckled and started to walk away. He snapped his fingers, and three more of his goons instantly surrounded me, knocking my Glock from my hands and it dropped a few feet away from me. One punched me hard in the chest, causing me to fall to my hands and knees to catch my breath.

My body went numb as my darkness swallowed me whole. While on my hands and knees, I lunged forward, catching the thug who punched me off guard. I pulled his leg towards me, and he fell backwards onto his back, groaning in pain. The other two circled behind me as I rose to my full height. All I could see were these pathetic wastes of lives blocking my way to Cassie. They stormed towards me and I matched their strides towards them, throwing a wide haymaker punch and catching one thug at his temple. He stumbled backwards, falling to one knee, holding his head in his hand as he winced in pain.

The second thug pulled out his gun and shot as I ducked to the side, grabbing the gun by the barrel and slamming it up towards his face, breaking his nose. The bullet hit a stone pillar, forcing a chunk to break off as it ricocheted into the ceiling. With the gunman stunned, I quickly assessed which gun was closer to me; my Glock, or the other that still lay in a pool of Eddie’s blood. I dove for my Glock and rolled to my back, aiming and shooting twice, dropping the last two thugs. The first one was still laying on his back, groaning in pain.

I stood up, stalking towards the thug laying on his back as a pair of green eyes was peeking through a slightly open door. It didn’t even register in my

mind that Bella was watching every move I made. I pressed my bloody foot to the thug's throat as he clawed at my boot, choking for air.

"What is the red room?" I growled.

The thug's face began turning purple, and I moved my foot to relieve the pressure on his throat. He coughed violently, taking greedy breaths of air.

I kneeled to one knee, pressing the barrel of the gun to his forehead.

"I'm not going to fucking ask you again. What. Is. The. Red. Room?" My finger pressed dangerously on the trigger of the gun.

"It's... it's M-Marco's room. He... he takes his g-girls there," he stammered.

"What *girls*?" I pressed the gun harder into his forehead.

"The.. the ones he s-sells... The s-sex slaves." Boiling hot rage hit me in the deepest void of my being as I stood up, shooting this asshole in the forehead. I shoved my Glock back in my waistband, as I began to shake with red-hot rage.

"Cassandra!" I roared as I punched the stone pillar over and over, until my fist was a bloody mess, and fell to my knees.

Soft footsteps ran towards me and as I looked up, meeting Bella's gaze, she wasn't frightened. I expected her to be scared of me, my darkness, my rage. She didn't seem scared, but her whole body shook as she knelt before me. Hot, silent tears were free falling from her forest green eyes, her eyebrows pinched together in what looked to be anger. With shaky hands, she lifted my broken, bloody hand, looking at the damage.

"Oh, Spencer... I'm... I'm so sorry..."

Bella held my hand and gently placed a kiss on the top, avoiding my bloody knuckles. Her deep, sensual eyes met mine. She saw me... saw

through my demons, my darkness. She saw *me*. Her hands found my cheeks, and her thumbs brushed away tears I didn't know were falling.

"Bella..." I felt my shadow begin to calm as I stayed kneeling in her presence.

"Let's get you cleaned up; you have at least 3 broken fingers." She stood up, offering me her hand.

I rose with her and immediately pinned her to the stone column by the throat. Bella's eyes were wide with amusement.

"You will *not* lay a hand on Cassie, you hear me, bitch?" I looked down at her as I leaned one hand on the pillar over her head. My gaze went to my hand on her throat and then to her eyes. I was expecting to see fear in her eyes, but the excitement, the desire in her eyes, made my cock twitch. I licked my lips as her eyes closed slightly and scanned mine.

"I'm going to help her, Spencer. I would never—"

I crashed my lips to hers, my hand still on her throat. Her moan as my grip tightened made me hungry for her. I wanted to bend her over and fuck her, fuck out all my rage, my pain. Release my darkness, let it all out on her perfect body. But I forced myself to tear away. Her perfect, plump lips were swollen, and her eyes were hooded as she leaned into my grip on her neck, pulling my hips towards her by my belt loops. She grinned with such satisfaction when she felt my erection on her stomach.

"You are going to help me get Cassie back. Then I'll figure out what to do with you, you hear me?" I purred into her ear.

Bella put her hands on my chest, pushing me back to meet her gaze.

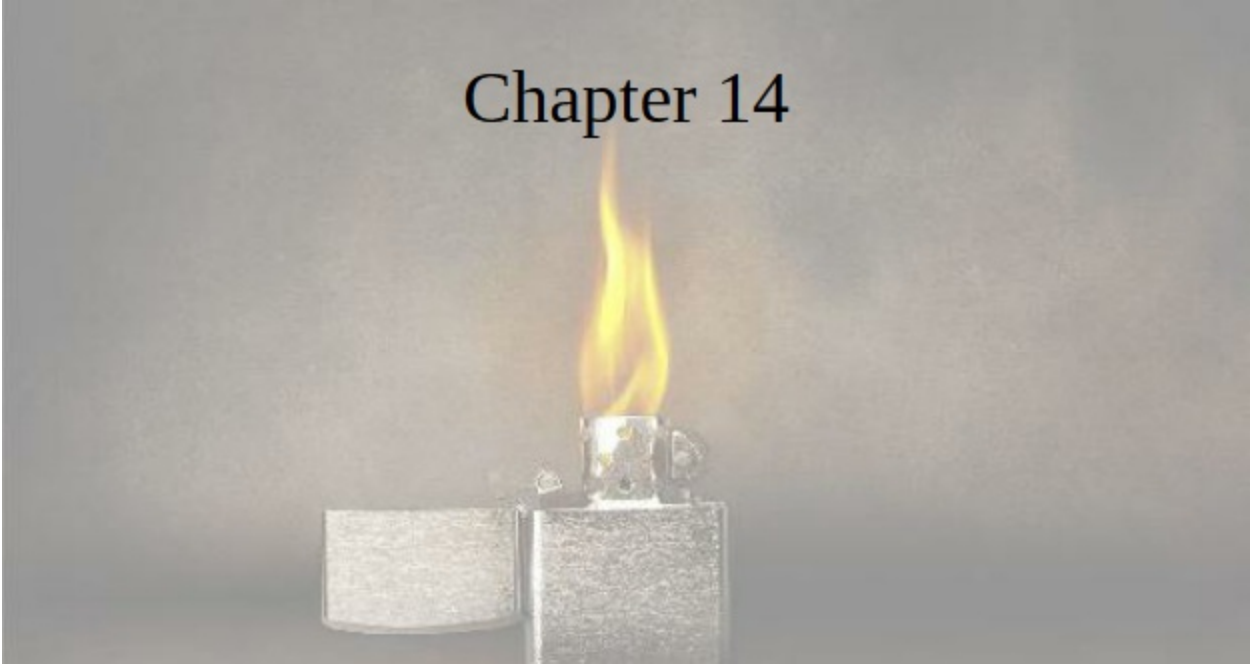
"I'm going to help Cassie, but remember one thing, Spencer." She grabbed a handful of my still hard cock over my jeans. "*No one* tells me what to do." She gave me a firm squeeze. Her eyes radiated power and control. I released

my hold on her neck and stared at her, unable to contain the grin forming in the corner of my mouth.

“Yes, ma’am,” I said sarcastically.

“Let’s take care of that hand.” I followed her out of the room, away from the dead bodies. I was trying to form a backup plan in case Bella fucked me over, but all I could see was her perfect, round ass swaying in front of me as I followed her.

Chapter 14



Valentina



My day was spent on the floor of the bedroom with my pillow, blankets, and a book I thumbed through but didn't read a single word. I couldn't stand to even look at the bed, let alone lie on it. There was nowhere else in this godforsaken house where I could relax.

I sat up and hugged my knees. My back and neck were stiff from lying on the floor, and I tried to rub out a new knot forming on the side of my neck. My long-sleeve, pink flannel pajamas were soft and gentle on my bruised skin, and the pants were cuffed up to my ankle—damn things were too long. I glanced up at the alarm clock on the nightstand—almost nine o'clock PM. I was grateful Marco was taking so long with whatever business he had to see to.

He's probably out fucking some other poor girl. Nikita scoffed in my brain.

"At least it's not me..." I said out loud with a sigh.

I scooted myself back up to the wall and leaned my head back. I pulled my plush gray blanket up to my lap and took a deep breath.

Alright, Nikita. Let's plan how to get the fuck out of here.

With a sigh, I flipped through the pages of my book, and found an old letter Justin wrote me in high school. I traced the outline of his letters with my fingertips, wishing it was his skin I was touching instead. I closed my book with a quick snap, and tried to fight tears from falling

How would he ever want me, Nikita? Any form of physical contact scares me and triggers my anxiety.

Time... It takes time. The right person will wait for us. Nikita said gently in my mind.

With a sigh, I sat forward to get up, when a little piece of white paper caught my eye in between the mattress and box spring.

"Oh my gosh, I almost forgot!" I said out loud as I forcefully pulled the envelope from its hiding spot.

I pulled out Rico's card and stuck it with Justin's letter in the safety of my book. I needed to get my hands on a cell phone...

Maybe he can get us out of here. Nikita said in my mind. But I didn't want Rico to save me from this... I wanted Justin.

Nikita decided we should be prepared to leave quickly, and I decided I was leaving after Marco came home and fell asleep. I couldn't take this anymore, my body couldn't take this anymore, my mind couldn't... Shaking off my nerves, I went to the closet and pulled out my overnight bag. It was an old duffel bag from high school that had "BAND" in collegiate style lettering on the front. I didn't bring much with me to Las Vegas, just some basic outfits, bras, panties, and that one professional outfit for the interview I never made it to. Leaving my slippers on, I put my one pair of pumps, my sandals, and what little clothes I had brought with me into the bag. For a brief moment, I stood in the silence of the bedroom making a mental note of all my things to make sure I grabbed them all.

Don't forget our meds.

“Thanks, Nikita,” I said out loud to my mind as I walked to the dresser. I kept my antidepressants in the top drawer, with my vitamins and birth control. I grabbed my 3 little bottles and saw Marco’s zippo lighter.

Let's take it so we have something to throw in the Grand Canyon or something.

“Not a bad idea.” I chuckled to myself as I tucked away the zippo and my medication, zipping up my bag and draping a sweatshirt on top in between the straps. I made my way to the dark living room and tucked it away in a corner where Marco never went.

I cursed in my mind when headlights turning into the driveway caught my attention. I peeked out the window between the blinds and sighed when I saw Marco’s Audi pull in. Marco got out of the back passenger side and stood beside the car talking on his phone. I quickly ran to the kitchen to have a reason to be up this late. I pulled out a package of crackers and opened the refrigerator to get some water when I heard the front door open, then close.

“What are you doing, Valentina?” Marco asked coldly. His eyes were dark, sinister. Something was definitely off with him tonight.

“Just getting a snack. I couldn’t sleep,” I replied weakly.

Marco stalked towards me and gripped my chin harshly, forcing me to look him in the eye. He turned my face side to side like he was checking me for something. It made me feel vulnerable and uneasy. Something was definitely off with him, and I couldn’t put my finger on it.

What the fuck is he doing? Nikita mirrored my thoughts.

“It’s a shame you don’t heal faster; you bruise too easily.” He sighed as he roughly tossed my face away from him like he was disgusted with me.

“I... I’m out of my makeup...” I hated how weak I sounded. My shaky

hands reached up to adjust my glasses.

“What a shame.” He scoffed and pushed the refrigerator door closed. The insult hurt, like it always did... small cuts on my soul that were reopened every time he insulted me, humiliated me. Every word reopening each shallow wound, just to let the pain be prolonged until I go completely numb, or die—whichever came first.

“I-I’ll p-pick up some m-more tomorrow,” I stammered, begging Nikita to keep the tears from falling.

“Tomorrow, huh? Tomorrow...” He trailed off as he sauntered back to the other side of the island and bent down. He tossed my duffel bag and sweatshirt onto the island. “How do you explain *this*, then?” He snarled through closed teeth.

“I... I...” My eyes widened in fear.

“Tsk tsk tsk, Valentina. Didn’t I warn you what happens when you try to run from me?” Marco trailed two fingers along the top of the counter of the island and slowly made his way back towards me. I backed up as he approached, backing into the refrigerator. I kept making my way backwards until I was cornered at the wall beside the refrigerator.

“M-Marco, please...” I brought my hands up to my chest with my palms out as he kept coming towards me. He leaned into my palms as he towered over me, and his eyes almost softened as he looked at me. I closed my eyes, bracing for pain, when I was instead met with something cold and hard under my chin.

My eyes flew open in fear as I desperately tried to back away more. Marco held a gun under my chin, and his finger was on the trigger. My body started to tremble, and silent tears fell as I looked into black eyes I didn’t recognize anymore.

“I warned you, Valentina,” Marco pushed the gun harder under my chin, as I averted my gaze from his evil eyes. “I warned you of what would happen if you were to defy me again.”

“W-why do you have this g-gun?” My voice broke and shook as I tried to force words out.

“To avoid any occupational hazards,” he replied coldly. “It seems to be the only option I have left to keep you in line as well.” His free hand found my messy bun, and he yanked my head back harshly.

“M-Marco p-please... I’m n-not leaving. I thought... thought it was time to... to go home...” I was sobbing uncontrollably.

“Home? California? You think you’re going back home?” He laughed and tightened his grip on my hair as I reached up to his wrist with both hands.

Fucking kick him in the balls! Nikita screamed in my head.

Justin... Please... Please help me. I don’t want to die before I get the chance to tell you how much I love you, how much I–

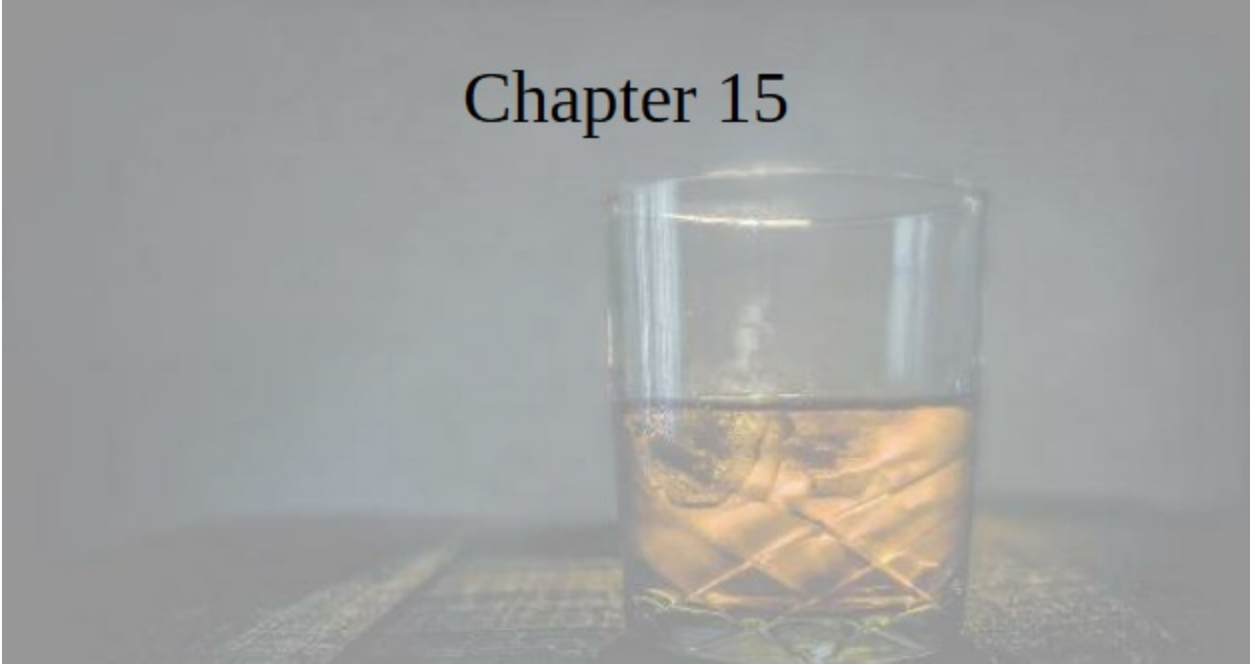
“You’re never going back to California, Valentina,” Marco interrupted my thoughts. “Once I get what I want from you and your family, you can return home in a casket,” he hissed through closed teeth.

In the distance, I could swear I heard the rumble of an engine. My eyes widened in fear. *Did a neighbor hear? Are the cops here? Are...*

All of a sudden I forgot what I was thinking, and I was looking at Marco’s dress shoes on the floor. I was dizzy, disoriented, and confused. I was trying, fighting to not lose consciousness when my eyes caught a figure kicking in the front door, his eyes finding me on the floor.

“Justin...” I moaned weakly as I lost consciousness.

Chapter 15



Justin



Uncle Rico and I left the hospital in a hurry to head back to the station before going to get my Val.

“I need to talk to the chief before we go,” I said as I buckled my seatbelt in Uncle Rico’s Impala.

“Yes, we can stop there first. We need to discuss a plan for tonight, principino. There is much we need to talk about.” Uncle Rico turned the key, starting up his car and driving towards the station.

It was a quick, silent, five-minute trip to the station. Uncle Rico parked his car next to my Mustang, and he followed me into the station.

It was a quiet day; there wasn’t anyone in the workout room, and all of our engines were in the bay. We made our way up to the dorms, and I showed Uncle Rico into my dorm room.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes. I’m going to see if Spencer is in his dorm, then check in with the chief.” I stood in the doorway with a hand at the back of my neck, trying to stretch and massage out the tension.

“Take your time. I am in no rush.” He unbuttoned his jacket and sat at my desk, picking up a muscle car magazine off my desk.

I closed the door behind me and took a deep breath. Spencer’s dorm was directly across the hall from mine. The screw holding the number “2” on the door was starting to come loose, and it was tilting to the left. I straightened it as I knocked on his door.

“Hey, Spence! You in?” I put my hands in my jeans pockets, waiting for a reply. “Spence?” Turning the knob, I peeked into a dark room. His bed was empty and unmade, and his wallet and keys were missing.

Did I even notice his bike? Was it in the parking lot?

I closed his door and made my way down the hall to find the chief. I walked past the kitchen and saw the chief’s back as he heated up his dinner in the microwave.

“Hey, Chief,” I said, as I found a seat at the table.

“Campbell! Good to see you, son and so soon!” He sat across from me with a steaming plate of ribs and vegetables.

“Yeah, it was just a graze. Killer headache though.” I feigned a smile, and he looked at me with genuine sympathy.

“I don’t want to see you on duty for two weeks, Campbell. I’ve already submitted the paperwork for your temporary medical leave. You have plenty of time saved up; you should take it. Heal up and rest so we can get you back on the road with West.” He smiled and took a generous bite of meat from the ribs.

“I appreciate that Chief, that’s why I came to look for you. I don’t want to milk it too long; you know Spence doesn’t do well riding with anyone else.” I chuckled as he slid me a can of Coke.

“I still don’t know how you do it with that boy.” He chuckled with a

mouthful of meat.

“He’s an acquired taste.” I took a sip of the Coke, raising it in thanks.

“He also called me asking for some time off. I think the shooting really affected him.” The Chief wiped his mouth with his napkin and interlaced his fingers on the table.

“I’ll try to find him and get in contact. I know he struggles from a bit of PTSD from his past. He has a hard time with firearms sometimes.”

“I remember. But take care of yourself, too, Campbell. Go get some R & R, get a fancy hotel, and get some room service. You deserve to have a break.” He stood to throw away his plate. “And take care of that noggin of yours. I need my best PM back.” He winked at me and walked out of the kitchen.

I sighed and downed the rest of the Coke, crushing the can in my hand and tossing it in the recycling bin on my way out. I looked at my watch. It was already getting late—eight o'clock.

I need to go get my Val, I thought to myself, as I headed back to my dorm.

Uncle Rico was right where I left him. He looked over the top of the magazine and met my eyes.

“You know this would perform better with a small block Chevy engine.” He turned the magazine my way to show me what he was reading.

“Yeah, yeah, Chevy is better than Ford, I know.” I chuckled. “So, what did we need to discuss?” I sat on the edge of my bed, leaning my elbows on top of my knees. Uncle Rico closed the magazine and placed it back on the desk. He turned to face me, a new seriousness in his eyes that I hadn’t seen in a long time.

“There is much you do not know about Valentina, my boy. About her family.”

“I knew her parents and her half brother very briefly when we went to school together. Her mother was a sweetheart. It’s a damn shame what happened with the car accident. I wish I knew where she was at the time, so I could be there for her.”

“Her father was a very... influential man here in Las Vegas.”

“I never knew he had business out this way. I just assumed he worked in California only.”

“I’m not going to sugarcoat anything for you anymore, principino. Your mother has had me do that for far too long.” Uncle Rico huffed out a big sigh, perking up my attention.

“What’s going on Uncle—”

“There is more to Valentina than you know,” he interrupted.

“What—”

“She is the daughter of Vicente Fiorelli,” he cut me off again.

“Wait, THE Fiorelli? As in the Fiorelli Mafia Family?” I was in shock.

“Yes, son.”

“What? How? Her last name is Fiore, not Fiorelli.”

“Her mother wanted to protect her, principino. She did not want her involved with the Mafia. She wanted her to have a normal life, away from the crime and sin that came from the Family. When she was born, Maria had her birth certificate filled out with the last name of Fiore.” I was dumbfounded.

“How... What... Aren’t you involved somehow? I used to help you when I moved here. Drove you around...”

“I was meeting with the Calaveras Negras cartel on behalf of Vicente. They are the Mafia’s biggest drug supplier. But all these questions can be answered later, son. Right now, we need to focus on getting Valentina away

from De La Rosa. She is the last surviving heir to the Fiorelli Family and needs to be under the Mafia's protection."

"Wait... My Valentina. A Mafia Queen? You can't be serious..." This all sounded like a cheap indie film.

"Why do you think Marco beats her half to death? He wants her weak, broken down, compliant. Once they marry, he can step in as head of the Fiorelli Family since her parents and brother have been killed. We cannot have that man, that *monster*, in charge of the Family." I buried my face in my hands, trying to make sense of everything that was going on.

"I don't even know what to say..."

"You love Valentina, son. That's all that matters at this moment. Her father's attorney gave her my contact information in secret. She was supposed to meet with me so I could ease her into things and try to plan our next steps. For thirty years, my loyalty was always to Vicente, but now my loyalty lies with Valentina. I will protect her with my life, as I did her father before her. But it is imperative that we get her away from Marco immediately."

I stood up, running my hands through my hair, trying to make sense of this bomb that was just dropped on me.

I've always known about Uncle Rico. The Mafia, the trips he had me go on. The gun I learned how to shoot to watch his back. The drugs I delivered to the warehouse the Fiorellis owned right off the strip. The money I delivered to Uncle Rico... I've always been involved, always known. No one knows I secretly worked for the Fiorellis without Uncle Rico knowing. I had to keep playing innocent, so he didn't hate me... Valentina... She can't know that I'm not the hero she thinks I am...

With a sigh, I took my keys out of my pocket to unlock my desk drawer.

Uncle Rico watched me as I pulled out my revolver, checking the chambers, making sure they were full. I tucked it in my belt at my back and grabbed a handful of bullets to tuck away in my pocket. He raised a knowing eyebrow at me and his eyes glowed with... pride?

“Let’s get my Queen.” I slammed my desk drawer shut, and Uncle Rico nodded to me as we headed out to our cars.

“I’ll follow you, principino. We need to take both in case we need to split up.”

“Agreed. Let's see if you can keep up with real American muscle, old man.” I chuckled.

“Lead the way.” He smirked, and I started up my Mustang.



About ten minutes later, we pulled up to Marco’s home in the godforsaken rich neighborhood I never wanted to visit again. Valentina’s car was in what looked to be the same spot in the driveway, and Marco’s Audi was backing out of the driveway. I remembered him having a driver, which meant he was home. I pulled up one house away and killed my engine. Uncle Rico drove around the corner, parking on the side of the house. It made it easier that Marco’s house was on a corner.

My phone vibrated, and I pulled it out of my pocket. It was Uncle Rico.

“I’ll watch the back door. You take the front.”

“Got it.”

I put my phone back in my pocket, questioning if I should have called Anna. She wanted to be in the neighborhood just in case something went south, but I wanted to handle this on my own. *Sorry Anna.*

With a sigh, I looked out my passenger window at the house. There was what looked to be one light on, maybe the kitchen. Blinds were closed in the front windows, so I couldn't see much. Quietly, I got out of my car, propping the door open without closing it all the way. I knew it would be loud and I didn't want any attention drawn to me. With my hands in my pockets, I walked up the sidewalk towards his house. A window on the side of the house had the blinds open just enough to see two figures in the kitchen. I froze in place as I saw Marco holding a gun to my Valentina's chin. I ran up to the front door, about to kick it in when I saw Marco pistol whip her through one of the small little windows on the door. I saw her frail body collapse on the floor, and my soul burned with a new found sense of rage. In one motion, I kicked the door in as hard as I could. It almost broke off its hinges as I rushed inside.

"Justin..." I heard Valentina's weak voice call for me before she lost consciousness. A small pool of blood forming under her perfect face. She was curled up on the floor against the wall.

"Stupid bitch," Marco said as he turned to face me while he wiped the butt of his gun clean with a handkerchief. After putting the gun in his waistband at his back, his eyes met mine.

I was burning with rage, hands balled into fists and knuckles turning white as I dug my fingernails into my palm. I felt warm blood at my fingertips as I let my eyes find Val again, still in a heap of chestnut hair and bloody pajamas.

"This will be the *last time* your pathetic hands will ever touch her again," I

growled as I stalked towards Marco.

He smirked as he tried to take off past me, but I was faster. I gripped his wrist as he tried to pull away from me and slammed him chest first into the wall, stunning him.

“Justin...” he hissed.

“Hmm... which to break first...” The corner of my mouth curled up into a grin as I gripped his pointer and middle finger in my fist, causing him to flinch and try to push off the wall with his free hand. But I was stronger. I bent his fingers back towards his wrist as hard as I could. The crack of his fingers and his screams in pain were music to my ears. Every sound his body would make as he broke, every cry he would make begging for mercy... It would be the most spectacular symphony I’d hear in my lifetime—and I couldn’t wait to revel in it.

I would make sure he would *never* use these hands to hurt Valentina ever again.

Uncle Rico ran in through the front door while I still had Marco’s fingers in my grip. I pushed him to the floor, and he held his pathetic hand in pain.

“Stupid bitch.” I spat his words back at him and nodded at Uncle Rico before turning to go to Valentina. Uncle Rico came into the kitchen with the same wicked grin and kicked Marco in the head, knocking him out.

I kneeled before the Queen of my heart and held her to my chest.

“Valentina... I’m never leaving you again.” I gently kissed her forehead as her blood started to warm my hand. I pulled my t-shirt off, bundling it up and putting pressure on the side of her head.

“It looks like she was planning to leave, Justin.” Uncle Rico nodded towards her band duffel bag on the island.

“Grab it for me, will you? I want her to have her things when she wakes

up. Go into the bedroom and get the big, fluffy blanket also?” He nodded and went to the back of the house, towards the bedroom, as I hooked her fallen glasses onto the collar of my shirt.

“Got it.” He folded up her blanket and grabbed her duffel as I carried Valentina to my car.

“I don’t want to risk taking her to the hospital. I have my bag in the trunk, and it doesn’t look like she needs stitches.” I laid her down in the backseat and opened my trunk to get some gauze and bandages. The bleeding slowed, and I sighed in relief as I bandaged up her head.

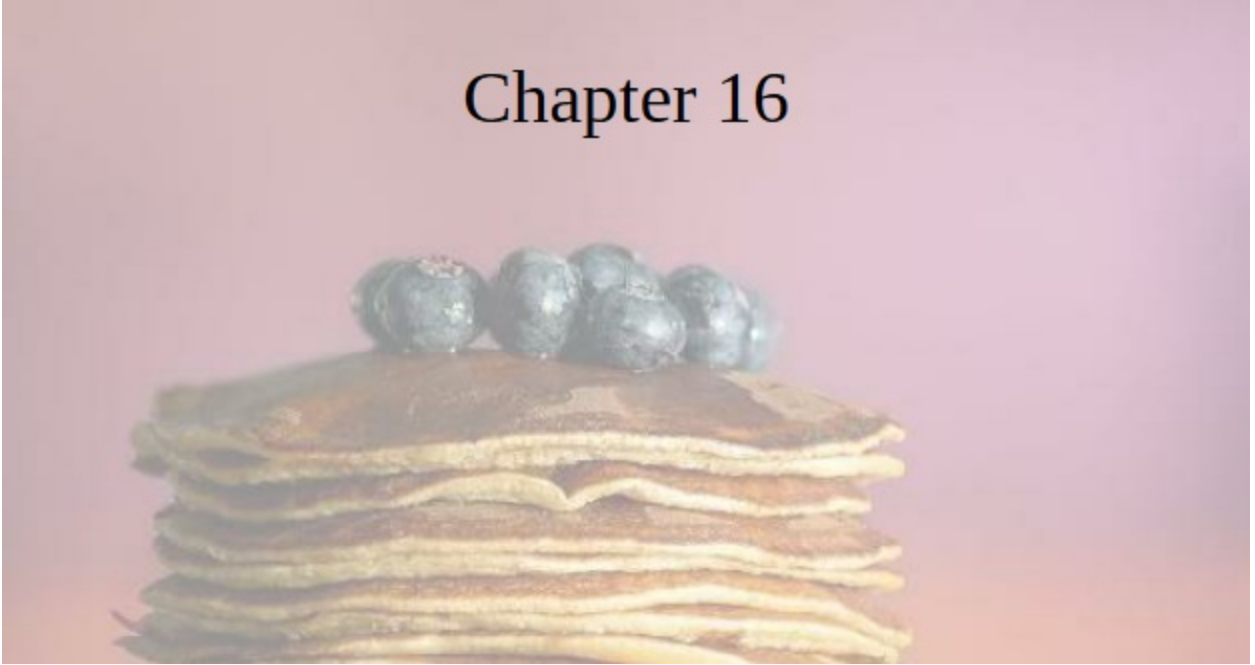
“Here, principino.” Uncle Rico handed me a key card to the MGM Grand. “Use my suite for a few weeks; she will be more comfortable there than at a hotel. I will come to check on her in a few days to give you some privacy. You protect her with your life, son,” he said to me with a puzzling look in his eyes. Pride? Concern? I couldn’t figure it out at the moment.

“Of course. Thank you for this.” I motioned to the key card.

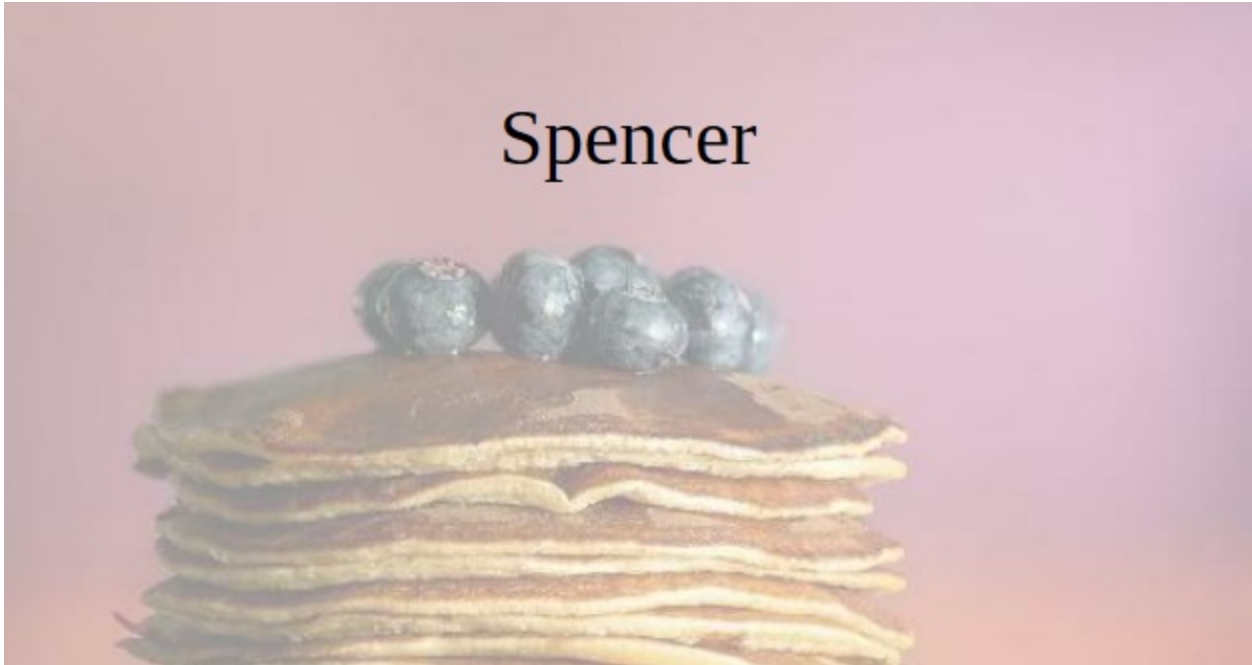
“Pull into the employee entrance on the east side of the building. Show them the keycard, and they will let you through. There is a green employee only entrance in the far corner of the building. Use that door, and it leads to an elevator. Scan the keycard, and it will take you directly to my private suite. There is only one card, so no one else can enter.”

“Thank you, Uncle Rico.” I quickly got in the car, pulling away from Marco’s house as Uncle Rico went back inside. I couldn’t care less what he did while he was in there now that my Valentina was safe with me.

Chapter 16



Spencer



“Thanks Chief, I appreciate that... Yeah, you too... Bye.” I hung up my phone, putting it back in my pocket.

“Get some time off?” Bella asked as she held my left wrist over the sink, rinsing my knuckles with cold water.

“Yeah, two weeks. I can just be a driver for now, since I can’t use my fucking hand.” I hissed in pain as she pulled a small chunk of stone out of a cut with tweezers.

“You need to get this checked out, you know. I used to see boxer’s fractures often when I worked at the hospital. I can tell you have at least two fractures. You need an x-ray.”

“Okay, *nurse*,” I teased, biting my lip and looking her up and down mockingly.

“Behave,” Bella commanded as she started to splint my hand roughly, making me groan in pain.

I hung my head in defeat, my hair starting to fall in my face. With my other hand, I frantically reached back to feel for Cassie’s hair band. I sighed

with relief when I found it, barely hanging on. I tried to scoop my hair up to put the hair band back on, but my left hand hurt so fucking bad.

“Let me help.” Bella took the hair tie from me and I glared at her.

“Don’t–”

“Relax. I’m honestly going to help you put your hair up. I’ll be gentle, I promise.”

I studied her green eyes, and she looked right back at me, not once breaking eye contact. She had me submitting to her with no words, and it was fucking hot as hell. I leaned my head back so she could gather all my hair, and she scooped it up, making a ponytail with her hand.

“I need to put my helmet on, so a low one would be fine.”

“How about you just shut up and let me do it how I fucking want to?” she purred in my ear as she yanked my hair back harshly. My cock twitched at her words, full of power, control.

I shut up and let her continue. Her fingers brushed through my hair, and her nails gently grazed my scalp as she gathered it into a ponytail. She fastened Cassie’s hair tie at the bottom of my hairline so my helmet would fit.

“What a good boy,” Bella whispered in my ear before stepping away, trailing a finger down my arm.

“Thanks...” I managed to stammer. I was trying to figure out why I had the urge to let her just have her way with me. I’m usually the one in control, and it was hot as fuck that I was completely at her mercy.

“Go to the hospital, Spencer.” Bella sauntered over to the door of her bathroom, my eyes watching her ass as her hips swayed back and forth like I was being hypnotized.

Bella turned to face me, holding the door open, motioning her head towards the hall.

“I’m not fucking leaving without Cassie,” I hissed.

“Such a fucking brat.” Bella sighed as she sauntered back towards me. “I told you I would take care of her. I won’t let Marco touch her, I promise Spencer. Trust me, I don’t go back on my word.” She winked at me and eyed me up and down.

“Where is she?” I was losing my patience.

“Probably up in my infirmary, so you should go so I can tend to any injuries she has. You’re a paramedic, I’m an RN. You know I’ll do *everything* I can to help her.” Her eyes looked sad for a split second as she turned to head back towards the door, holding it open. I slid out of the folding chair I was sitting in and made my way to the door, stopping in front of her.

“Thank you for this.” I lifted my wrapped arm, then dropped it to hang at my side.

“Go to the hospital, you brat.” She chuckled and pushed me by the chest so I stepped backwards enough for her to close the door.

“I’m not a fucking child! Brat, my ass! You better fucking take care of her!” I yelled at the closed door, and I could’ve sworn I heard a chuckle on the other end.

With a huff, I stormed down the hall to the exit leading to the commercial kitchen. Two of Marco’s assholes were trying to fix the door I had kicked in, and an evil smirk appeared on my lips. They had the door halfway open, trying to reattach the hinges to the wall.

“Good evening, gentlemen.” They both glared at me with hatred in their eyes, but they stayed silent as I continued towards the door to leave. I stopped in the doorway, smirking at them over my shoulder as I turned, swiftly kicking the door out of their hands, leaving a new dent as it hit the floor.

“Fuck you, Spencer!” one of them spat as I casually strolled towards my

bike, ignoring their curses in Spanish.

I was grateful it was late at night; I didn't want any attention on my hand as I tried to ride my motorcycle to the hospital. I sat on my bike with a sigh, trying to ignore the pain in my left hand as I fumbled with the buckle to my helmet and clicked it into place. I kicked up the kickstand and pulled the left lever on my handlebar to make sure I was able to work the clutch. It hurt like a bitch, but I could manage a few blocks.

I couldn't help but let my gaze fall back to the service entrance, wondering where Cassie was. Fuck, I didn't want to leave. I wanted to kill every last one of them until I found her. I had to trust Bella to look out for her, but that woman... I wanted her to just have her way with me, with my darkness. I wanted her to tame me, save me from what I'd been forced to become. I chuckled at the thought of her curvy figure trying to put me in my place, but couldn't help the growing bulge in my jeans as I pictured her in some dominatrix leather outfit, making me her bitch.

Shaking off the thought, I started up my bike, flinching as I pressed in the clutch to shift, and drove off down the strip towards the station. I decided to stop by the dorms to pick up some shit to do since I knew I'd be in the emergency room for a few hours.

The warm Las Vegas night breeze helped calm my anxiety as I rode down the strip, but all I could think about was Cassie. I hadn't seen her in two years, two long fucking years. Seeing her bloody and broken made my blood boil. I would do whatever it took to destroy Marco and his precious fucking organization. I'd do anything I had to do to get Cassie back, safe and sound.

As I pulled into the station and parked my bike, I pulled out my phone to send Anna a text, not even caring how late it was.

Spencer: What the fuck, Graham! Marco has Cassie!

Anna: What are you talking about, Spencer? She's at the spot we discussed.

Spencer: The fucking cops you left her with work for Marco!

Anna: If this is some sick joke Spencer...

Spencer: Why the fuck would I lie? We need to talk.

Anna: Give me fifteen minutes. Sirens?

Spencer: No, University Medical Center ER.

Anna: Do I want to know?

Spencer: Just get there.

I shoved my phone back in my pocket and quickly ran into the station, heading towards my dorm. I needed to change out of my bloody clothes. I chuckled when I came up to my door and saw the “2” straightened. I sighed with relief, knowing Justin was out of the hospital since he's the only one who ever bothered to fix it, then bitches about needing to tighten the screw.

I opened my door, kicking my boots off in the doorway. I went to the kitchenette to get a grocery bag to put them in.

I'll worry about cleaning them off later.

After putting my boots in the bag, I went to my bedroom to change. I hissed in pain as I unbuckled my belt and jeans, letting them fall to the floor. After stepping out of my jeans, I pulled my dirty white t-shirt over my head and added it to the new pile of laundry. With a sigh, I went to my bathroom, examining myself in my mirror to make sure I didn't have any other blood on me. With my good right hand, I splashed water in my face—a sad attempt to cool off the rage still simmering under the surface.

Returning to the bedroom, I pulled on some gray sweatpants, a fresh t-shirt and slipped into my slip-on Vans. I didn't want to even try tying shoelaces. I

pulled on a zip-up hoodie, then made my way back out to head to the hospital.



Ten minutes later, I was checked into the ER, sitting with a grumpy Anna. She was pinching the bridge of her nose with one hand and holding a hot coffee in the other.

“Okay, wait. You’re fucking telling me they work for Calaveras Negras?” Anna sighed.

“Unless someone else knew where Cassie went...”

“No! Okay! NO. I take my job very fucking seriously, Spencer,” Anna hissed, trying to keep her voice down. “I would never put an innocent girl in the hands of the cartel like that.”

“Who was assigned to her in Chicago?”

“Bates and Johnson. I already had Gabriel send the files to my phone.” Anna showed me the screen, and the two motherfuckers responsible for Marco having Cassie stared back at me.

“I don’t recognize them as any of Marco’s men.” I leaned forward, resting my right elbow on my knee, and rubbed my forehead.

“And how would you know who works for Marco?” Anna looked at me, trying to figure out what I was hiding.

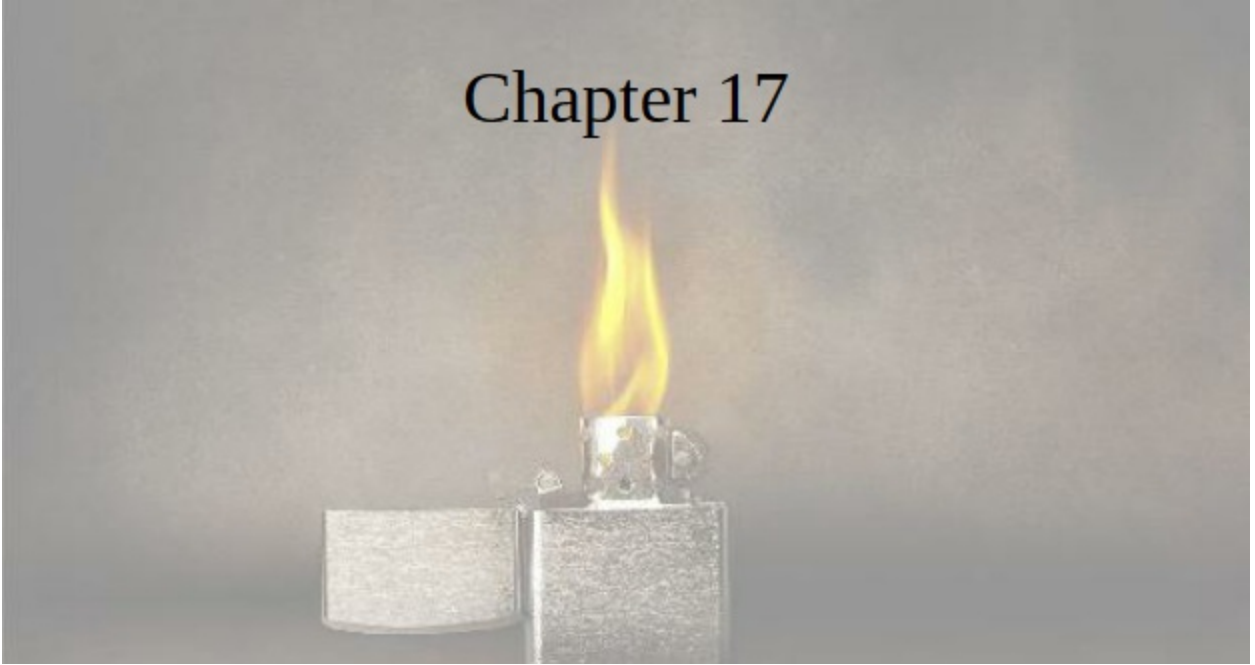
Before I could answer, the nurse called my name, and I stood up.

“We need to talk, Graham. Just not here.” I turned to walk towards the nurse when Anna called out to me.

“Call me when you’re home. I’ve been meaning to stop by and check on Justin. I’ll come by.”

I nodded at her and followed the nurse, still questioning if I could trust Anna.

Chapter 17



Valentina



I woke up to unfamiliar bedsheets. They were soft, almost silky smooth feeling on my feet. There was an unfamiliar scent on the pillow, mingled with my familiar plush blanket. I slowly, hesitantly, opened my eyes, afraid of where I would be. My vision was blurry, and I had to blink a few times for the cloudiness to ease enough to try to focus on my surroundings. Reaching up to my eyes, I noticed I was missing my glasses.

I was in a lavish looking king-size bed with soft white linens and fluffy pillows. My favorite soft, plush blanket was draped on top of me over the sheets. An instant wave of panic hit me, and I looked under the sheets. Relief swept through me when I saw my pajamas from last night were still on.

Slowly, I turned my head and felt a sharp pain. I brought a hand to my forehead and felt what seemed to be an Ace bandage type wrap around my head. Trailing my fingers around my forehead to my temple, I was met with sharp, excruciating pain. Ripping my hand away, I was hit with the memory of what had happened. Marco hit me with his gun...

My mind was silent as I searched for Nikita. I was scared and didn't know where I was. I slowly rolled to my other side, and with blurry vision again, saw a figure sitting in a chair next to the bed. He looked uncomfortable, with his head cocked to the side. I was able to make out what seemed to be tattoos on his arms and chest, and hair haphazardly falling in his face. I quickly tried to blink the blurry vision away and started to panic.

Who is this? Where am I? Whose bed is this?

My chest tightened, and I shot up to sit, pulling my blanket to my chest as my breathing became labored. I felt my body start to shake, and tears started to fall as I held my aching head in my hands. I tried to stay quiet so the man wouldn't wake up and hurt me, but I gasped. I couldn't breathe and the panic attack intensified.

"Val?" A soft, familiar voice broke through to my ears.

I was sobbing and shaking uncontrollably as the man quickly shot up out of his seat and sat on the edge of the bed. Warm hands came to my upper arms, and that made me snap. I screamed, backing away from his touch violently.

"Val, sweetheart, it's okay..."

Crawling backwards further, I tried to get away from him. I squeezed my eyes shut and shuffled my body backwards, kicking the sheets off of me.

"Val! Please! Stop! You'll fall..."

I fell backwards off the bed, straight onto my back, and groaned in pain.

"Oh my god, Val, please relax. Baby, it's me. It's Justin." He ran to my side, kneeling before me, pleading.

I curled up into a ball on the floor, making myself as small as I could, trying desperately to disappear. I was choking on my sobs, trying to breathe.

"Sweetheart, it's over, I promise you. He'll never hurt you, never touch

you. You're safe with me. I'm never letting you go ever again."

"J-Justin?" I said weakly.

"Yes Valentina, it's me. It's time to calm down now, baby girl. Breathe with me, okay?" Justin started exaggerating his breathing like he always did for me, and I tried to focus on him.

"H-How... What's--"

"Don't worry about that now. Breathe with me, baby." He continued breathing, and I tried to match his breaths. My chest hurt, my back hurt, my head hurt. I was feeling overwhelmed and relieved at the same time.

"Good girl." Justin calmly said as I felt my breathing steadily become more even. My body responded to his sensual voice. I was coming down from my panic attack and immediately starting to feel... turned on? *Why did those words affect me so much?*

"I promise I won't touch you again until you're ready, Val," he whispered, interrupting my thought.

"H-How did I get here?" I hated how weak I sounded.

"Don't worry about that right now. All that matters is that you're here, and you're safe with me. I will never let anyone hurt you ever again." His brown eyes softened as I studied him. He reached up to the nightstand, handing me my glasses.

"My bag..."

"On the dresser," Justin motioned his head to the other side of the room, and I saw my duffel bag. "Can we get you off the floor now?" He smiled at me as he stood, reaching out his hand for me to take.

"I got it..." I quickly stumbled to get up, clenching my blanket to my chest. *Fuck, I'm such a child...*

"Be careful, you might be a bit dizzy after that nasty hit to the head." I

inadvertently brought my fingertips to the bandage.

“I’m so sorry you had to see that. I shouldn’t have—”

“No. Valentina, you did absolutely nothing wrong. You have nothing to apologize for.” He growled as his eyes darkened, and I immediately looked at my feet, avoiding his gaze.

“Fuck, Val, I’m sorry... I’m not upset at you.” Justin’s eyes immediately softened, as I looked back at him shyly. “How about I start you a hot bath? I picked up your favorite rose-scented things. There are those bath bombs you like, bubble bath, lotion I think...”

“Y-you remembered...” My eyes started to water.

“Of course I remembered, Val. If it’s important to you, it’s important to me. You love rose-scented things, but hate receiving roses as a gift because it’s too typical.”

All I could do was stare at the man before me. Justin was shirtless, and his brown hair was falling in different directions from a restless sleep in the chair by the bed. His stubble was growing into a perfect beard. His jeans sat low on his hips, showing the waistband of his boxer briefs. I found myself wishing I could trace my fingers across every tattoo he had on his arms and his chest, across all the defined muscles of his chest, abdomen, and down that V that disappeared into his waistband... Goosebumps started to trail down my arms at the reminder of what was beneath those jeans, and how good he felt inside me—it made my pussy wet with desire...

“Are you okay, Val?” Justin’s concerned voice interrupted my dirty thoughts.

“Yes, sorry.” I tried to hide a smile I felt curling up on my lips.

“Let me show you to the bathroom.” Justin picked up my duffel bag.

He walked to the other side of the bedroom towards the bathroom, and I

looked around the room in awe. I've never seen a suite quite like this before. There was a beautiful mahogany bedroom set, with a dresser with a built-in vanity. On the opposite wall next to the bed, there was a huge, frameless mirror. From the bed, I was able to see the whole room, and the door in the reflection, and somehow, it was comforting being able to see the door when my back was to it. Just outside the double doors of the bedroom, I caught sight of a little seating area with a recliner and a cocktail cart.

Curiosity got the better of me, as I pushed open the bedroom doors to explore this room. A brand new bottle of Jameson sat on the cocktail cart, and I felt my chest warm with the memories of graduation night. I made a mental note to visit that cart in the future.

I stopped in front of a floor to ceiling window near the sitting area and it was almost surreal being this high up above the strip below. Looking up and to the left, I saw we were at the MGM Grand. It didn't matter where I was, but for some reason it was comforting to know where I was.

I heard Justin start the water of the bath, and the rose scent hit my nose. I was still in awe that he remembered such a little detail about me. Hesitantly I made my way back through the bedroom, and stepped into the bathroom. This perfect man was lighting candles around the huge jacuzzi tub, and tossing bath bombs in the water.

"I left towels for you, and your duffel bag is next to the tub. Please take your time, no rush. I'll be in the sitting room if you need me. Oh, and I had some things prepared for you in case you wanted to use them." He motioned to a little basket on the sink.

He started to walk past me, but stopped in front of me. His eyes were full of worry and concern. I decided to be brave and return his gaze. *Fuck, I want you Justin. I'm just not ready... Please be patient with me.*

Very quickly, I jumped to my toes, placing the smallest kiss on his cheek. My face instantly heated up, and I knew he saw how red I was getting. He was stunned at my gesture, but never stopped looking into my eyes.

“My brave Val...” He brushed a stray chunk of hair behind my ear as I flinched at his touch.

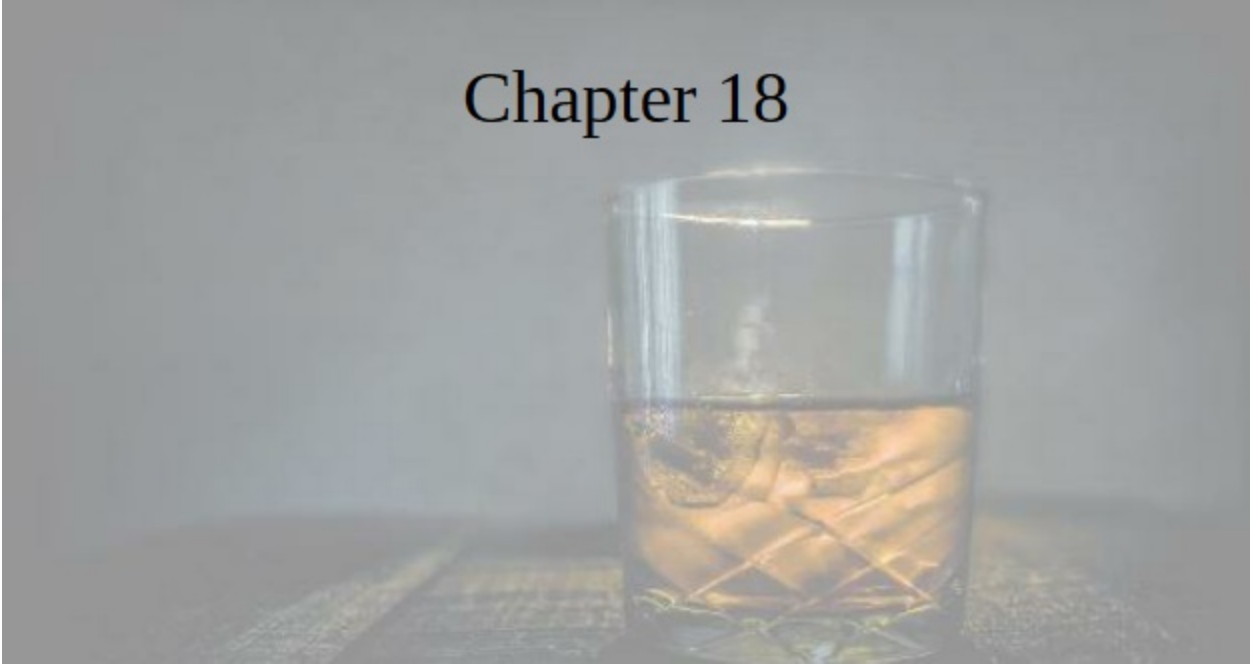
“I’m so sorry...”

“No more apologizing, sweetheart. Enjoy your bath.” He winked at me as he walked out of the bathroom, closing the door.

After Justin closed the door, I looked into the basket he left on the sink, and my eyes watered at his thoughtfulness. There was a two-piece button up pajama set, a long silk robe, various toiletries, lotion, and tampons. After laying out the pajamas and robe, I stripped out of my dirty pajamas and sank down into the tub. The water was a perfect temperature, and I rested my head back on the rim.

I’m finally free...

Chapter 18



Justin

After leaving Val to her bath, I headed to the sitting room and sat in a recliner next to the cocktail cart. I heard Val turn off the bath water as I leaned my head back onto the headrest with a grin. Without knowing, I brought a hand to my cheek where she placed the smallest kiss and my smile widened.

That twisted motherfucker will never even look at my Val ever again.

Sitting up, I poured myself two fingers of whiskey and listened to the bath water sloshing around as Val shifted. A grin formed on my lips when I pictured Val rubbing her perfect curvy body with a washcloth. *Fuck, I wish I was that goddamn washcloth.* Images of that sensitive skin on Valentina's neck feathered gently with my kisses, while that dainty hand of hers wandered over her body, was enough to cause my dick to ache in these jeans. God, she was so beautiful. I wanted desperately to claim her, taste her, make that sweet, innocent mouth scream my name.

She was finally able to leave that rotten, abusive son-of-a-bitch fiance, and I couldn't in my right mind drop the "I love you and always have" bomb on her while she was fragile and healing—not now. She had no idea how I truly

felt about her. How could I confess that I had been in love with her since we met ten years ago...? Our hook up after graduation meant so much more to me than just a one-night stand. She's my best friend; we'd been through hell and back together before Marco came into her life. My brother's overdose, graduating college together, the loss of her unborn baby. I knew she absolutely did not see herself the way I saw her: perfect, strong... Which was a damn shame. She was the strongest person I had ever known, overcoming so much trauma, so much pain, and still standing, still breathing. *I'll make her see somehow.*

With a sigh, I sat up, leaning my elbows on my knees, and cradled my forehead in my palms. Valentina was everything to me, my morning and night. She was in my dreams constantly—waking up next to her, seeing her glowing after making love all throughout the night before, her perfect, silky hair in disarray as she slept comfortably in my arms. I dreamed about coming home to her after a long day, sharing meals together, curling up on the couch watching her giggle at Gordon Ramsay calling chefs fucking donkeys. I slid my hands down my face after rubbing my eyes with my fingertips, resting my forearms on my knees, and looked down at the carpet.

How do I tell her that for once in my pathetic life, I felt at home when I had the honor of looking into her hazel eyes? I wanted to make love to her with the sunrise, worship her body, treat her like the queen she was, and how she deserved to be treated. I wanted her to feel honored and cherished. Everything she was supposed to get from a life partner that Marco never provided. But most of all... I wanted to protect her. I would protect her with my life. I would do anything to see her smile again. *Anything.*

With my whiskey in hand, I leaned back in the recliner, sinking into the soft cushions. My right arm rested on the armrest, and my left hand held my

rocks glass upright on my thigh. I closed my eyes, lost in my thoughts.

Valentina giggled, and it was the sweetest fucking melody I'd heard in my life. I looked around the open hood of my dad's Mustang to see her being chased by a miniature version of herself. A sweet little girl with the same long, brown wavy hair and the same captivating hazel eyes as her mama. They stopped to take a breath, and Valentina looked right at me and smiled. God, her smile. It could bring an army, hell, the whole world, to its knees. She was so beautiful, and I was the lucky bastard that got to call her mine.

"Daddy! Daddy! Help! Uncle Spence is going to get us with the tickle fingers!"

Our daughter shrieked as Spencer jumped into view wearing a giant horse-head mask, wiggling his fingers like they were claws.

"Run Sophie!" Valentina called to our daughter.

"Save us Daddyyy!" She giggled and ran away with Spencer taking giant zombie-like steps towards them as they ran away.

Sophie...

I sat up with a startle, spilling my whiskey on my lap, my rocks glass falling to the carpet when my cell phone rang, vibrating loudly on the cocktail cart.

"Fuck!" I scowled as I jumped up, reaching for a napkin from the cart. I didn't answer the phone, it was another "potential spam." But that dream... Sophie... We had a daughter... I sat and held my head in my hands again and tears began to well under my eyes as the sad realization set in—It was a dream, and I was here without Valentina's hand, and without Sophie. She didn't exist... Yet.

With a sigh, I stood, trying to get my shit together. I noticed Valentina was awfully quiet in the bath, and I looked at my watch. She had only been in

there for about fifteen minutes. After pat drying my spilled whiskey from my lap, I made my way to the doorway of the restroom, cracking the door ever so slightly.

“Val? Is everything okay in here? How’s your bath?” I was met with silence.

“Val, can I get you anything?” More silence.

My heart began to race as I gently pushed open the door and saw her slouched down underwater, one of her arms draped over the side of the bathtub. The water was a blood red color and panic flooded my system as I rushed to her side. I quickly scooped her out of the bathtub and laid her on the floor.

“Val! Val, oh my god!” I reached for a towel to cover her cold body, and pat her cheeks. She didn’t move, and I felt the panic continue to grow in me. I checked her pulse, and she wasn’t breathing, so I immediately started chest compressions and CPR.

“Val, please. Please...” Tears fell between each pump of my compressions.

One long minute later, Val coughed. Water escaping her mouth, soaking the towel covering her and my jeans.

“Oh fuck, Val, thank god.” I held her to my chest, sobbing.

Slowly, she became more lucid, and her hazel eyes opened wide, looking at me, then at the towel covering her. She leaped backwards, barely missing the edge of the tub with her head, quickly trying to cover more of herself with the towel.

“M-Marco p-p-please no...” she sobbed almost incoherently.

“Val, baby, it’s Justin. Marco isn’t here. He’ll never be here, please...” I reached out my hand to help her and she shrank further into the corner of the bathroom.

“N-no, p-please...” She hid her face in her hands, her wet brown hair cascading down her face.

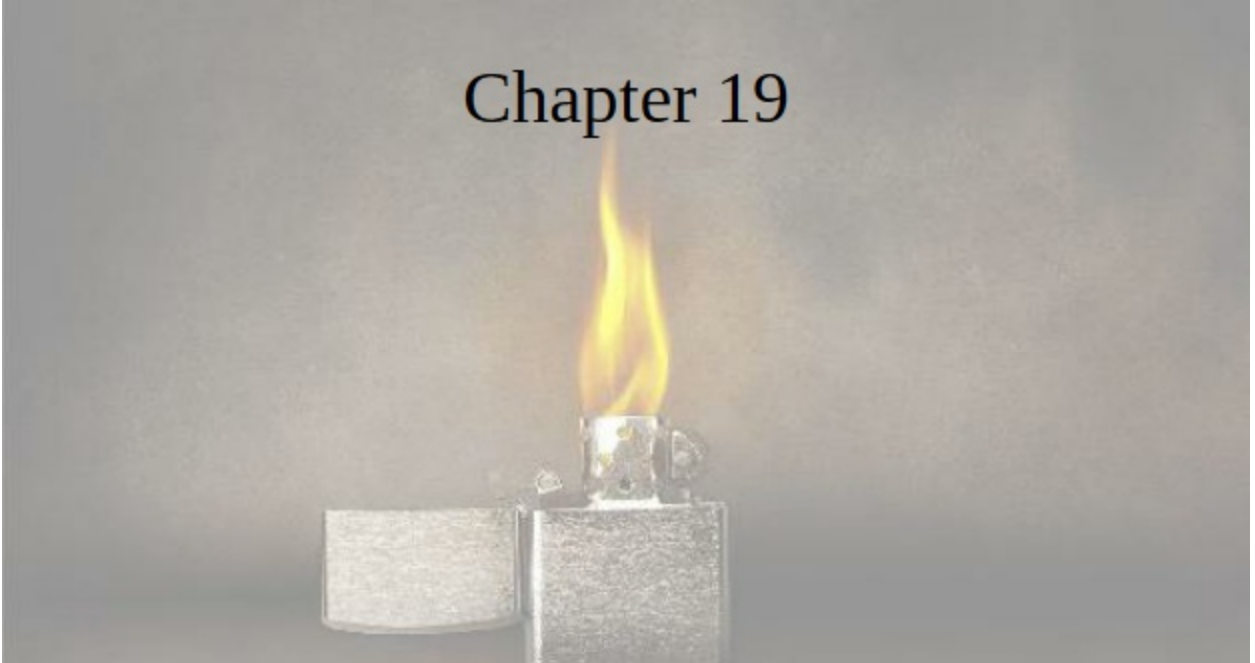
“Val, sweetheart, listen to me. I’m going to leave the room.” I scoot myself back towards the storage cabinet, pulling out two more towels. “I’m leaving more towels right here for you, okay?” I placed the towels as close as I could to her without scaring her.

“I’ll be in the other room. Everything is okay. I promise you’re safe here.” I scooted away from her, then stood to leave the room. She was still shaking, looking at the floor, but raised her eyes just enough to see my feet leave the room. I shut the door and immediately heard her start sobbing quietly.

Fuck that asshole. I’ll kill him for doing this to her.

I sat on the other side of the door listening to my perfect Valentina fall apart alone, desperately wishing she would let me near her so I could kiss her fears away.

Chapter 19



Valentina



The bath felt like heaven. I couldn't remember the last time I was able to relax and soak in a bathtub, especially one this big. A tear fell as I scanned all the rose-scented things Justin had purchased for me on the little shelf attached to the tub. He thought of everything—shampoo, body wash, bubble bath, lotions, oils... He even remembered how much I loved bath bombs.

I shut the water off, trying to settle in, but it was hard to get comfortable. My back was sore, my ribs were still healing, and my head was throbbing from where Marco hit me with his gun. After trying to shift multiple ways, and leaning at different angles to get comfortable, I gave up and just sat straight up. My head hanging in defeat, I reached my hands out to hold on to the sides of the tub as I tried to calm the growing anxiety bubbling to the surface.

Reaching for a quiet Nikita in my mind, I tried to even out my breathing. With my eyes still closed, I tilted my head back.

He's not here, he's gone. I'm safe here. I repeated to myself.

Deciding to start washing my body, I opened my eyes and froze in fear. The water was red. Blood red.

Last Week

The sound of Marco's grunting and his hips slapping against my ass were all I could hear. He had me bent over the bed with a fist full of my hair, pulling my head back towards him roughly. He was drunk—again.

"Fuck yeah, Valentina." I whimpered in pain as he thrusted into me relentlessly. His free hand smacked my ass so hard, tears began to fall as he gripped my tender skin in the same spot. His disgusting fingers dug into my skin, and his nails left crescent-shaped cuts.

"I'm gonna—I'm gonna fuck that pussy so good..." he slurred.

I kept my eyes squeezed shut like always, trying intensely to distract myself from the pain.

"M-Marco, p-please..." I was desperate for him to stop; I was raw, and every movement he made burned my tender skin.

"Yeah, you like that, don't you, bitch?" He yanked my head back again, as another cry left my lips. His other hand moved from my ass to my throat as he continued his thrusts.

"Please... Please stop..."

Marco withdrew from me suddenly, and I sobbed in relief. I felt blood start to drip down my thigh as he flipped me onto my back, stepping in between my legs. His pathetic dick still sticking straight out at me.

"Yes, bleed for me. Fuck..." He fisted himself and started pumping his dick while looking at my bleeding pussy. I didn't try to hide the sobs this time. I shamelessly sobbed, begging him to stop.

"M-Marco p-please... No-no more..." He slammed into me with no warning. One hand pushed my knee open in his favorite position and his

other roughly circled my clit.

“I fucking love my pretty, wet cunt.”

Twenty minutes later, he forced me to swallow his come as he fucked my throat. The salty taste mixed with my blood made me want to vomit. When he was done, he waved me off towards the restroom.

“Go clean yourself off; you’re disgusting.” He flopped himself down on the bed, passing out almost instantly.

Slowly, I stumbled into the bathroom and turned on the faucet of the bathtub. Using the wall for balance, I stepped in and sat down, hugging my knees. The warm water stung, and I sobbed into my knees. Leaning over the side of the tub, I quickly reached for the little trash can and retched.

My eyes opened and blood started to rise to the surface of the bath water. I was in too much pain to lean forward to unplug the drain, so I just sat in the cloudy, red water.

“Please get me out of here...” I cried to whatever god would hear me.

The same blood red water invaded my vision, as the reminder of the past pushed my mind over the edge.

Nikita... Please, please, where are you...?

My mind went numb as I fainted.

Warm... My body was cold, but my cheek was warm. It was a nice warmth, a familiar warmth.

“Val? Val, oh my god!”

That voice... sounds so familiar. He sounds so worried. I wonder what is going on...

“Val, please. Please...”

I heard that familiar voice again. Deep and sensual. He sounded so familiar. I wanted him to keep talking so I could get lost in his voice. Why

does my chest hurt?

I was jerked out of my thoughts as I vomited water, coughing and sobbing.

“Oh fuck, Val, thank god,” Justin cried.

My body was weak, and I was so very confused. But I was warm, my cheek was warm. I opened my eyes and Justin looked down at me, eyes full of tears and concern. My hands were in my lap, and I felt a towel covering me. I looked down and realized I was naked, barely covered in Justin’s arms, and I panicked.

“M-Marco p-p-please no...” I sobbed, jumping backwards out of Justin’s hands, scooting myself to the corner of the bathroom. I knew it was Justin’s hands, but my mind saw Marco’s.

“Val, baby, it’s Justin. Marco isn’t here. He’ll never be here, please...” He reached out his hand, and all I could do was back further into the corner.

“N-no, p-please...” I hid my face in my hands, trying to disappear.

“Val, sweetheart, listen to me. I’m going to leave the room.” I peeked through my fingers as Justin shuffled himself carefully towards a cabinet, pulling out more towels. “I’m leaving more towels right here for you, okay?” He gently placed the towels near me, being careful not to touch my legs.

“I’ll be in the other room. Everything is okay. I promise you’re safe here.” Justin backed away, standing to leave the bathroom.

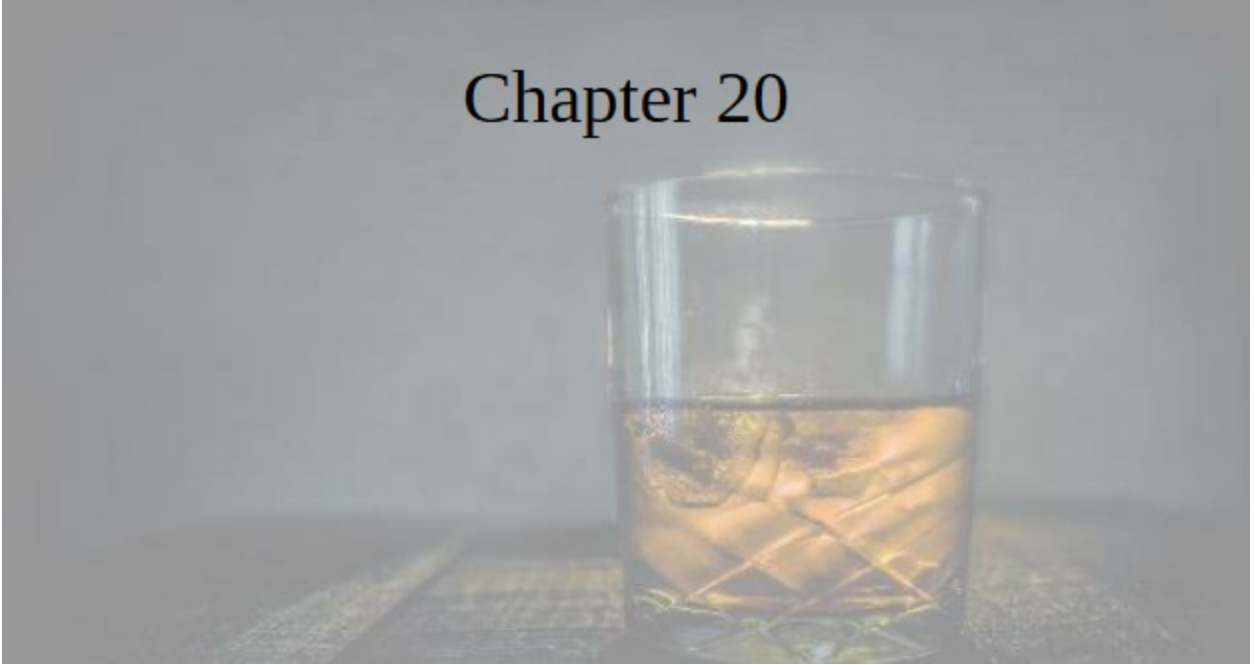
With my eyes on the floor, I just let the tears fall after Justin closed the door.

What the fuck is wrong with me? Why am I like this? I can’t take this anymore...

I sobbed hard, praying for the pain to end, praying to be free from the grip Marco had on me, praying to forget the trauma, the memories, the pain, praying to be free.

Most of all, I prayed for my body to let Justin touch me. I desperately wanted to be loved, to be held, to feel his warmth. But I was broken, and no one wants someone who's broken...

Chapter 20



Justin



The hardest thing I've ever had to do was listen to Valentina fall apart from the other side of the door. I knew that motherfucker was behind it all, and I wanted to break him how he broke her. I decided to give her some privacy and got up to go back to the cocktail cart. I picked up my fallen glass and poured a fresh two fingers of whiskey, then walked to the window.

Looking down at the strip, my conversation with Uncle Rico replayed in my mind. I hadn't worked for him and the mafia in over a year. Now my Valentina was the heiress to the Fiorellis. *How was she going to react to that? How was she going to react to my Uncle Rico working for them, to me—*

Soft footsteps approached me, interrupting my thoughts. I turned to find Valentina standing in a floor-length silk bathrobe, her blanket in hand, and her sad eyes looking to the floor.

"Val, are you alright?" I took one step, then stopped. I didn't want to make her feel uncomfortable.

"I'm—um. I'm o-okay. Thanks for..." She nodded her head slightly towards the bathroom door, then pushed her glasses up her nose.

“No thanks necessary, Val.” I tried to give her a warm smile, but I knew I looked like hell.

“My um—my bandage came off in the w—water. I’m not sure if I—if I need it still.” My heart broke with every word she stumbled over.

“I can take a look at your stitches, if you’re comfortable with that. I would only touch here...” I circled a small area on my temple as her scared eyes followed my movements.

“O-okay.”

“Come sit here, if that’s okay? These recliners are pretty comfortable.” I tried to smile softly and put down my glass on the cart.

Valentina walked over to one of the recliners and placed her blanket on the armrest as she sat down.

“Oh, this is cushy.”

“Told you.” I winked and saw a slight curve in her lip at the corner of her mouth.

She looked at the cart, studying the various bottles, and noticed the Jameson bottle empty and a full decanter next to it. Her eyes then fell to my glass, and before I could tell her the decanter had the Jameson in it, she swiped my glass, downing the whiskey in one sip. *There’s my Val.*

Her delicate hand placed the now empty glass back on the cart and she straightened her posture in the chair, closing her eyes.

“Okay, I’m ready.” Her voice was brave, but her body trembled.

“I’m going to grab my bag from the other room real quick and be right back.” I quickly turned and grabbed my supplies from the foyer and rejoined Valentina in the sitting room.

Those hazel eyes I love so much were watching my every move. I don’t blame her for being wary around half-naked men since my shirt was still off,

but there was a hint of my old Val in her eyes. A small spark of who she used to be, and at that moment, I knew there was hope. I would do everything in my power to reignite that spark in her, to see her burn wild and free again.

I approached her slowly, and she never broke eye contact with me. It was hard to take my eyes off hers so I could inspect her stitches. I had hoped I didn't need to give her any, but after examining her, I had to give her six stitches. They were all along her hairline, and I was grateful since the scar would be easily camouflaged in her hair. I lifted my hand slowly to move her hair to get a better look and brushed a still slightly damp section of hair behind her ear. The slight contact with her skin sent electricity through my body. Valentina closed her eyes, leaning ever so slightly into my touch, and I cupped her cheek with my hand. She flinched and a single tear fell, but she leaned into my touch as her lip trembled on my palm.

“Val...” I gently lifted her chin to meet her hazel eyes. I wanted to pull her to me, feel her lips on mine again, taste her again. That little spark in her eyes seemed to want the same thing, but she held back.

“Justin...” *Fuck, my name sounded perfect from her lips.*

“Your stitches look okay, but we should keep them covered for another day or two.” I fucking hated changing the subject, but I wanted her to feel safe with me.

“Okay.” She looked relieved as I removed my hand from her cheek to reapply some fresh gauze and tape. As much as I hated it, I knew that I made the right decision.

“Val...” She looked up at me with big, sad eyes. “Val, what happened in there? Were you trying to, you know...”

“What? No! Justin, no! I have this thing...” She looked away from me, lowering her eyes to the floor in shame.

“Sweetheart,” I kneeled in front of her, tipping her chin up to meet my eyes again. “I just wanted to make sure you were okay. I can’t bear the thought of losing you that way.”

“My therapist said it was an anxiety disorder. When I have the um... stressful moments, or if the PTSD gets bad enough, my body just shuts down.”

“Do I need to call your therapist for you, sweetheart? We can make you an appointment and...”

“She retired with no warning.” She interrupted, while tears began to stream down her cheeks.

“She gave me antidepressants, but I don’t use them. They just make me feel like a zombie, like I’m on autopilot. I can’t... I can’t be that way around Marco.”

She sniffled, nodding her head and returned her eyes to the floor. I really wanted to change the subject so she wouldn't faint again.

“Are you hungry? We can get room service in this fancy place.” I stood, and pulled out my phone to show her the room service menu.

“I-I haven’t eaten in two days.” Her eyes lowered to the floor again.

“Val, sweetheart...” My heart ached at her admission. I could tell she was embarrassed, so I quickly changed the tone of my voice. “Well, guess we need to go all out then. I’m starving.”

“I’m okay with whatever you have. I’m going to go get dressed.” She got up and sauntered over to the bed, looking through her duffel bag.

“Okay, I’ll be in the other room figuring out the TV, and I’ll call in our order.” I grinned at my phone as I walked towards the living room area. They had pastrami melts, Valentina’s absolute favorite.



Twenty minutes later, we were sitting around a completely full coffee table with plates of food everywhere. Valentina was sitting on the floor with her legs crossed, holding the biggest pastrami melt I'd ever seen. She attempted to bite into it, and I saw her wiggle in place as she closed her eyes, humming with pleasure. I had to shift positions, willing my dick to behave.

My phone vibrated in my pocket and I put down my plate, wiped my hands, and checked the notification on my phone. It was Uncle Rico.

Uncle Rico: Good evening, principino. Is Valentina well?

Justin: Yes, she's in food heaven.

Uncle Rico: Good, good. I am happy to hear. May I visit if you feel she is well enough?

Justin: It's your place, Uncle Rico. You can come whenever you need.

Uncle Rico: I respect her privacy, my boy.

Justin: She seems okay. She would probably enjoy seeing someone she knows.

Uncle Rico: I will be right up, I am already in the parking lot.

Justin: Ok, I'll head down.

I put my phone away and let myself get distracted by Valentina's messy face and happy wiggles. I just wished she would smile...

"Hey Val, my uncle is here. He wanted to stop by to check in. Is that okay? We're staying in his place, so he may need to get some of his things."

"Okay." She nodded and continued eating her pastrami melt.

“I’ll be right back. I need to head down to get him. I promise I’ll be right back.” She nodded as she nervously fidgeted with her hands.

I pulled a t-shirt on and rushed to the elevator to meet Uncle Rico. The door opened, and he smiled as he adjusted his tie.

“Justin, good to see you, my boy.” He pulled me into a hug as we stepped into the elevator.

“She is still very guarded, but she ate. I’m happy with that; it’s progress.” I put my hands in my pockets as we rode the elevator up to the suite in silence.

We walked into the foyer, and Valentina was carrying too many plates in her hands towards the kitchen.

“Please, let me help!” Uncle Rico rushed to her side, taking the stack of plates. Valentina’s eyes went wide as she looked up at him.

“R-Rico?” she stuttered as Uncle Rico placed the dishes in the sink.

“Yes, mia cara, it’s so good to see you. I hope your head is healing well.” He smiled at Valentina, but her eyes were on the floor again. There was a tremor in her shoulders as she sniffled.

“Oh, I’m so sorry mia cara. You’re safe now,” Uncle Rico said gently.

Valentina fell to her knees in tears, and I rushed to her side, careful not to touch her. Uncle Rico nodded at me, and I kneeled before my queen.

“Val, sweetheart...” Suddenly, she lunged at me, clinging on to my shirt as she sobbed into my chest. I wrapped my arms around her, burying my face in her hair as she unleashed her emotions. Uncle Rico nodded to me before going to the sitting room to give us privacy as I held her, savoring her scent, her touch. I cupped her cheeks, and her sad, puffy eyes looked into mine.

“Valentina...” I wiped her tears away with my thumbs as she looked at me like it was the first time we ever laid eyes on each other. She pulled away

slowly, my hands instantly missing the warmth of her skin as she stood up, trying to wipe away her anxiety.

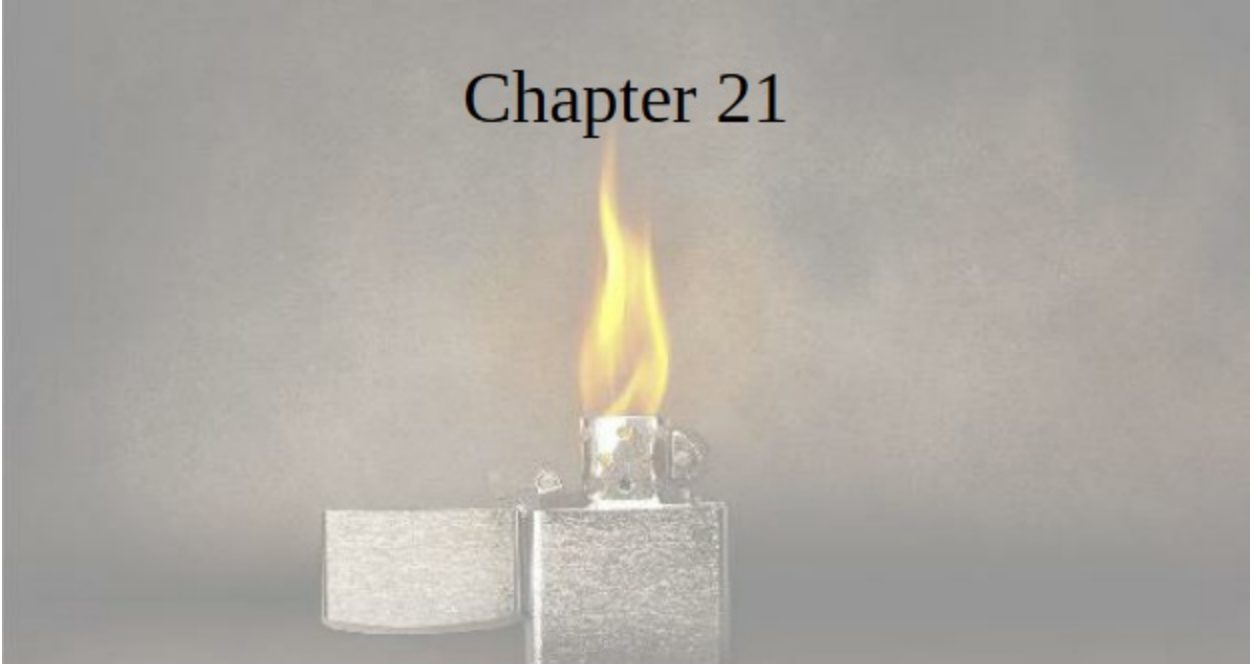
“R-Rico was my father’s business partner. He’s who I was supposed to meet with when I asked for a ride.” She hugged herself and looked towards the sitting room.

“Would you like me to go in there with you?”

“P-please. If you don’t mind.”

“Of course, let’s go.” I smiled at her as we walked together to the sitting room, knowing this was about to be another very difficult conversation for Valentina.

Chapter 21



Valentina



Justin and I met Rico in the sitting room, and he had three glasses of whiskey on the cocktail cart waiting for us. He unbuttoned his suit jacket and casually put his hands in his front pockets with a serious look on his face while Justin protectively stood by my side.

Fuck, my head hurts. Yet another injury from Marco to add to my collection...

“Mia cara, I know things have been very difficult for you.” He handed Justin and me a glass each. “Unfortunately, what we need to discuss is urgent and must be done now. Please, sit.” Rico motioned to a chair as he sat in one of the recliners. I took the other one, while Justin pulled up an ottoman and sat beside me.

“Thank you for helping me with my father’s business matters, Rico. I really want to help however I can.” I tried to sound confident, but there was a nervous tinge to my voice. Desperate to get my anxiety under control, I took a swig of whiskey. The soft burn as it traveled down my throat helped calm my jittery nerves.

Nikita, where are you...? Please...

“Valentina, your father was an important man here in Las Vegas—especially in this area.” He motioned out the large floor to ceiling window towards the strip down below.

“I knew he had business here, but I just assumed it was handled remotely since we lived in California.” My knee started to bounce as my anxiety grew. Justin placed a warm, gentle hand on my knee and it stopped.

“There is no easy way to say this, mia cara, so I’ll just say it. Your father was the leader of the Fiorelli family. The Fiorellis run Las Vegas, especially the Las Vegas strip.” My jaw dropped, but Rico’s features were stoic and serious. I knew he was telling me the truth.

“Wait... So you’re telling me I’m some mafia princess or something?”

This can’t be real. The mafia was in the movies, not real life...

“Yes, and no, Valentina.” Rico held his glass with both hands and looked to the floor.

“When your half brother was killed a few years ago, that left you the sole heir. Now that Vicente and Maria have passed, that means you, mia cara, are our leader. Our queen.”

“I-I— W-what?” I looked at Justin, and he looked serious also. Did he know something about this already?

“I know this is shocking news, my flower. Your mother, Maria wanted to keep you away from this life. When she was pregnant with you, they moved to California, and when you were born, the name you were given was Valentina Amelia Fiore. They did not want you to grow up with the name Fiorelli and be a target.” Rico stood and kneeled in front of me, looking at me straight in my eyes.

“Mia cara, I have been loyal to your father, to your family, all my life. You

have my loyalty as long as I am still breathing. My little fiorelli, my little flower.” Rico gently kissed the top of my hand and looked at Justin. I desperately tried to keep my anxious hand from flinching at Rico’s touch.

“Principino, there is something I must tell you, as well, before I move on.” Justin looked at me, then back at Rico with a puzzled look on his face.

“What is it?” Justin questioned with concern lacing his brown eyes. Rico was still on a knee, but shuffled to face Justin, cupping his cheeks.

“You are my son, principino. I am not your uncle, like you were raised to believe. I loved your mother fiercely, but she hated the Fiorellis, hated the mafia. She left me and took you to California to be away from me, away from the mafia. I was only allowed to be in your life as your ‘uncle’. But I agreed to keep you and your mother safe.”

My hand was at my mouth in shock. Justin was now looking down at the floor, his shoulders shaking. He struggled so much in school not having his father. I was there for that. I knew how much not having Rico affected him growing up. Tears began to pool in my eyes as I heard a quiet sob from Justin.

“W-why didn’t you say anything? I needed you... I-” Justin murmured.

“I know, principino. I’m so sorry. I will spend the rest of my life trying to make it up to you.” He pulled Justin in for a tight hug, and Justin sobbed into his shoulder.

All I could do was place my hand on his back and be there for him like he had been for me all these years.

Justin, I’m here. I’m never leaving you, like you never left me. I silently promised him. As they broke away from each other, Rico placed a comforting hand on his shoulder.

“This is the important part, principino. Do you mind, my flower?”

Rico reached a hand out to me. I timidly placed my shaking hand in his as he held Justin's hand in the other.

"My family has protected the Fiorellis for generations. My father before me, and his before him. I know you care for each other, so this should be easy. Justin, my boy, you must protect her with your life, as I did for Vicente. We need to have her ready to meet with The Collective."

"Even if she wasn't a mafia queen, I'd do anything to protect her." Justin looked at me with a new intensity, a new purpose.

"How... how am I supposed to run a mafia family when I can't keep myself together? I-I can't do this," I stammered.

"This is why we must meet with your father's Collective, mia cara. We are all here to help, and if necessary, we can appoint someone in your place. I know this is a lot of information, so please take a few days to let it settle in and stay together in the safety of the suite and casino. The Fiorelli family's headquarters is here in the MGM Grand. We will be here when you are ready, my flower." Rico stood to leave, but I stayed in my seat, too stunned to function.

"Surely the Calaveras Negras know this about her; it's not safe to have Valentina out in the open at the casino," Justin stated.

"Oh yes, how could I forget? Valentina, mia cara. There is something you need to know about your fiancée." Rico sighed.

"Ex-fiancee," I corrected as I crossed my arms and furrowed my brows. Looking down to my ring finger, I scowled at the extravagant ring. Marco had made it too small, so I couldn't take it off. *I need to cut this piece of shit off my finger.*

"Of course, my apologies. Marco is the leader of the Calaveras Negras. They are a Colombian drug cartel and the family's main supplier. Marco was

trying to marry you so he could step in as leader of the family in your place. His abuse was meant to break you down so much that you would concede easily.” Hatred burned in Rico’s eyes.

“H-he what?!” I stood quickly, my empty whiskey glass falling to the carpet as fresh tears began to fall. I hugged myself, backing away from Rico and Justin.

“Val, it’s okay. He’ll never touch you again.” Justin reached for me, but I continued backing away.

“Y-you knew?” I sounded angrier than I meant to, and Justin winced at my tone.

“He just found out, my flower. He did not know until I told him,” Rico defended.

“So you’re trying to tell me that I’m some mafia queen, and my fiance beat my ass until I died, literally died twice, just so he could take my place as the leader of my father’s mafia family?” Justin’s eyes went wide at my confession, before pure anger clouded his eyes.

I held my head in my hands and shook my head. My anxiety was building again, and I just needed to get away from all of this. I didn’t want this life. I wanted to go home to California. I wanted to hide in my library. I wanted a normal life with no pain, with no—

“Val!” I heard Justin’s voice before my mind went dark and silent—finally.



I don't know how long I was passed out for, but I woke to soft sheets and my blanket draped over my body. I was lying on my side facing the double doors to the bedroom. They were not shut all the way, and I could vaguely hear Justin and Rico talking.

"This is too much for her. They can't expect her to just jump in and do all this." Justin... my hero defending me.

"They are aware of this, principino. Just please try to speak with her about it."

"It's not my place to ask her this... She just fainted for fuck's sake!"

"I know you love her, son. She will listen to you."

"How can I show her that I do, when I can barely touch her? I know she's traumatized, and I respect that. I just want to hold her..."

Footsteps came closer as I feigned sleep. I deeply wanted Justin to finish his sentence. I loved him too, so very much. I had ignored it for so long...

"Go to her, son. She is safe in the casino. Fiorelli's bodyguards will be on alert. Take this... Take her to get a dress and shoes. She needs clothing, too, if all she had was in that small little duffel bag."

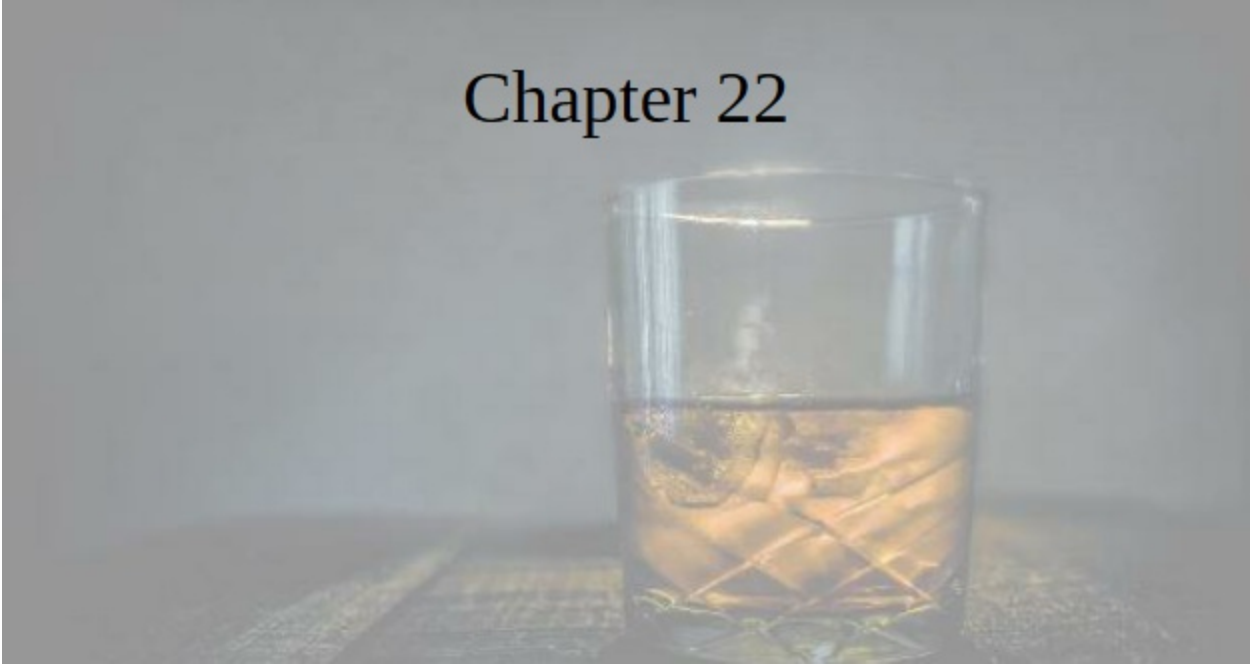
"Thanks, Unc-Dad? What do I call you now?" Justin chuckled.

"You can call me whatever you want, son. Take that girl shopping. Women love to be spoiled. Take her to a nice dinner, and treat her like a queen."

"Of course, I..." The footsteps retreated, and I heard the elevator door close. I tried to stay fake sleeping as Justin came back into the room. He took his place in the chair, and I barely opened my eyes to peek. He held a black credit card with gold etching, and he hung his head as he quietly cried alone.

Please don't cry, I'm here, I don't care about anything going on, I'm here for you. I'm safe... I'm... Sleep found me again mid-thought.

Chapter 22



Justin



I ran to catch Valentina's small body before she hit the floor. Cursing under my breath, I gently carried her in my arms towards the bedroom with a concerned "Uncle" Rico following me.

"This is too much for her to handle mentally right now." I rubbed my eyes, then ran my fingers through my hair exasperatedly.

"I was afraid of this, principino. But she needed to know the truth, so she can accept it and move forward." Rico pulled the sheets back as I laid down Valentina and tucked her in.

For a moment, I stood there looking down at Valentina. Gently, I brushed stray waves out of her face and placed a kiss on her forehead.

"I'm so sorry, Val." I draped her favorite blanket on top of her, and Rico followed me out of the room as I left the door cracked.

"Do you feel up for talking, son?" Rico asked me after a slight awkward silence.

"Yeah, sure." I followed him back to the sitting room, and he poured us two more fingers of whiskey each. We sat in the recliners, and I leaned

forward to rest my arms on my knees.

“Please know this is not what I wanted. I begged your mother to let me in your life, Justin.”

“I needed you. I wouldn’t have cared about the mafia, the family, Vegas. I just needed you.” The tears came as I mourned my past. I didn’t have my father to help me when my brother overdosed. I didn’t have my father to help me work through the grief as I struggled in high school. I didn’t have my father there when I had to watch my brother’s casket lowered six feet under. I didn’t have my father there to help me pick out the ring I bought Valentina and desperately wanted to give her after graduation... I planned on begging her to come with me, to leave Marco so we could be happy together.

“Justin, please forgive me...” Rico fell to his knees in front of me and embraced me as I released my emotions.

I let everything out. All the pain of growing up without my father, the loss of my brother, the loss of Valentina. Every single moment of pain I’d ever felt was pouring from my soul.

“I was always there, son. I had to watch you grow into the man you are now from a distance. It was the most difficult thing I’ve ever had to do in my life. You graduated high school with honors and sat a few rows away from Valentina. I saw you graduate college and meet with the firefighters. You were always destined for great things, Justin. In a way, your mother was right to take you away from here, away from the Fiorellis. If anything happened to you where you couldn’t live out your dreams, it would have been worse to me than death.”

“Y-you were there?” I asked, wiping my eyes, trying to brush off what I thought was a moment of weakness.

“Yes, principino. My prince. You’ve always been my prince.” Rico patted

my shoulder and stood. I followed suit.

“This is too much for her; they can’t expect her to just jump in and do all this.” I was trying to change the subject to give my mind a chance to recover.

“They are aware of this, principino. Just please try to speak with her about it.” Rico placed his hands in his pockets.

“It’s not my place to ask her this... She just fainted for fuck’s sake!” I instantly regretted sounding so angry.

“I know you love her, son. She will listen to you and hear you out.” He smiled, brushing off my harsh exclamation.

“How can I show her I love her when I can barely touch her? I know she’s traumatized, and I understand that, but... I just want to hold her.” I sighed.

I walked to the double doors of the bedroom and peeked in to make sure Valentina was alright before turning my attention back to my father.

“Patience, son. We have a lot to plan and take care of for her.”

“Speaking of... Please tell me you took care of that piece of shit after I got her out of the house.” My face twisted in anger at the mere thought of Marco.

“It would have been too messy, son. Valentina’s blood was on the floor, as well, and I didn’t want to risk the police having any DNA samples from her. But oh, how satisfying it was to kick his face in.” Rico closed his eyes and grinned, as if he was savoring in the memory.

“He deserves so much worse...” I growled.

“Yes he does, I agree. I would have tied that bastard up and used some of my interrogation techniques, but that other low-life Damian showed up. I needed to have a quick exit and get back here.”

I nodded in understanding as my eyes found the double doors leading to the bedroom.

“Go to her, son. I know your presence helps to calm her. Please know that

she is safe in the casino. Fiorelli bodyguards will be on alert.” Rico said as he reached into his front pocket.

“Take this. Take her to get a dress and shoes. She needs clothing, if all she has is in that small little duffel bag.” He handed me a black credit card with gold decoration.

“Thanks Unc–Dad? What do I call you now?” I chuckled nervously as I studied the card–it had my name on it.

“You can call me whatever you want, son. Take that girl shopping; women love to be spoiled. Take her to a nice dinner, and treat her like a queen,” Rico said as we turned to make our way towards the elevator.

“Of course, I will. I didn’t know the Fiorellis owned the MGM. I’m definitely grateful for that. I’ll take her down to the shops when she wakes up.” I was still studying the card, turning it around in my hand.

“Please do not worry about the limit on that card, son. Use it for anything you need. It is attached to my account, and we have plenty of money on it.” He winked as the elevator door opened.

“Thank you for this. I’ve been wanting to help get her clothes and her essentials.” We embraced in a hug before he stepped into the elevator.

“The only thing I ask, principino, is that you get her a suit. Pant suit, or skirt. She needs to look confident, like a boss, when she meets with The Collective.”

“Alright, we’ll work on that.” I nodded as the door closed.

“Go take care of our queen.” Rico’s last words before the elevator descended to the ground level.

Quietly, I pulled open the bedroom doors, and made my way inside. Valentina was sleeping peacefully, her breathing deep and even. I put my phone on silent, and placed it on the nightstand with my wallet, taking my

place in the chair by the bed. I stared at the black credit card, and tried to fight the tears that came. It took every ounce of strength I could muster to resist climbing into bed with her

I took off my t-shirt and tossed it to the floor in front of the dresser. Reaching to the floor on the left side of the chair, I pulled up the extra sheet I had been using as a blanket and tried to settle in and get comfortable. I flexed my muscles and stretched my neck from side to side, preparing myself for another restless sleep.

“Justin...”

Val?

“I’ve missed you, Justin...”

What’s going on?

“Why so quiet?”

I opened my eyes to the sound of high heels on the tile floor and saw Valentina wearing nothing but the tiniest set of black lace lingerie and one of my button-up shirts, unbuttoned. A string of pearls adorned her neck, and her glasses were starting to sag lower on her nose as she sauntered over towards me as I sat in the chair by the bed. My cock stiffened at the sight of her.

“Val, what are you doing? Are you okay?”

“Why so many questions tonight?” She grinned at me, her hazel eyes filled with lust.

All I could do was look at her beautiful body as she came closer to me. Her chestnut hair cascaded down her back in elegant waves. The lace bra she wore was sheer, and seeing the perfect, plump buds of her nipples made my cock ache for her even more. She approached me and stood in between my legs. I couldn’t help myself—I placed my hands on the backs of her thighs, trailing my hands upwards. She hummed in approval as she lowered her

shoulders back to shrug off my shirt. My hands slid up to her amazing, plump ass, and I gripped it as I placed a soft kiss under her belly button.

“Justin...” Valentina breathlessly moaned my name as she straddled my lap, rubbing her pussy on my hard cock in my sweatpants.

“Fuck, Val.” She was grinding her clit on me, chasing her own pleasure, and I was in awe of her.

“Justin... Yes...”

Valentina moaned and my hands trailed up her back, unhooking her bra and releasing her perfect breasts. I cupped them both with my hands, licking one of her nipples while pinching the other as she started grinding onto me faster and harder. She arched her head back to the ceiling as she continued to moan with each movement she made. With one of her nipples still in my mouth, my other hand trailed down and was met with hot, wet lace.

“So fucking wet for me, baby. Fuck, you’re so perfect.”

I slid the damp lace to the side and circled her needy clit with my thumb as she chased her orgasm. Her hands found my shoulders and her nails dug into my skin. The slight twinge of pain made my sweatpants unbearable. I lifted my hips, just enough to slide my sweatpants down, freeing my cock, and Valentina continued to grind on my length.

“Please, Justin. Please...”

“You want me to bury my cock in your pussy, baby?” Valentina bit her bottom lip, nodding her head as she continued to grind on me. “I need to hear your words, Val.”

“Please... Yes, I want you.”

I lifted her hips slightly, lining up the head of my cock with her wet pussy and she seated herself on my length, taking me in completely.

“Fucking hell, Val. So tight, baby, so... fuck.” I trailed off as she began to

ride my dick, bouncing her plump ass on my lap, causing me to groan with every movement she made. “Look at how perfect you look taking this cock, baby.” Her hooded eyes met mine as I met her movements, thrusting into her.

“Such a perfect, tight pussy. Ride your cock, baby, take what you want.”

I slid down ever so slightly in the chair, to plant my feet on the floor and thrust harder into her. I brought a thumb to her clit, circling it as her legs started to shake. I felt her pussy tighten on my cock, and the contractions of her orgasm made me come. As we came down from our highs, I placed a hand on her flushed cheek, guiding her down to me as I kissed her with every ounce of love for her I had in my soul.

“Justin?”

All of a sudden, Valentina was torn off of me. Her screams echoed on the walls of the suite as I jumped up, pulling up my sweatpants trying to figure out what the fuck just happened. I could hear her screaming.

“Justin, wake up!”

“Valentina, where are you?” I tore through the suite, looking for her. I finally found her in the sitting room, trapped in the intruder’s grasp.

“Don’t come any closer,” the voice said as they stepped into the moonlight shining through the window. It was Marco. He was holding my still-naked Valentina by the throat with a gun to her head.

“Marco, no, please. Anything you want, you can have. Please let her go.”

“Justin! Please!”

Am I hearing Valentina in my head? I could’ve sworn I heard her, but her lips aren’t moving on her terrified face.

“Let her go!” I stepped forward and Marco shot Valentina, point blank, in between her beautiful hazel eyes. Her lifeless body hit the floor, and I fell to my knees, screaming.

“Rico, please hurry, it’s Justin...”

Rico... father?

“The father that abandoned you, never loved you. Chose the mafia over you?” Marco stalked towards me, still holding the gun.

“You don’t know shit...” I trailed off, my eyes finding Valentina on the floor. There was so much blood, so much...

Still on my knees, I held my head in my hands.

“This can’t be real, this can’t be real.”

“Principino, wake up.”

My body started to convulse, and I was back in high school, watching my stepdad beat me with a belt for getting a B on a test. I blinked, then I was at Michael’s funeral.

“Make it fucking stop!” I roared.

“Mia cara, stand back, okay?”

“O-okay.”

I woke up in a panic, ready to fight. I shot up from the floor, throwing a blind punch towards the shadow in front of me. A firm hand caught my fist mid punch.

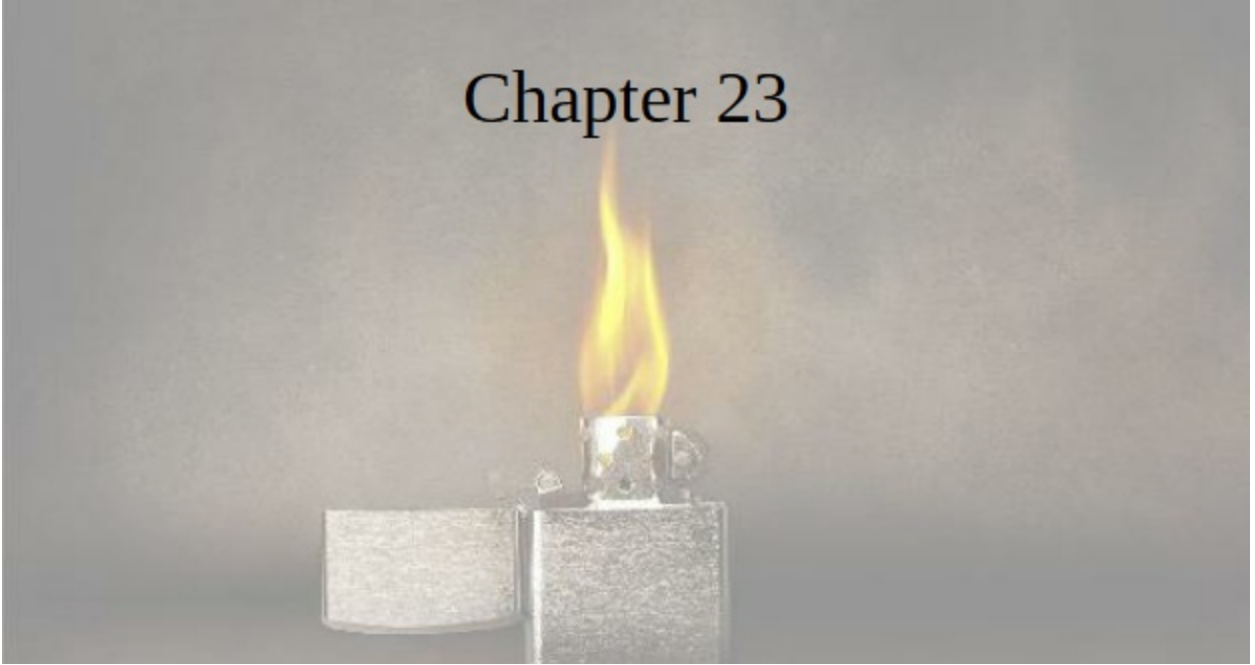
“Justin, my boy. Please calm down.”

“F-father?” I stumbled backwards, hitting the floor.

“Justin! Oh my god, are you okay?” Valentina’s voice sounded so frightened.

“M-marco, h-he k-k-kill...” My body gave out, and the room went dark.

Chapter 23



Valentina



I woke to Justin grunting like he was in pain. He was asleep in the chair next to the bed with sweat on his brow, head turning side to side. Reaching to the nightstand, I grabbed my glasses, quickly putting them on.

"Justin?"

His face contorted with pain, and tears were streaming down his face. I'd been there before, and I knew if I tried to wake him suddenly, it could get ugly.

"Justin! Please!" I tried one more time. With no luck, I grabbed Justin's phone on the nightstand and was so thankful there wasn't a passcode to unlock it. I found Rico in the contacts and called.

"Justin? It's four in the morning. Is everything alright?" Rico answered on the first ring.

"Rico, it's Valentina."

"Is everything alright, mia cara?"

"Rico, please hurry. It's Justin... I-I can't wake him; he looks like he's having a really bad night terror."

"I'm coming now, mia cara. I was staying on the floor below. Please send the elevator to floor nineteen."

"O-okay." Quickly, I darted out of the bedroom to the elevator, sending it down for Rico. I came back to Justin in the same position.

"P-please wake up Justin, it's not real..." I was interrupted by Rico rushing into the room. He cursed under his breath as he held Justin's upper arms firmly.

"Principino, wake up."

"Make it fucking stop!" Justin roared.

"Mia cara, stand back, okay?"

"O-okay." Shuffling back towards the bed feeling so helpless, I watched as Rico tried to wake Justin.

All of a sudden, Justin's eyes flew open, and he threw a punch at Rico. I gasped as Rico caught his fist before it made contact with his jaw.

"Justin, my boy. Please calm down."

"F-father?" Justin stumbled backwards, hitting the floor.

"Justin! Oh my god, are you okay?" Justin's eyes found mine, but they were still glazed over.

"M-Marco, h-he k-k-kill..." Justin passed out, slumping forward into Rico's arms.

I couldn't help the tears that came as Rico held his son, held the love of my life in his arms and cried into his hair. Justin's limp body broke my heart, and suddenly I understood what Justin must have gone through when he saw me this way. It is devastating.

"My son..." Rico sniffled before turning his head to the side to speak to me.

"Mia cara, can you please help me pull the sheets down on the other side

of the bed? We should let him rest somewhere more comfortable.”

“Y-yes, of course.” I hurried over to the other side of the bed, pulling the sheets down.

Turning back towards Rico and Justin to help lift him, I was stunned when Rico lifted Justin on his own. He slung Justin’s limp arm over his shoulder and half carried, half dragged him to the bed. He was a lot stronger than he looked in his sweatpants and zip-up hoodie. Gently, he sat Justin on the bed and lifted his legs to help him lie down.

I gently pulled the sheets over Justin’s body, trying to ignore his defined abs, chest, and arms. The tattoos I wanted to trace with my fingers...

“I will stay until he wakes, if you are comfortable with that?” Rico politely asked, as I welcomed the interruption to my dirty thoughts.

“Sure, that’s fine. He had night terrors like this in high school. I’ve never seen one this severe before.” I brushed aside Justin’s hair, that was damp with a cold sweat.

“I am concerned he will lash out when he wakes again. Once he wakes, I will leave you to your privacy.” Rico brought Justin’s chair to the other side of the bed and sat down, trying to get comfortable.

“Would you like some coffee? I can start some. I’m used to being up this early.” I tried to smile.

“I would like that, my flower. Thank you.”

I turned to head to the kitchen to start the coffee pot. My thoughts began to wander, and I tried reaching out to Nikita again.

Where are you? I could really use you right now...

Sighing in defeat, I found two mugs, pouring the freshly brewed coffee for Rico and myself. I peeked in the fridge and smiled when I saw my favorite caramel creamer. After mixing my coffee to my liking, I took out the regular

creamer and found sugar on the counter. For some reason, I remember when I was little, maybe five or six years old, Rico liked his coffee two-by-two. Two creamers, two sugars.

With our still steaming mugs in hand, I made my way back to the bedroom to Rico and Justin. I handed Rico his coffee, and he smiled a bright, genuine smile at me after he took a sip.

“You remembered how I like my coffee, mia cara. Thank you, it’s delicious.” Rico complimented.

“It’s one of those things that I have always remembered. I can’t explain it.” I blew gently on my coffee before taking a sip. The hot, caramel-flavored goodness warmed my chest.

“It warms my heart knowing you have a fond memory of me.” Rico held his mug in his lap as he rested his head back on the chair.

There was a desk on the opposite wall with a desk chair, so I rolled it over, taking a seat next to Rico.

“Why didn’t my dad tell me about the family?” I asked while looking into my coffee mug in my lap.

“Your mother didn’t want you involved; she wanted you to be able to make your own decisions with your life and not feel pressured into the family... business.” Rico took a sip.

“It almost seems like a movie. How am I supposed to handle all this? I’m not a criminal. The only gun I’ve seen is Marco’s. I’ve never even had a speeding ticket.”

“I know it is a lot of information all at once, mia cara. I am here to help ease you into it. Your father was prepared for you to say no, and in that case, I will follow the instructions he set in place for that. But I hope you will

consider at least coming to talk with The Collective so we can give you a better look at how things are run and regulated.” Rico’s eyes fell to Justin.

“I’m a librarian, not a mafia boss. I wouldn’t even know what to do...” My eyes drifted to Justin, now sleeping peacefully.

“You love him, my flower.” Rico finished off his coffee, while mine grew cold in my hands.

“I-I always have. After college, I did what I felt was best for me... I obviously made a huge mistake. If I would’ve come with Justin...” A single tear trailed down my cheek.

“Please do not torture yourself with the ‘what-ifs’. All that matters in this moment is that you’re safe and that no one will ever raise a hand to you ever again.” Rico nodded his head towards Justin. “Even if we had nothing to do with the family, that boy would go to the ends of the earth for you. He truly loves you, Valentina. I hope you let him help you heal, help you realize that you can be touched without pain, without marks. That man worships the ground you walk on, and something tells me no matter what you choose to do, he will remain by your side...” Rico trailed off.

“I hope so, I really do. I can’t lose him again.”

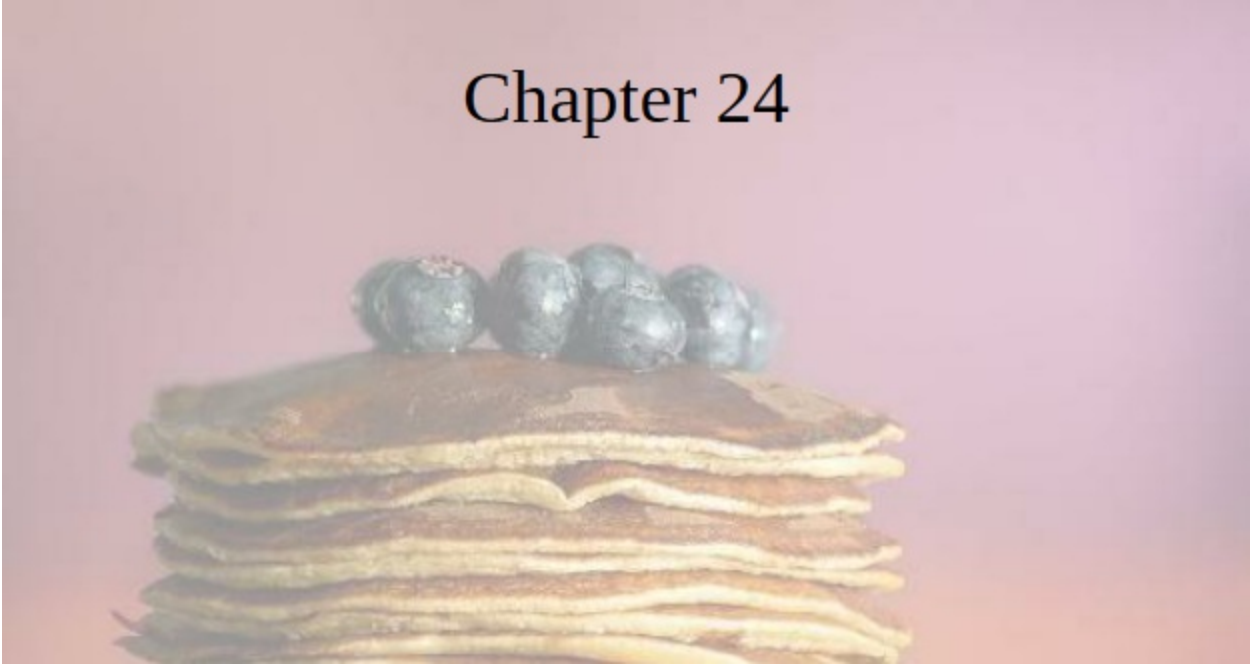
I looked over at Rico, and he had fallen asleep in the chair. Taking the coffee mug from his lap so it wouldn’t fall, I placed it on the nightstand and picked up Justin’s sheet from the floor, draping it over Rico.

As I turned to walk out of the room, I stopped next to Justin at the side of the bed and leaned over his sleeping face to whisper in his ear, “Please be patient with me; I’m trying my best... I love you, Justin...”

I could’ve sworn I saw a slight smile form on his lips as I placed a gentle kiss on his forehead, then I left him and Rico to rest. I made my way to the sitting room and sat on the floor next to the huge floor-to-ceiling window,

gazing down at the twinkling lights of the strip. It was almost five in the morning, and the view of the sunrise would be amazing. Leaning my head against the cool glass, I drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 24



Spencer



“Come on, Spence. Push, man!”

Against the hospital’s advice, I’m back to working out. Davis was spotting me at the weight bench as I bench pressed more weight than I’m used to. I needed to do *something*. All I could think about was getting stronger, so I could fight to get Cassie back. I racked the weights with a huff.

“Fuck this hand.” I cursed at my two taped fingers as I shook my hand.

“Still not bad, man.” Davis slapped my back as he racked the weights.

Working out at the station wasn’t the same without Justin around. The guys just seemed more quiet and down. Our chief came down the stairs, clapping his hands to get our attention.

“Alright boys. Group one head out. Group two will stay behind in case of calls. After your five miles are up, come back and switch.”

Davis and four others were part of group one, and they jogged out of the bay for their five-mile run, Davis giving me a wave. I nodded at him in exchange. Myself and five others stayed behind for group two. I was turning back towards the weights when the chief called out to me.

“West, a word in my office real quick?” He raised his eyebrows at me, then headed up the stairs to his office.

Grabbing my sweat towel to wipe off, I followed him, taking two steps at a time, and plopped myself down in one of the worn chairs across from his desk.

“What’s up, boss?”

“You have been requested for a special... assignment.” He hesitated.

“Special assignment?” I cocked an eyebrow.

“Look, I don’t know the details, just that you, and a select few were selected to go to this event,” He handed me an envelope. “The governor signed off on it, so it’s out of my hands.”

Opening the envelope, I immediately saw Marco’s seal and cursed under my breath. He was inviting me and whoever the fuck these other people were to some special event. *A black tie event? Masquerade masks required? Bunch of bullshit if you ask me.*

“I’m not going.” I stood, crumpling up the envelope, shoving it in my pocket before turning towards the door.

“West... Wait.” The chief sighed. “I was told to expect you to say no and to give you this as... encouragement to say yes.” He held out a padded manila envelope to me.

“What is it?” I dreaded looking inside. I knew how Marco’s sick fucking mind worked, and I didn’t want to see what this so-called encouragement was.

“I-I don’t know Spencer. I have an idea, but I—” the chief stammered as I ripped open the top of the envelope.

A piece of folded paper was on top, and I opened the short handwritten letter.

If you don't show up, expect nine more envelopes delivered to the station until you decide to take me seriously.

-MD

An anxious rage started to build up in me, starting at my feet, traveling up to my head. My hands shook as I read the short note multiple times, like it would somehow change what it said.

“Spencer, I—”

I didn't let the chief finish his thought as I stormed out of his office towards my dorm. Kicking open my door, the little brass “2” flew off and hit the floor, and I stormed into the kitchenette where my supply bag was, ripping a glove out of the box in the front compartment. With shaking hands, I reached my gloved hand in and pulled out a severed pointer finger with a glitter pink nail polished, and a shitty tattoo of a mustache on the side of the finger.

Dropping my mental walls, I let my darkness surround me, numb me. But I couldn't help the hot tears falling as I examined the finger. It looked like a clean cut, but the severed end was smashed, and it looked dirty. Those motherfuckers made it so I couldn't save it to try to have it reattached to Cassie.

Storming into my bathroom, I grabbed a bottle of nasal saline I'd never used and sprayed the severed end to try to clean it the best I could. Then, I returned to the kitchenette, grabbing a Ziploc bag to put her finger in and a tupperware container to fill with ice. I scooped ice out of my freezer into the container and placed the sealed bag inside, sealing the lid. I prayed that it was able to be saved, even though I had no idea when it was severed.

I placed the container on the counter, then slammed my fists down onto it, causing the marble to crack. Resting my head on my fists, I let out all the

emotions I'd been burying, all the anger, the rage.

Bella fucking promised Cassie would be safe with her. How could she let this happen, how...

My thoughts were interrupted when my eyes found my pointer finger, seeing the same shitty mustache tattoo. We got them on Cassie's twenty-first birthday as a joke, and because my body is completely covered, the only free space I had was on the sides of my fingers or my face, and it wasn't part of my plan to tattoo my face. I quickly regained my bearings and went to my bedroom to change out of my workout gear. Cassie's finger had limited time, and I wanted to get it to the hospital before I went to get her from Marco's lair.

I kicked my sweaty clothes to the corner by my small closet and pulled on a fresh t-shirt and jeans. I was in a hurry, but I didn't want to forget my Glock. Tucking it in its safe place at my back, I quickly put on my steel-toe boots, grabbed my leather jacket and the container off the sink, then ran outside to my bike.

The hot Vegas sun beat down on my face as I rushed to put the container in my saddlebag, hoping it would stay cold. I zipped up my jacket, put Cassie's pink hair tie on my wrist, buckled my helmet on, and raced to the hospital.



Twenty minutes later, I was sitting on my bike outside the service entrance that led to Marco's office. The surgeon didn't seem hopeful for Cassie's finger, but urged me to bring her in as soon as possible. I fixed up my hair

with Cassie's hair tie and patted my back to check for my Glock as I walked up to the door that was still fucked up from my kick not too long ago.

Before I could kick the door again, it opened, and Bella emerged, closing the door behind her.

"No, Spencer..."

"Move, Bella." With the back of my hand, I tried to push her out of the way.

"I said no, Spencer."

I swung around to face her and roughly pinned her to the door by her neck. Bella didn't flinch, but her hooded eyes glared at me.

"Where. The. *Fuck*. Is. Cassie?" My grip tightened with each pause, as her powerful gaze never left mine. I couldn't help licking my lips at the sight of her under my control. Bella's palms remained on the door behind her as she continued to stare me down. I could feel her pulse under my fingertips, and it remained steady, not showing one ounce of fear.

"I'm not going to ask you again, Bella. Where is she?" I hissed through clenched teeth, squeezing her petite neck harder. A smirk started to curve up in the corner of her mouth as she pushed herself off the door, backing me up a few feet. Gripping my wrist on her neck, she kicked her heel behind my ankle, sweeping my leg out in front of me. I landed harshly on my back, and instantly, her high heel was pressing on my throat.

"You don't fucking know how to listen, do you? Maybe I need to... punish you. Teach you to obey me," Bella purred as she pressed her heel harder on my neck. My dick throbbed with intense pleasure and need in my jeans. She noticed my stiffening cock in my pants and curled her lips up into a sultry grin.

"Bella..." Reaching behind me, I tore my Glock out from my back and

aimed it between her eyes, holding the grip with two hands. She released her foot from my neck and knelt down at my side, pressing her forehead into my gun.

“What are you waiting for, pretty boy? Do it.”

With her forehead still pressing on the barrel of my gun, I pulled the trigger. Bella didn't so much as flinch, not even a hair on her head moved at the harsh click of my unloaded gun. It was fucking hot as hell, and I wanted to claim her right out here on the pavement. She angled her body over mine, a hand on either side of my head, her black hair falling out of her ponytail as she leaned closer to my ear. Her scent was intoxicating, and I couldn't help but close my eyes and inhale a deep breath, savoring in her scent.

“You want to be punished, don't you?” she whispered in my ear. Her breath on my neck made me groan involuntarily. “After all this is over, you're mine, Spencer. You and this...” Her hand cupped my aching cock over my jeans. “Mine.”

“Yes, ma'am...” I whispered back as I dropped my gun at my side. She grabbed my chin, her nails digging into my cheeks as her powerful eyes stared into mine.

“Mmm, now you want to be a good boy...” She crashed her lips to mine, tightening her grip on my cock as she inhaled my moans.

“C-Cassie...” I forced myself to pull away. “You fucking promised you would keep her safe.” Bella placed her finger on my lips, shushing me.

“Come.” She stood, and I obeyed. “Stay quiet, understand?” I nodded.

Bella held a pointer finger to her lips again, opening the door to the service entrance and urged me inside quietly. She softly shut the door, as the darkness from the room enveloped us. I wanted to feel her sexy throat in my hands while I bent that sweet, plump ass over a table. Her dominant eyes

softened, almost with worry, as she swallowed, trying to remain quiet. I let go of my aching desire to fuck her when she pointed towards Marco's office and mouthed "Go."

I slowly made my way down the hallway towards Marco's office. The door was cracked, and I could hear Damian talking to Marco. I inched forward to get a better listen.

"I think he's bought the act by now." Damian chuckled.

"We can never be too sure, Damian. You need to continue to keep an eye on Spencer until he returns. I know he won't have Justin's head since I have it on good authority that he is hiding out with the Fiorellis." Marco slammed a drawer shut.

"We'll get it figured out," Damian replied calmly.

I'll kill that fucking weasel...

"All that matters right now is that you keep watching Spencer, keep him out of the loop until Justin is dead. Spencer can't know the plan. Once they're all dead, I will force my way to the throne of the Fiorelli family, dragging their precious Valentina to the throne with me. If she denies me again, I'll slit her throat in front of her mafia family."

It took every ounce of restraint I had to stay put and not storm into the office to shoot them both. I peeked through a crack in the door and could see Marco had a nasty black eye and a wrap around his hand. I chuckled to myself, hoping that was Justin's handiwork. Bella trailed a finger down my forearm, pulling my attention away from Marco and his fucking pig of a hitman. She motioned with her head for me to follow her, and I obeyed as she led me back to the service entrance and followed me to my bike.

"You needed to hear what was going on so you could be prepared." Her brows were pressed together in anger.

“You fucking promised, Bella. You promised me Marco wouldn’t touch Cassie,” I growled, stalking closer to her.

“I know Spencer, and I didn’t lie. Marco didn’t cut off her finger, Damian did.”

I stumbled back a step in shock, then felt the anger rise up in me again.

“Not now, Spencer.” Bella placed a hand on my arm. “No one here likes what Marco is doing. He only has Damian, and maybe three other men, loyal to him. All the others and I are against everything he is planning. You need to stop him.”

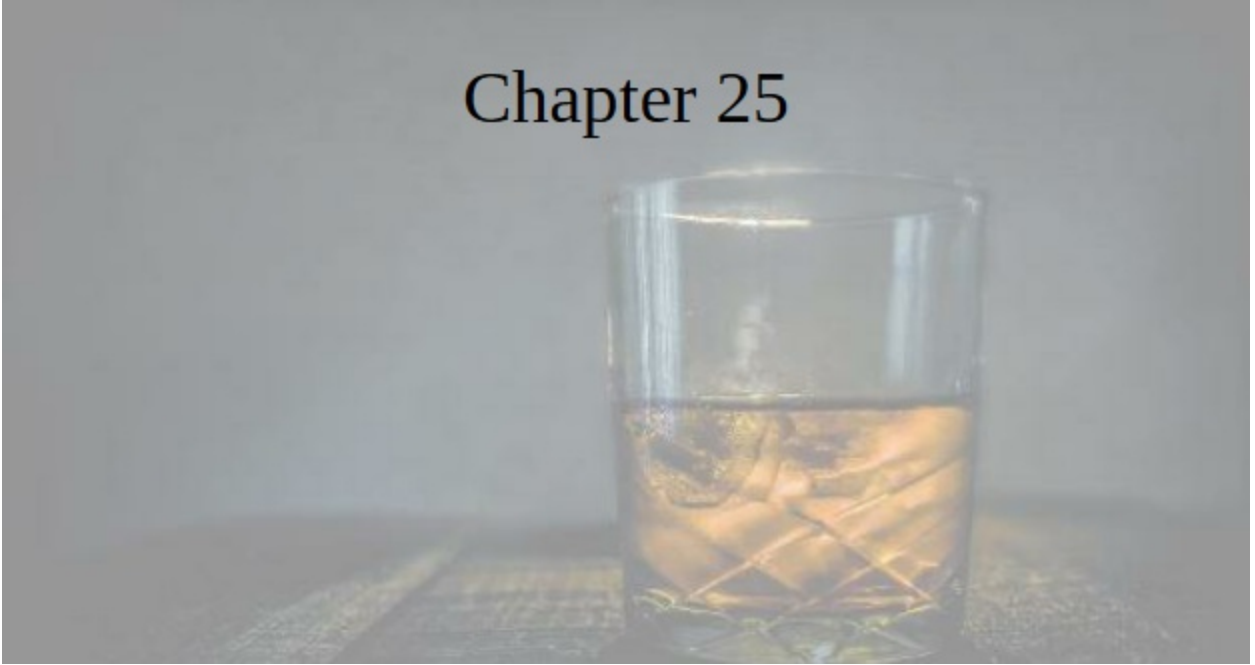
“I want Cassie back, Bella. Now.”

“I-I can’t, Spencer. She was taken overnight. I tried to keep her with me, I tried—”

“Don’t be here when I return, Bella,” I cut her off. “You and those that are against Marco... Do not be here when I return. I’m going to burn this fucking place to the ground, and I won’t care who burns with it.”

I got on my bike, started it up, and peeled away, leaving Bella in the dust.

Chapter 25



Justin

The sunlight on my face woke me from a deep, dreamless sleep. A faint rose scent reached my nose, making me smile. Expecting to find Valentina, I rolled over, but was met with cool sheets, realizing I was in the bed alone.

What? How did I get in the bed?

“Justin?”

I turned around to see Rico sitting in the chair I had been using.

“What–What’s going on?” I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes and hissed at the pain in my temple from my still healing bullet wound.

“Let me check on Valentina, then we will talk.” Rico stood and stretched his back before heading out towards the sitting room.

I tried to sit up, but I was confused and disoriented. The sudden movement made me feel nauseous, so I laid back down, and I heard Rico gently speak to Valentina.

“Oh, mia cara, let's get off the floor.”

My body felt tired and weak, but I pulled back the sheets and tried to stand. Once steady, I made my way to the sitting room to find Rico kneeling in front

of Valentina. She was sitting on the floor, hugging her knees to her chest and resting her head on the window.

“Is she alright?”

“I believe she is sleeping, but this looks very uncomfortable.” Rico’s eyebrows were pinched together in concern.

Shaking off the lightheadedness I was feeling, I kneeled next to Rico and very gently brushed some of her hair behind her ear.

“Val, let’s get you more comfortable, okay?” Her breathing was deep and steady.

“Poor girl. This is probably the best sleep she has gotten in a while. Perhaps you should take her to the bed if you are able.”

“Yes, I’m fine,” I said to Rico as I stretched my neck from side to side. “Val, sweetheart, we’re going to go to the bed, okay?”

Gently, I scooped her into my arms, her head slowly falling forward to lean on my chest. The pressure being relieved from her back caused her to groan in approval in her sleep. It shot waves of heat straight to my dick.

“Fucking hell, Valentina,” I whispered as I gently placed her in bed. She rolled over onto her side, and her pajama shirt rode up, teasing me with a view of the underside of her perfect tits. I tried to adjust myself in my sweatpants, but it was getting unbearable.

Grabbing a towel to hold at my waist to hide my arousal, I poked my head out of the doorway to call out to Rico.

“I’m going to grab a shower.”

“Alright son, I’ll return to my room and do the same. Please call if you need me.”

I nodded in thanks and turned back towards the bathroom in the master suite. I stopped to check on Valentina, who looked perfect in bed. Her hair

was splayed out on the pillows, like I always imagined it would be. She shifted again, and her top rose even higher. I was greeted by a perfectly plump nipple.

Fuck, I wish my mouth was on those tits, my hands...

In her sleep, Valentina took a deep breath that ended on the slightest moan. I couldn't fucking take it anymore. While watching her naked breast rise and fall with her breaths, I reached a hand into my sweatpants. I fisted my cock, picturing my tongue trailing around her nipple as my hands trailed down her body to finger her wet pussy. I threw my head back as I pumped my cock, imagining her screaming my name.

She shifted again in her sleep. I didn't want her to wake to me fucking my hand, so I tore my eyes off of her and turned to enter the bathroom. My cock ached for her touch, her hands, her pussy, her mouth, anything. It just needed her warmth.

I turned the water on hot, stepping out of my sweatpants and into the shower. I propped my hands up on the wall, hanging my head, and let the water fall over me. The hot water dripped off my hair, falling to the shower floor, as I continued my thoughts of Valentina's perfect, naked body splayed out on the bed for me.

I groaned as I fisted my cock again, replaying that night after graduation on the hood of my Mustang. Her tight, perfect pussy stretching to take all of my cock. My name on her lips as she climaxed... I pumped myself harder and faster, imagining her tight pussy swallowing my dick as I thrust into her.

"Fuck, Val..." I groaned out loud as I imagined watching her eyes roll back as my thumb found her clit, circling torturously slow, drawing out her orgasm. The sound of my hips hitting her ass as I claimed her.

I tried not to make noise and wake Valentina, but at this point I couldn't help it anymore. I shamelessly moaned her name as I fucked my hand, my climax slowly building.

"You like that, Justin?" I imagined Valentina taking control, riding my cock. Bouncing her ass on my lap.

"Fuck yes, baby. Just like that..."

I gripped her hips as she rode my dick, feeling her wet pussy take all of me in. My hands found her clit as she moaned louder.

"Such a good fucking girl. I love how wet your pussy is for me, baby."

Valentina's moans became more hoarse and intense.

"Such a pretty, perfect pussy, taking your cock."

"Yes... Mine..." Valentina's hazel eyes darkened with lust as she bit her bottom lip, keeping eye contact with me through hooded eyes.

"Fuck, baby. Look at how perfect you look with my cock in you." My hands found her hair at the back of her head, pulling her head back to look into the mirror while my thrusts continued.

"You're going to take all this cock like my pretty little whore, aren't you, Valentina?"

"Y-yes, Justin, yes..."

"Yes, Val..." I groaned as I spilled onto the shower floor, my climax making my knees shake.

I was hit with a sudden wave of regret. How could I be doing this? Marco spent years taking advantage of her, and I just jerked off to her instead of covering her with a blanket like I should have...

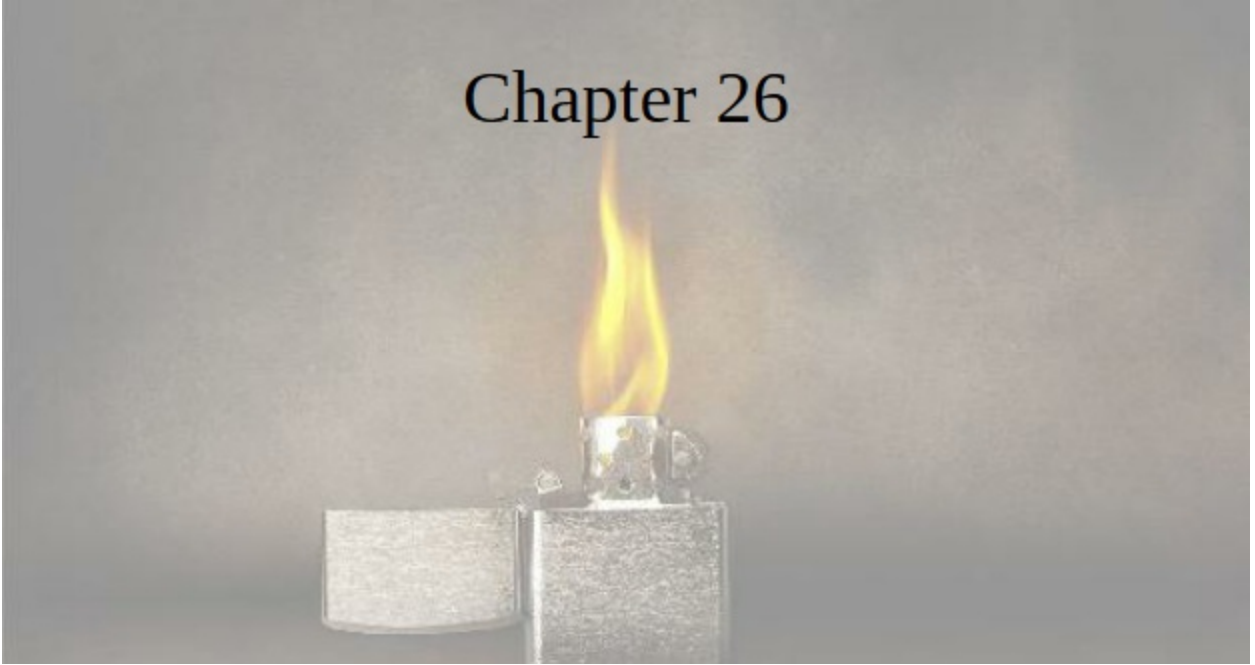
"Justin? Are you okay?" Valentina cracked the bathroom door to check on me.

"Be out in a minute."

“Okay, I’ll put on some coffee.”

I heard the bathroom door close, and I stood under the shower spray, my guilt consuming me, and my bitter tears getting lost in the water at my feet.

Chapter 26





“Fuck, Val.”

I opened my eyes, confused and disoriented. I didn’t remember coming to the bed, and I could’ve sworn I heard Justin say my name. Sitting up and crossing my legs, I stretched my arms above my head, trying to shake off the exhaustion that still weighed heavily on me.

“Val...”

Justin sounded like he was... moaning? Looking around the room, I didn’t see him, so I got out of bed, walking towards the bathroom door. He was in the shower, and he was grunting and moaning. The door was barely cracked open, and I very quietly pushed it open enough to peek inside.

I was met with hot steam from the shower and Justin’s silhouette. His back was to the door as he stood, leaning with one hand on the wall, his eyes on the floor. Every muscle on his sculpted back and arms flexed with each moan. I couldn’t help but stare at his tattooed, muscular back, his toned legs... Even his ass was perfect. Everything about this man was perfect. As my eyes trailed across his wet, naked body, I followed the line of his arm

down to see him gripping his cock, pumping himself in torturously slow movements. Hot arousal shot straight to my core as I felt my body react to the sight of him jerking off.

“Fuck yes, baby. Just like that...”

Justin moaned, pumping himself harder.

He's thinking of me? My mind went wild with desire, memories of how perfect he felt inside me, how his hot breath felt on my neck, how his hands felt on my ass... Unable to help myself, I placed my hand on my neck, remembering his touch as I slid my hand down to my breasts. My nipples were plump and sensitive as I pinched one and bit on my lower lip. My hand continued to trail down my stomach, down the front of my pajama shorts and under my hot, damp panties.

Keeping the bathroom door cracked so I could hear him, I sat myself against the wall outside the bathroom and slid my middle finger to circle my swollen clit. I moaned quietly with Justin as I tried to match his sounds, closing my eyes and replaying our encounter on the hood of his Mustang.

“Justin...” I let out a breathy moan as I pushed my middle and ring finger inside my wet pussy. I was so wet, so turned on by how he moaned my name. The thought of him jerking off to me made all of my self-control escape my body.

“Such a good fucking girl. I love how wet your pussy is for me, baby,” Justin groaned.

“Oh my god, yes...” I moaned as I pumped my fingers as deep as I could inside my cunt, wishing it was Justin's perfect cock instead.

My moans became louder, and I didn't even care anymore. I was tired of Marco having this control over me, over my sexuality, over my body. I desperately wished I had the courage to just shed my pajamas and go show

Justin how wet I was for him. Wished I could beg him to make me his, to fuck me until Marco was a distant memory. Wished he could kiss my pain away.

“Such a pretty, perfect pussy taking your cock,” Justin growled softly.

“Fuck, Justin. Yes...” The sounds of my fingers pumping in and out of my wet pussy filled the room as I bit my lip, trying to stay quiet. Justin’s dirty talk was going to make me lose my mind.

“Fuck, baby. Look at how perfect you look with my cock in you.”

“Show me... Show me...” I started gyrating my hips on my hand as I thrust my fingers as far into my cunt as I could, stroking my clit with my thumb. My orgasm was coming at me full force.

“You’re going to take all this cock like my pretty little whore, aren’t you, Valentina?”

“Yes, Justin. Fuck yes...” With my free hand, I reached up, grabbing my breast and flicking my nipple. I pictured Justin’s mouth on mine, his hands on my hips, as he thrust into me...

Justin muffled a loud moan as my orgasm came simultaneously with his. My pussy clenched tight on my fingers, my muscles contracting as my whole body shook with a sweet mixture of desire and relief.

Slowly, I withdrew my fingers and saw them glisten with my come. Closing my eyes, I put my middle and ring finger in my mouth, licking and sucking them clean. I wanted to taste myself, taste what Justin did to my body, prove to myself that the feelings were real. There was no pain, no blood, no shame.

A quiet sob startled me back to reality. I peeked in at Justin again, and he hung his head, leaning both hands on the wall. His shoulders shook with every shaky sob. I wanted to run to him, to comfort him, but I stopped

myself. Standing up, shaking off thoughts of a round two with him in the shower, I exaggeratedly opened the door a few inches and peeked my head in.

“Justin? Are you okay?” I asked, trying to mask my desire for him.

“Be out in a minute,” he responded quickly, as he ran his hands through his wet hair.

“Okay, I’ll put on some coffee.”

I shut the door behind me, hugging my arms as I rested the back of my head on the door.

Why was he sobbing...? Was I not good enough, even in his mind? I’m such a fucking failure. He can’t even get off thinking about me without getting upset... The anxiety was speaking loudly in my mind as I reached for a still silent Nikita.

Wrapping myself in the floor-length silk robe I’d grown so fond of, I made my way to the kitchen to prepare our coffee. I sniffled softly as I scooped the coffee into the filter and started the machine. Resting my palms on the counter, I hung my head and just let out the feelings of inadequacy. I sobbed quietly, my tears leaving wet streaks down my silk robe as they fell.

I’m so tired of not being good enough.

“Val? Are you okay?”

I jumped, turning to face Justin as he stood in the entryway to the kitchen. His long sleeve shirt was only half buttoned, and his chocolate brown eyes were laced with concern.

“I-I–” I stumbled over what I was trying to say as Justin walked up to me slowly, never breaking eye contact.

“May I?” He raised his hands up to my cheeks as I nodded shyly, keeping my eyes on the floor.

His warm hands cupped my cheeks as he brushed away my tears with his thumbs. I couldn't help but bring my palms to his bare chest showing through his half-buttoned shirt. He shivered at my touch, goosebumps freckling across his skin. A soft noise left his lips as I trailed my fingertips along the tattoos on his chest, feeling every arc and curve of his muscles.

So very gently, Justin lifted my chin to look into my eyes. His lips parted ever so slightly as he looked down at me like I was the most precious thing he'd ever laid his hands on. I fought to remain still as my body desperately screamed at me to retreat.

"Val..." Justin whispered as he leaned his head forward, placing the softest kiss on my cheek.

"Justin, I—"

He silenced me with a soft kiss on my lips. So gentle, as if he were asking me for permission with every delicate brush of his lips. With my trembling hands still on his chest, he gently kissed me again before stepping away from me. I immediately missed his warmth, his skin, his lips. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw his stiff cock showing through his jeans, and arousal flooded my body.

"Please don't cry, Val. I hate seeing you cry."

"I'm sorry... There's just so much..."

"You don't have to explain; I know. Why don't you get dressed, then let's grab a coffee and some sweets from the coffee shop in the casino? We have some shopping to do." He smiled at me, and I tried to hide my excitement while heading to the bedroom to change.



Twenty minutes later, I was sipping the best latte I'd ever had. I was happily munching on a chocolate croissant as Justin spoke with Rico off to the side. Their conversation looked serious; Rico was pointing to various parts of the casino, and Justin's eyes kept finding mine every few seconds. Every time, he would wink at me and my stomach would flutter like a damn schoolgirl making eye contact with her crush.

Suddenly, a big, tattooed man plopped down in the seat across from me.

"I don't appreciate you giving my wife looks like that, miss." The mysterious man smiled and made a kiss face at me as he casually draped his arm across the back of the chair, his legs spread wide.

"I'm sorry?" I looked over the mystery man's shoulder, finding Justin's eyes. He was wearing a huge grin as he made his way back over to the table with Rico following.

"Spencer! Hey man, good to see you." Justin clapped his hand on the top of the mystery man's—Spencer's—shoulder as he tied up his hair with a bright pink hair band.

"Campbell, you asshole. You left me at the station alone with Davis." Spencer yanked Justin by the arm as he stood, twisting his body to catch Justin in a standing armlock.

Rico came to sit next to me as I continued to munch on my croissant, watching the drama unfold in front of me. I slid our basket of pastries over towards Rico to offer one, and he followed suit. He crossed an ankle over his

knee, getting comfortable as we watched Justin and Spencer fight. Rico waved off a few men that came over, concerned something was happening.

“Fuck you, West.” Justin grunted as he bent forward in between his legs, pulling Spencer’s leg out by the bottom of his jeans, causing him to lose balance and let go of Justin’s arm. When Spencer lost his balance, Justin rammed his shoulder into his stomach, grabbing him behind the legs, and lifted them to slam him to the ground.

Spencer wrapped an arm around Justin’s neck as they fell onto the floor, and wrapped his ankles around Justin’s waist. I looked over at Rico, confused.

“Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, mia cara,” Rico said before taking another bite of his scone.

“Huh. Interesting.” I sipped on my now lukewarm latte.

“Fuck... you... Campbell...” Spencer grunted as he squeezed Justin’s neck with one arm.

Justin reached up to his neck with both hands and pulled down on Spencer’s arm to alleviate the pressure, giving him just enough room to slip his head out. Justin pushed off of Spencer’s chest, sitting up tall and raising a fist.

“Oh my god, Rico, do we need to do something?” I grew concerned seeing Justin ready to strike his friend.

“Only if you think we need to, my flower. You own this casino; it’s your say.” Rico sipped on a glass of water.

“M-my casino?”

“Yes, mia cara. Your father owned this casino, so you now own it.”

I sat there, stunned, frozen in place. Justin and Spencer continued to roll around grappling, and time seemed to stand still for me while I processed

Rico's words.

The sound of crashing tables snapped me back to reality as Justin and Spencer laid on their backs on the floor, chests heaving as they laughed. Justin's eyes found mine, and he jumped up, immediately coming to me with concern in his eyes.

"Val, are you okay?"

Justin pulled up one of the fallen chairs and sat next to me. Spencer chuckled as he readjusted his ponytail, coming back up to the table.

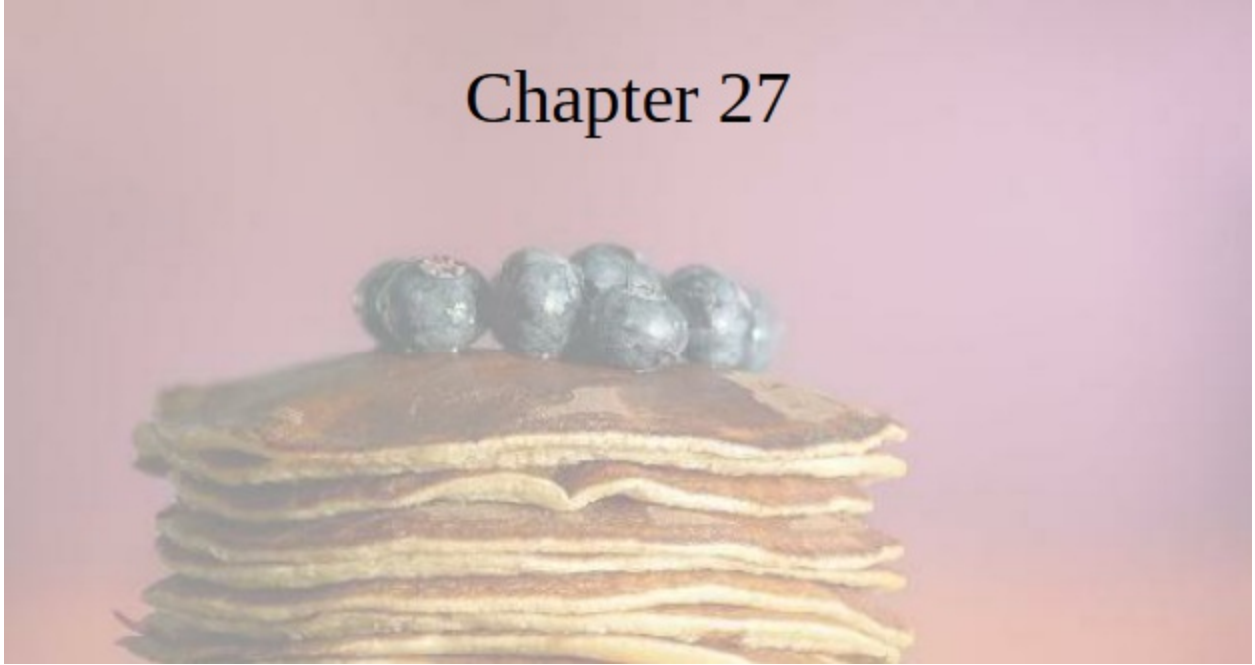
"I-I—"

"I let Valentina know she owns the casino. It might have been a lot of information at once." Rico grinned as he sipped his water.

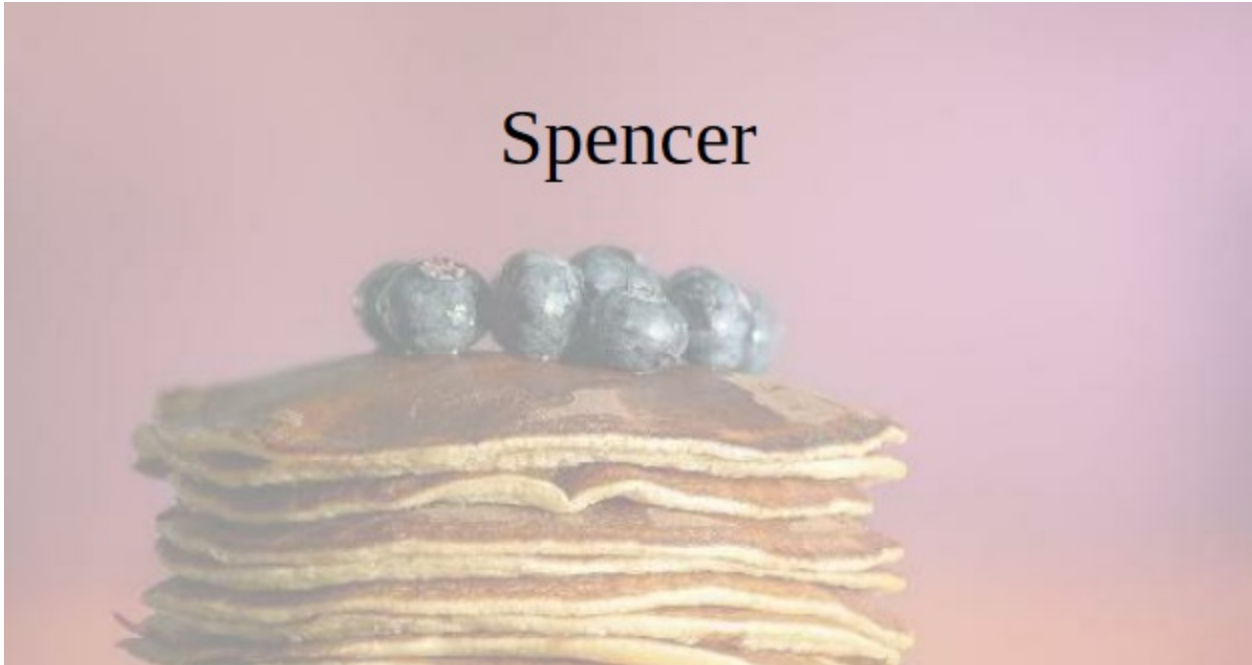
"Send Justin the bill for the tables, boss," Spencer quipped as he quickly set the tables and chairs back up.

For the first time in a long time, I laughed. I laughed so hard, my eyes began to water. Justin looked at me and smiled such a beautiful genuine smile, and I knew then that things were going to be okay.

Chapter 27



Spencer



I wished I was at the MGM shopping with Valentina and sparring with Justin, but I was only here to make sure Marco's assholes didn't get to Valentina. Damian, and his big fucking mouth, was telling anyone who would listen about his plans to come to either kidnap her or kill her. Enough was enough.

Valentina took at least 15 hangers into the fitting room, and Justin sat chatting with this fella that was introduced to me as Rico. He was Mr. Fiorelli's right-hand man. I knew who he was from Marco's files. He was loyal, probably there protecting Valentina. I stood leaning on a wall, dreading this conversation.

Walking over to where Justin and Rico were sitting, I sighed.

"We need to talk."

"Everything cool, Spence?" Justin asked, his smile turning serious.

"No, not really. But I need to talk to both of you without Valentina. It's... about De La Rosa." Rubbing my eyes, I sighed as Rico stood.

"One moment, Spencer." Rico gently knocked on the fitting room door. "Mia cara, we'll be right at the front of the store. I need to discuss something

with Justin. We will only be five minutes.”

“Okay! I have a lot to figure out in here, anyway,” Valentina replied behind the door.

Rico rejoined us as we moved further away from the fitting room.

“What’s going on, Spence?” Justin crossed his arms.

“I have an old friend that works for his organization, and they mentioned that things aren’t going well over there. From what he told me, Marco has gotten really out of control, and a lot of his men are trying to find a way out.”

“The fucking pig is finally breaking,” Rico hissed.

“What concerns me is what my... friend heard directly from Marco. They know that Valentina is engaged to him, they know that she’s here. He sent Damian here for her.”

“There is no way any of those Colombian assholes will ever step foot in this casino without a bullet between their eyes.” Rico’s eyes went dark as he pulled out his phone, stepping away to make a call.

“Justin, this guy is a professional assassin; we have to get her out of here.”

“She is safest here, surrounded by her family’s protection. I don’t know what to do. I—” Justin stopped abruptly, and my eyes tracked where he was looking. A couple walked into the boutique, and they were getting closer to the fitting room.

“Fuck, Campbell, that’s him.” I glared at Marco’s hitman as Justin rushed towards the fitting room, calling for Rico.

The woman that Damian was with saw me, and her eyes went wide. She pointed right at me, yelling in Spanish. The employee working in the boutique quickly darted behind the register counter, ducking to hide.

“Val! We need to go!” Justin ran the rest of the way to the fitting room, and I dashed after him, trying to stop Damian from getting to her first.

“No fucking way, asshole.” I reached out to catch him by the jacket, but he was slightly quicker than Justin and I.

He kicked in the door to Valentina’s fitting room, and her eyes went wide in fear. A black dress was half zipped up her back as he grabbed her arm to drag her out.

“Marco wants his bitch back,” he hissed at Valentina, looking her up and down. “Now I understand why.” He buried his face in Valentina’s neck, inhaling her scent.

Justin’s face went red with anger, and his eyes darkened as he transformed into someone I didn’t recognize. Rico ran back in, aiming his gun at Damian, and I took off after the woman. She was slow and easy to subdue, and I pinned her to the ground with my knee in her back.

“Get your hands off Valentina, you imbecile.” Rico shot his gun into the fitting room door next to Damian’s face to get his attention.

Justin stalked towards Valentina, and Damian’s gaze snapped to him.

“I don’t think so, Mr. Campbell.” He reached into his back, pulling out a Glock with a silencer and aimed it under Valentina’s chin. Silent tears fell down Valentina’s face as she locked eyes with Justin.

All I could do was stare, watching the situation unfold. I kept the bitch under me still while Valentina just stared at Justin like they were the only ones in the room.

The woman squirmed, and I shifted to pin her down with my shin so she couldn’t move. Her shirt rode up slightly, exposing a gun tucked in her waistband. I grabbed it, then quickly grabbed her mouth so she couldn’t speak.

At least four Fiorelli guards came from all directions, distracting Damian, and as soon as his eyes left Justin, I shot at him with his woman’s gun. At the

same time, Justin ran towards him, tackling him to the ground, and Rico grabbed Valentina's hand, pulling her to him. Valentina stood behind Rico, taking everything in with a stunned expression.

Justin had Damian pinned down as three of Fiorelli's guards handcuffed him, taking his gun and dragging him away.

"Basement three," Rico called out. One of the guards nodded as they carried Damian out.

Valentina's eyes met mine as I waited, still pinning down this woman. Rico whistled for the last guard and waved towards us. Justin stood, dusting his shirt off, and came to my side.

"Go to Val, Campbell. I got her."

Justin nodded, but Valentina approached us. He reached out a hand to her as she stood in front of me and the powerless woman. She kneeled in front of me and threw her arms around my neck.

"Th-thank you Spencer."

All I could do was nod in reply; the guilt of working for the man responsible for this perfect woman's pain and trauma was overwhelming. Rico and the last guard came over to take the woman away, but Valentina raised a finger for them to wait as she remained kneeling in front of me.

"Val, let's get you back to the suite." Justin reached his hand out to her again.

Valentina nodded at him, but before standing, she turned her attention to the woman on the ground. She grabbed a fist full of her fake blonde hair and jerked her head up to meet her eyes.

"You tell Marco he should know better than to send some cheap bitch to try to hurt me," Valentina hissed as she slammed her head into the ground three times, ruthlessly knocking her out cold.

Justin's and Rico's jaws dropped in shock, and I couldn't help but grin and nod in approval.

"You'll do just fine, Queen Fiorelli." I lowered my gaze to the floor in a silent bow to her, and the fear in her eyes dissipated, replaced with anger. Valentina smiled shyly, then she took Justin's hand and left the room as the last guard carried the bloody, unconscious woman away.

"Emily, dear. Please have all the items Miss Fiorelli had in the fitting room brought to my second suite, and charge them to my account," Rico had said to the boutique employee as she nervously came over to pick up a few racks that had been knocked down.

"Y-Yes Mr. Rico, sir."

"Let me help you with these racks, Emily." I smiled at her as I helped her straighten up the store.

"Spencer, please join me outside when you are finished." Rico put his phone to his ear, walking away as I acknowledged him with a nod.

Emily and I made quick work of getting her boutique back in order. She quickly picked up the clothes that were strewn about the fitting room and started placing them back on their hangers for Valentina.

"May I see what Miss Fiorelli chose, Emily?" I tried my best to smile and calm her down.

"S-Sure. I'll h-hand them over as I rehang them." Emily stammered as she began handing me hangers of clothing.

Valentina had only chosen some jeans, blouses, and one pantsuit. Definitely not enough for a mafia queen's wardrobe. I hung the pieces on an empty rack as Emily put the last blouse on a hanger.

"I have to get back to Mr. Serious over there." I nodded my head in Rico's direction, and she smiled shyly. "Do me a favor? Take this and please help

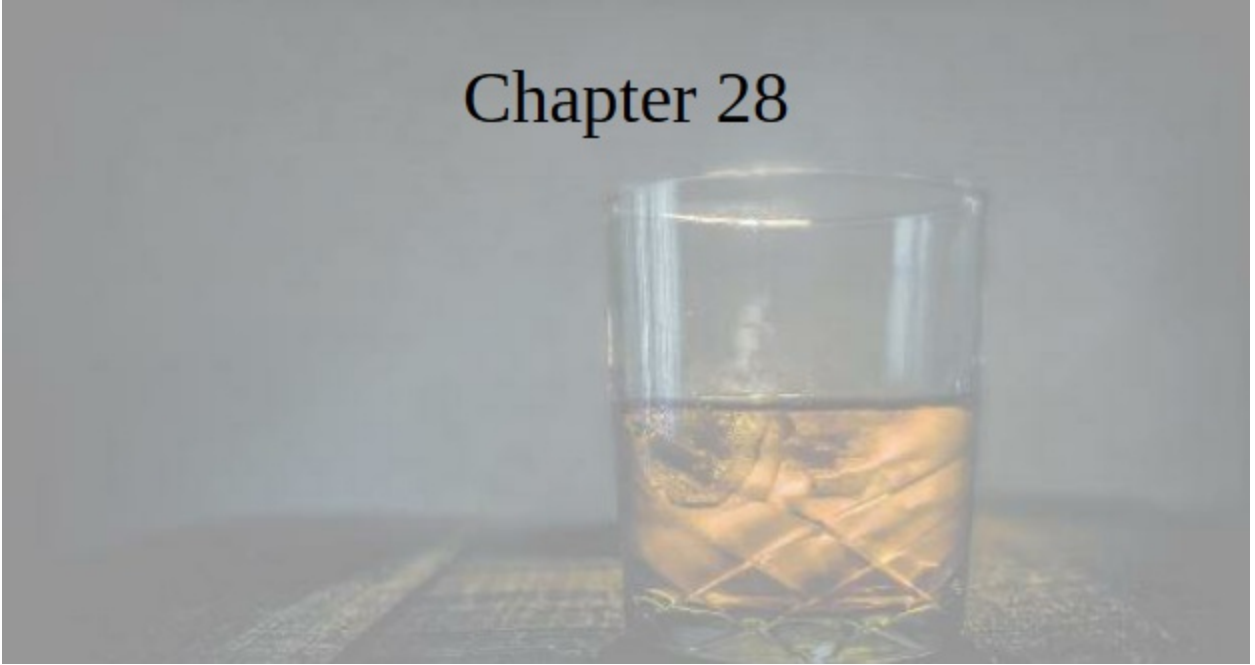
me pick out items for Miss Fiorelli. Whatever you can with this. You've seen what she looks like and have a good idea of her size based on what she chose already. She needs some professional looks, and pick her something to make her feel pretty. That girl's been through the ringer." I handed Emily ten one-hundred-dollar bills.

"Oh, wow! Y-yes sir!"

"Just Spencer is fine." I smiled as I adjusted my leather jacket, walking towards Rico.

This will never be enough to make up for working for Marco, for helping him try to ruin her. Valentina, please forgive me. Please know I had no choice...

Chapter 28



Justin



The reflection of the glittering lights from the Las Vegas Strip shone on the whiskey glass Valentina held delicately in her hands. She was standing with her back to me, gazing out of the floor to ceiling window in the suite's sitting room as I poured myself two fingers of whiskey, plopping myself into one of the chairs. In her reflection, I could see a storm brewing in her intoxicating hazel eyes.

She closed her eyes as one of her hands left the whiskey glass and came up to the back of her head. Her hair cascaded down her back as she removed the claw-like clip holding it up. The way Valentina sighed as the tension on her scalp was relieved sent a shiver up my dick, making it stiffen in my jeans.

An instantaneous pang of guilt hit me as I realized she was probably trying to prevent a headache or a migraine from forming. All I could think about was pulling her onto my lap so she could ride my cock and use my body to find a release.

Taking another sip of whiskey, my eyes found the reflection of her face in the glass again. Her eyelids fluttered as she tried to relax the muscles in her

face. I could tell she was trying to hide her forming tears, but seeing the slight tremor in her shoulders made my heart ache. Valentina threw back the rest of her whiskey, and one of her delicate hands rubbed the back of her neck as she stretched and tilted her head, trying to relieve the pressure building. The flickering lights kept her gaze focused on the lively city at her feet.

I knew she was struggling with physical contact after leaving Marco, and after what happened with Marco's hired hand at the boutique, but fuck. I needed to touch her, taste her, show her what love was supposed to feel like.

I set my glass down on the cocktail cart and unbuttoned the top two buttons of my shirt. Slowly, I approached Valentina, my heart was thundering in my chest so loud, I was expecting her to hear it. She was still rubbing her neck, trying to relieve her stress. As I came closer to her, the subtle smell of her rose perfume became intoxicating.

"Val... Please trust me. Please..." I begged her as her hazel eyes found mine in the reflection of the glass.

Her features were laced with worry and hesitance, but I could be patient. She needed to know I'd wait as long as it took for her to be comfortable with my touch. She needed to see that I would never force her to do anything and that she was truly safe with me.

Please let me touch you, let me love you... I begged her silently in my mind

Valentina's eyes closed, and she gave me a small, but wary, nod of approval.

Stepping closer to her, I placed a soft kiss on the hand that was still on her neck and gently brushed aside her hair to the front of her shoulder. She twitched, and I could sense she was fighting the urge to pull away from me. As gently as I could, I slowly reached my left hand around to the front of her

hip, delicately pulling her closer to me. The slight tremor in her body brought fresh tears to pool in her eyes. I never wanted her to fear being touched again, especially by me.

“Justin...” Valentina’s sweet voice was a whisper, and its husky, needy tone hardened my cock even more than I thought possible.

She tried to suppress a small, shaky gasp as I pressed my dick against her ass, her body resting against mine.

“God, Valentina, you will be my undoing,” I whispered against her ear.

Goosebumps started to form on her delicious neck and arms. Her chest began to rise and fall quicker, as her breathing became hitched and uneven. Her perfect breasts taunted me as her chest rose and fell with each shaky breath.

I kissed her as gently as I could at the base of her ear, and she leaned away, exposing more of her neck. The most sexy, subtle moan I’d ever heard escaped her lips. Finding her reflection in the glass, I could see she was discreetly biting her bottom lip, her eyes now open and hooded.

My pants became uncomfortably tight as she gently backed her ass into my dick. All I could think about was the image of her beautiful, plump lips wrapped around my cock as I thrust into her mouth. The sounds of her sucking, slurping, gagging... I was struggling to restrain my hunger, my desire for her, but I had to control myself; I had to earn her trust.

My girl was still healing from the damage that motherfucker did to her body. The last thing I wanted to do was rush her. She’d let me touch her at this moment without cowering away from me. It was a gift, and I would cherish it as long as I could.

Her hand found the back of my head, and she ran her fingers through my hair, pulling me closer. I couldn’t control the groan that escaped my throat.

“Fuck Val, I’ve wanted this for so long, wanted you...”

She turned to face me, wrapping her arms around herself, and stepped just out of my reach.

“Justin I-I...” Her hazel eyes studied mine as if she was looking for the lie, for the deceit, the trick.

“I swear to you Val... Sweetheart, it’s the truth. I would never hurt you... I love you... So fucking much it hurts.” I watched her intently, hoping she could see the truth in my eyes, in my confession.

Before I could process her reaction to my confession, she threw her arms around my neck and kissed me hard. It was a kiss full of longing, pleading, desperation, desire. It was the perfect cocktail of her soul, and I could get drunk off her kiss every day for the rest of my life and die a happy man.

Her whiskey glass fell as she tried to place it on the cocktail cart, and it shattered on the floor. We didn’t hear it; we didn’t notice. Tears rolled down her cheeks as I cupped the back of her head to deepen our kiss. My other hand found the small of her back and pulled her closer to me. I gently nibbled on her bottom lip, licking the sting away as she granted me entry into her mouth. Our tongues danced together, tasting each other, getting lost in the moment.

The small, subtle moans she was making made my cock ready to bury into her, to claim her. I wanted her... All of her. I wanted her pain. I wanted her darkness. I wanted her to consume me whole, to drag me to the darkest corner of her soul, so she would never be alone again. I wanted to cherish her, to show her what love is supposed to be... To help her find her light again.

As soon as it began, it was over. Valentina tore away from me; her eyes widened in fear as she stumbled backwards, falling onto her ass. She began to

convulse, backing away from me as tears poured from her eyes. Her breathing was riddled with panic, and she began to hyperventilate. Her beautiful, pouty lips were swollen from our kiss, and her eyes were locked shut as she hugged her knees.

“Val, sweetheart... please. It’s okay, I’m right here.”

“M-M-Marco, h-he...”

“Shh, baby, it’s okay. He’s never going to hurt you again. Please, breathe with me Val.” I began to exaggerate my breathing to help her calm down like I always used to.

“N-no. No b-breathing. I’m s-so tired, so tired of this. He can’t... he can’t do this to m-me anymore.” Valentina was sobbing, trying to speak, but her stuttering made her hard to understand. She ripped her glasses off, burying her face in her hands.

“Val...” I kneeled before her, cupping her cheeks and lifting her face to meet my eyes.

“J-Justin...” She opened her eyes, her perfect eyes.

“I love you, Valentina. I promise I will never hurt you, and as long as I’m fucking breathing, nothing and no one will ever hurt you again. If you need to stop, we will. I’ll never push you past a point you’re not comfortable with yet.”

Her eyes studied me for a moment, then found the floor. I hated seeing her cowering away, hiding. Her breathing was still heavy and uneven, and I didn’t want to push her into a panic attack.

“W-what would you do if I never pulled away?” A hit of mischievousness flashed in her eyes, causing me to grin and lean closer to her.

“Why don’t you let me show you, Val?” I whispered in her ear as she shivered at the feel of my hot breath on her neck.

She closed her eyes, nodding her head as a few stray tears fell.

“I need your words, sweetheart,” I whispered in the same spot and placed a small kiss on her neck.

“Yes...”

“There’s my good girl.” She reached to her shoulder to fix the thin strap of the black dress from the boutique that had slipped down her shoulder, but I stopped her hand, gently holding it in place. Leaning forward, I kissed her shoulder, pulling the strap further down with my teeth, and trailed kisses back up her arm to the sensitive skin under her ear. Her body flinched with every touch, and I hated it.

“Justin...” Her soft, innocent voice made it so hard to resist ripping off that dress and fucking her on the floor.

“Let me... show you... real love.” Each pause was a kiss along her jawline until I reached her lips. “Such a good girl,” I whispered as I gently caressed her bottom lip with my thumb. All hints of her panic vanished.

“I want you to—” Valentina’s eyes were hooded as she looked at me. Still trembling, she swallowed her nerves. “I want you to f-feel what you do to me.”

Her shaking hand took mine, placing it on the soft skin of her thigh, encouraging me to continue up her skirt. Her warm, silky smooth skin was freckled with goosebumps as she guided my hand higher towards her pussy. The higher my hand traveled, the more her body shook.

“Val, I can’t do this to you. I don’t want to push you too far. I’m patient, sweetheart. You have nothing to prove to me.” Valentina’s scared, hazel eyes met mine.

“P-please, just...” She was fighting her nerves, and a single tear fell down her cheek. “I need... I need this. Please...” Her tears began free-falling, and I

just wanted to hold her to me and protect her from this ugly world. My hand remained on her upper thigh as I reached my other up to thumb away her tears.

“Please Val, if you need me to stop, please tell me to stop. We go at your pace, sweetheart.” Her cheek leaned into my touch as she nodded her head. “I need your words, sweetheart.”

“Y-yes, I’ll tell you if I need to stop.” Her brave eyes met mine, and I saw a small mischievous spark, a small glimpse of who she used to be.

“Good girl, sweetheart,” I purred in her ear. Goosebumps began to form on her shaky skin as she closed her eyes, absorbing my approval. With a gasp, her dainty hands found my wrist on her thigh, nudging me to continue.

“Fuck, Val.” My fingertips found hot, damp, lace panties. “So fucking wet, baby.” Valentina’s breathing hitched with my words.

“I heard you... In the shower.” She hummed as she opened her eyes to gaze at me. I froze in shock.

“Val, I’m so sorry. I thought you were sleep—”

“Show me... Show me how perfect I look with your cock in me,” she interrupted as she motioned her head towards the bedroom. The mischievous spark in her eye told me she was thinking of that mirror on the wall by the bed.

A sly grin found my lips as I fisted her damp lace in the center of my hand, pulling her towards me by her panties until she was lying underneath me. She gasped at the sudden movement, her eyes went wide with fear that immediately shifted to excitement. My knuckles were lined up perfectly with her wet pussy.

“You want your cock, Valentina? Once I claim you again, you’re mine. No other man ever gets to see your pretty, perfect cunt. No one except me.”

“Y-Yes, please...” she whispered as she tried to grind on my hand gripping the hot lace.

“What a needy little pussy you have, Valentina. Trying to fuck my hand already.” I grinned, inserting my pointer finger into her deliciously wet cunt.

Valentina arched her back, her hands finding her breasts over her dress as her hooded eyes met mine again. She grinned the most sexy smile as she pulled down her dress, exposing her breasts. Her shaky hands cupped them both, pinching and flicking her nipples as her head leaned back into the floor. I worked my pointer finger inside her pussy, pumping in and out as my thumb circled her clit.

“God Valentina, you’re so fucking sexy. Pinch those perfect nipples for me, baby.” I growled in approval as Valentina immediately obeyed. Her perfect body stopped trembling in fear, and her panic vanished.

Her sweet moans were becoming louder and more needy. I reached down with my free hand, unbuttoning and unzipping my pants to give my aching cock relief.

“Let me see your eyes, Valentina.” She laid flat on her back, and I crawled on top of her, still working her cunt with my finger. Her eyes opened, meeting mine.

“There’s my good girl.” She moaned as I rewarded her with the addition of my middle finger. Her thighs began to twitch, her orgasm building.

“J-Justin, please...” she begged.

“Do you want to come, Valentina?”

“Y-yes... It’s been... It’s been so long...” She moaned as I continued to circle her clit and my fingers pumped in and out of her wet pussy.

“What a fucking shame. You will always come for me, Valentina. Do you understand?”

“Y-yes...” she whispered as she arched her back into my touch.

“Good girl, sweetheart. Do you hear how wet you are, Val? How perfect your pussy sounds taking my fingers?” Her hips started to grind on my hand harder, chasing her orgasm as the sounds of my hand pumping in and out of her wet pussy became just as loud as her moans.

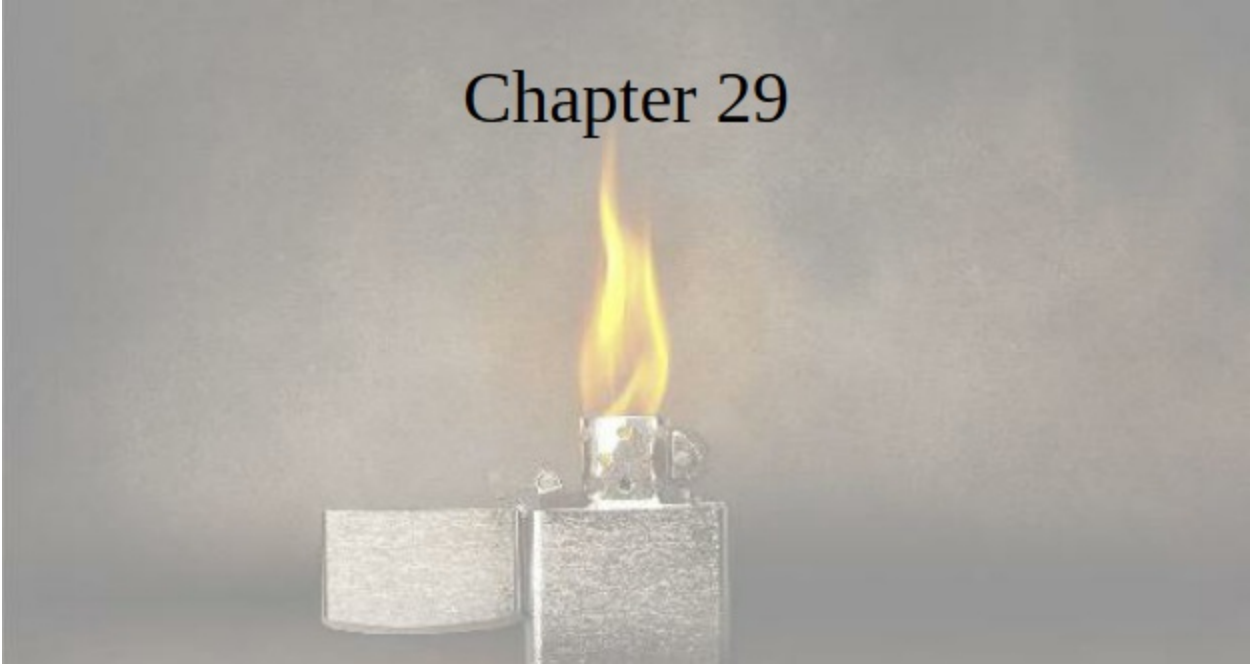
I withdrew my fingers, and she mewled a small whine in protest, her hooded eyes never leaving mine.

I stood up, scooping her into my arms, and she wrapped her legs around my torso.

“You deserve to come in a more comfortable place than the floor, sweetheart.” She kissed me like she needed my mouth to survive as she rocked her wet cunt on my cock, leaving a delicious wet stain on my boxer briefs.

“Fuck, Valentina, you’re so fucking perfect.” I held her ass as I returned her kiss.

Chapter 29



Valentina



Justin kicked open the double doors to the bedroom while he carried me into the room, kissing me without abandon. He kicked off his shoes and opened his jeans and I laced my fingers through his hair. His fingertips dug into my ass as he held me, before gently placing me in the center of the bed.

I laid on my back, staring up at Justin in awe as he climbed onto the bed. His chocolate brown eyes shone with arousal and wonder. My dress was still pulled down, exposing my breasts as my chest rose and fell in time with his. Justin spread my legs, kneeling in between them, his hands on either side of my head, caging me in. His hair fell into his face as his eyes trailed up and down my half-naked body.

“So fucking beautiful.” Justin’s lips found my neck as he trailed gentle kisses up to my ear. “May I?” he asked as his eyes found my breasts. I was amazed that I wasn’t scared; I wasn’t trembling; I wasn’t pulling away.

I nodded as I tried to find him with my hips, desperate for his touch.

“Use your words, sweetheart,” Justin purred as he nibbled on my earlobe.

“Y-yes, please touch me.”

“Good girl, Val.” I groaned in response to his praise as he cupped one of my breasts in his hand while his tongue found the other, flicking and sucking on my nipple. I kept my hands above my head, resting on the bed, as Justin’s kisses trailed down my sternum.

A mischievous grin formed on his lips as he ripped my new dress open at the seam going down the middle.

“J-Justin!” I gasped in shock at the tearing fabric, and the cool air suddenly reached my hot skin.

“I’ll... replace... it...” Every pause was a kiss down my stomach. His hands slid down my sides as he continued to trail kisses down to my belly button. I couldn’t help but smirk at his eagerness to get the dress off.

“Keep your arms up by your head, sweetheart,” Justin purred as his chin reached my pussy. “If you move those hands, I stop.” His mischievous eyes met mine as I bit my lip and nodded, before resting my head back onto the soft mattress.

“Words, baby.”

“I won’t... I won’t move.” I groaned as Justin placed a kiss on my pussy over my panties.

“There’s my good girl. God, I’ve been aching to taste your perfect cunt, Valentina.”

“It’s... It’s all yours...” I moaned as Justin’s teeth found the waistband of my panties. He growled in approval as he lowered them with his teeth.

Reaching his hands underneath my ass, he pulled them down from behind me while he kept the black lace in his mouth. Growing impatient, he ripped them off of me from the back, the sound of the tearing lace made my back arch, arousal flooding my core as he parted my thighs more. Suddenly, he sat back on his heels, his eyes stuck on all the cuts and bruises Marco left on me.

I was immediately petrified and embarrassed of my bruised body. I trembled as I reached for the sheets to try to cover myself.

“I-I promise they don’t hurt anymore,” I stammered as I tried to close my legs, suddenly feeling ashamed of my healing injuries.

He saw everything. The cigarette burns, the knife cuts, the bruises from Marco’s fingertips. Quickly, I reached for the sheets, desperate to cover them. I hated what Marco had done to my body, it was humiliating. Tears began to form in my eyes as Justin tore the sheets away and gently traced his fingers over each bruise.

“Do you trust me, Val?” His question caught me off guard.

“Of course, Justin. W-Why?”

“If you move your arms, I stop, baby. Okay?”

“O-okay.”

Justin placed a kiss on a healing bruise on the inside of my thigh and circled it with his thumb. His dark eyes found mine as he dug his thumb into the center of the bruise. He pressed into it hard, licking up my pussy simultaneously, never breaking eye contact.

The sudden pain made my eyes water, and I groaned in pain, but his tongue on my clit was overwhelming. I groaned again. It was a sweet mixture of pain and pleasure as Justin dug his thumb into my thigh harder while licking and sucking on my clit. The harder he gripped my bruised thigh, the more fervently he worked his tongue.

I gripped the sheets to keep my arms where Justin told me to, and I arched into him as he trailed his fingertips along my entrance. He continued to dig his thumb into my bruise and suck on my clit, humming in approval. Justin continued to groan as he teased my pussy with his middle finger, coating himself in my arousal.

“Do you like my tongue on your clit, baby?” Justin purred as I started to grind my hips on his hand.

“Yes...” I could barely speak.

Justin pressed his finger deeper inside my pussy as my moans echoed throughout the room. He released my thigh and trailed his tongue from my clit to my fresh bruise, leaving a soft kiss in the middle of it.

“Now you’ll know *I* was the one to mark your skin as I feasted on your perfect cunt.” Justin withdrew his finger, scooped his arms under my thighs, and pulled my pussy to his face. He stuck his tongue inside me, tasting my arousal.

“So fucking sweet and perfect... fuck...”

I couldn’t take it anymore. I sat up and pulled him up to me by his shirt, crashing our lips together. I kept my hold on him as I leaned back, pulling him over me and ripping his button-up shirt open. Buttons flew off as his greedy hands cupped my breasts. Pulling away from his kiss, I brought his hand up to my mouth, trailing my tongue up his middle finger. The sweet taste of my own arousal hit my tongue, and I sucked his finger clean. His eyes darkened with desire as I kept eye contact with him, sucking on his finger as if it was his cock.

I reached up and cupped his hard cock, still in his underwear, as he slowly withdrew his finger from my mouth.

“Please Justin, please...” I shamelessly begged for him, trying to tug on his boxer briefs.

He jumped off the bed, quickly pulling off his boxer briefs as I trailed a trembling hand down my stomach to find my sensitive clit with my middle finger.

“That’s it, baby. Let me see you touch your needy cunt.” Justin kicked his

boxer briefs off, gripping his hard cock as I circled my clit. My other hand found my breast and pinched my nipple.

“This... This is what you did to me while you were in the shower...” My voice trailed off into a moan as I inserted two fingers inside my pussy.

Justin’s eyes were glued to my hand as I shamelessly chased my own pleasure, completely bared to him as he fisted his cock, pumping himself slowly. I closed my eyes, my orgasm building as I circled my clit faster. Justin stepped towards me and pulled my legs until my ass was on the edge of the bed. He reached down to my hand, forcing me to withdraw my fingers, and brought them to his lips, returning the favor and licking them clean.

“Such a sweet pussy, sweetheart. Fuck, I want you, Val. Please let me...” His hard cock lined up perfectly with my pussy as he begged me for permission.

“Fuck me, Justin. Fuck me like your pretty little whore,” I whispered his words from the shower, and he groaned as he pumped his cock at my entrance.

“God, Valentina.” Justin grabbed me by my hips, slamming his cock into me to the hilt. I felt my pussy stretch to take him in, every restraint in my body and mind shattered. A noise came from my throat that I didn’t know I could make.

With his hands on my hips, he roughly thrust into me. It was everything I remembered and more. The sound of our skin slapping together, his fingers digging into my hips, the feral moans coming out of his mouth...

“My god, baby, look how well you take this cock. So fucking perfect, so wet.” Justin moaned as I met his thrusts, grinding my hips into him.

“Please... Please don’t stop.” I cried out as my orgasm came at me full force. My thighs began to shake as Justin grinned.

“This is all you’ll remember, sweetheart. How perfect *your* cock is in your sweet cunt.” Justin groaned as he obeyed, thrusting harder into me. “Come for me Val.” Justin moaned with me as my climax continued to build. He brought his thumb to my clit as I reached the edge. “I want to feel your cunt choke this dick, baby. Come for me...”

Justin thrust his cock into me relentlessly, circling my sensitive clit as my climax hit me. My back arched completely off the bed, and my whole body shook while waves of pleasure overwhelmed me. I screamed out his name, noticing he was about to reach his peak. I cupped my breasts, grinding my hips onto his cock, and he continued his thrusts.

“Yes, Justin...”

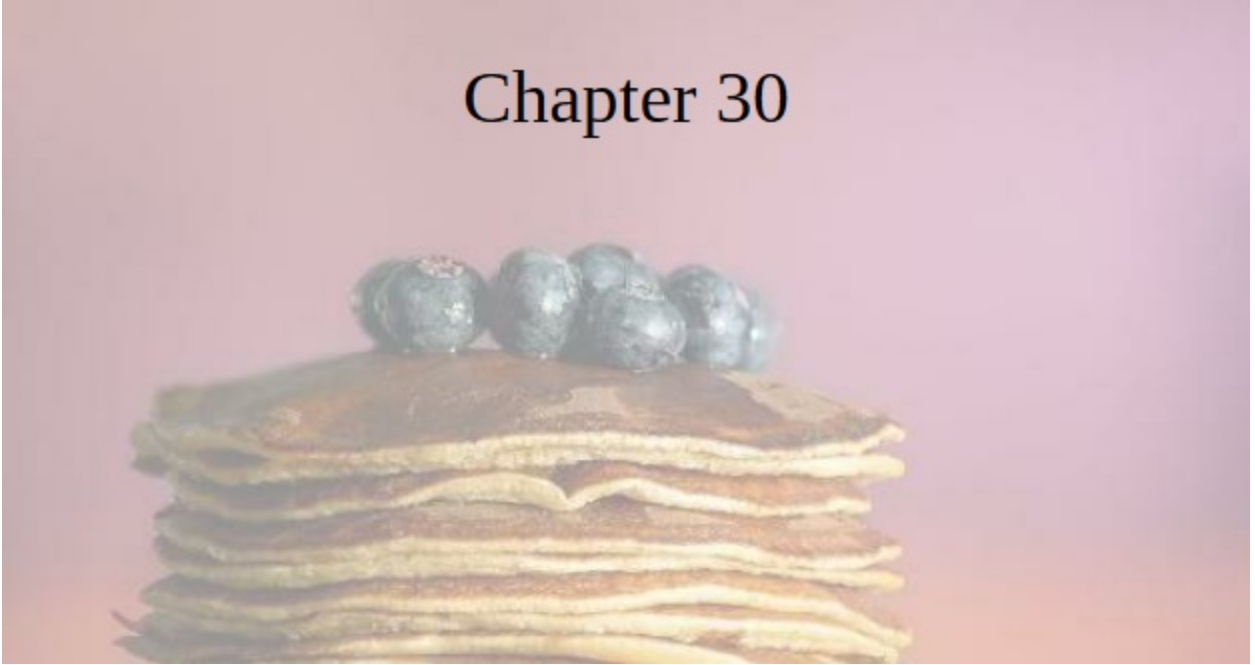
“Val... Fuck...” Justin groaned.

With one more deep thrust, he came, spilling himself into me as I wrapped my legs around his waist, not letting one drop of his come leave my pussy.

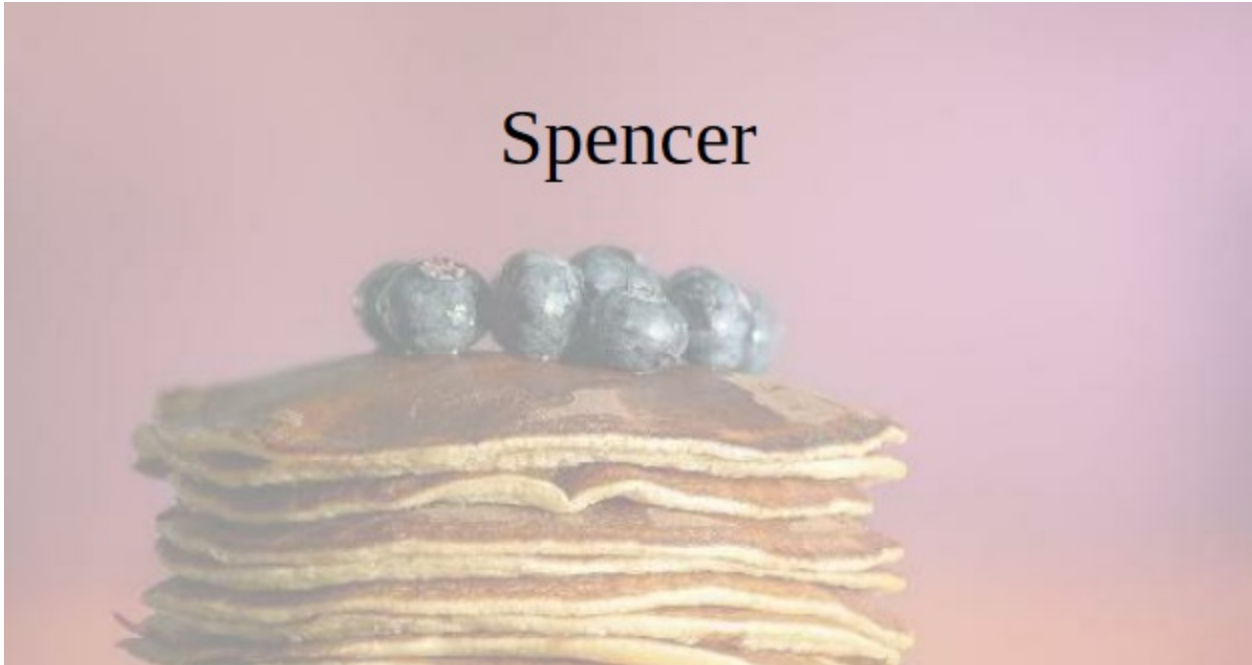
He leaned over me, his cock still inside me as he cupped my cheek, and kissed me so passionately I wanted to cry. Before I knew what was happening, the words just spilled out of my mouth.

“I-I love you, Justin...” I finally felt that comfort, that trust, shattering all the restraint I ever had in my heart. *Please never leave me, Justin.*

Chapter 30



Spencer



Rico handed me a cold beer from the fridge as we stood in the kitchen of his suite in the casino. I only knew him from Marco mentioning him, and I had no idea what he wanted to talk about. Nervously, I placed one hand in the front pocket of my jeans as I raised my cold beer bottle to him in thanks.

“Please don’t be nervous, son,” Rico said smoothly, opening a bottle for himself.

I followed him to the living room area of his suite and plopped down on the couch as he opened his hand, offering me a seat.

“I’m just going to get right into what I need to say, Spencer.”

“I’m all ears.” I took a generous swig of beer to hide my paranoia.

“I know who you are. I know who you work for. I know about Cassandra.”

I coughed, choking on my beer, standing up quickly and defensively.

“Please sit, son. I’m not saying this to threaten you.” Rico stood, going over to a cabinet and showing me his hands as he placed his gun from his shoulder holster in one of the drawers, then locking it.

“How...”

“I’m sure you know who I am if you work for Marco. It’s my job to know all threats and enemies of the Fiorellis.” He returned to his seat, and took a sip of his beer.

“I thought Marco’s bunch of assholes worked for you guys,” I scoffed, sitting back down on the couch.

“You’re not completely wrong. They *were* our main supplier until Vicente died. Before Marco had Valentina’s parents killed.” Rico’s eyes darkened with rage.

“Well, you know, you may have their murderer in your basement. Marco had that fucker on speed dial until he found me.” I rubbed my forehead with one hand before finishing off my beer.

“Is that so?” Rico finished his beer also, looking deep in thought.

“Marco fucking blackmailed me into this shit. I never wanted this. I didn’t want this for Cassie.” I hung my head, holding my forehead in my hands.

“I know what happened with Luciano. As much as I loved Vicente, his son was a disaster. He got too up close and personal with Marco’s product, and developed an addiction. Please know that Vicente never faulted you for the accident.”

“Marco told me who he was, and I fucking panicked. You hear stories about what the mafia does when one of their own is killed.”

“We are definitely different from what you may have perceived. I only wish we met sooner, Spencer, so we could have avoided all of this. But now, we have a problem.”

I lifted my head, meeting Rico’s serious gaze.

“I have a problem, too. He fucking took my sister and cut her fucking finger off. Sent it to the station for the chief to give me in a fucking envelope.

I have to get her back. I have to—” The empty beer bottle in my hand broke as I squeezed my fists shut, shattering it into pieces onto Rico’s hardwood floor.

“We have a common enemy, Spencer. We can help each other.” Rico walked to the kitchen and came back with a stack of napkins for my now bloody palm.

“I don’t give a fuck about the mafia; I just want my fucking sister back,” I growled at Rico.

“Then what of Justin? Tell me Spencer, how do you plan to carry out the hit Marco assigned to you? What about Valentina? Are you here to kill her, too, then?” Rico hissed as he stood, watching my every move.

“What? No! I’m here to fucking help Justin, not kill him. There’s no way Marco’s bitch ass could ever convince me. You have to fucking help me stop him. He’s...” I kicked my foot backwards, forcing the couch to fly back against the wall.

“The Red Room...” Rico’s eyes darkened again.

“Cassie...” I cracked my neck, ready to fight. I needed to punch something, someone. My shadow was consuming me, and I needed to spill blood.

“One of our top men poses as a customer for his... auctions. We’ve freed 14 young women in two years. Another auction is scheduled this weekend.”

“Marco is forcing me to go. I refused, and he fucking sent Cassie’s finger, threatening to hurt her more if I don’t show.” I pulled the crumpled invitation from my pocket and handed it to Rico.

“That sick bastard wants you to see Cassie get sold off to some pervert.” Crossing his arms, Rico took a deep breath before continuing. “Justin and Valentina do not know you are working for Marco. Valentina is healing, and I’m afraid if she finds out, she will shut down again.”

“I know she's the heir to the throne. I will protect her with my life, as Justin would.”

“I believe you, son. I saw you save her from Marco’s hitman. Speaking of... Come. Let’s deal with him.” A twisted grin formed on his lips as he unlocked the drawer to get his gun. I returned his grin and followed him to the basement.



After a short elevator ride, Rico and I stepped into the basement of the casino. I looked around as I followed him down a long concrete hallway. This huge basement looked like it had been here for centuries. There were rooms, and what looked like jail cells, cut into the stone walls lining the hallway leading to a large, more modern-looking foyer. Passing by these modern rooms, I nodded in approval at the technology, cells, weapons... This was going to be fucking fun as hell.

“Mr. Vitale.” One of the guards nodded at Rico as we approached a metal door at the end of the hallway.

“Antonio. He’s fine; he’s with me to take care of our trash problem.” Rico chuckled as we passed Antonio, stepping into a sterile-looking room.

The room reminded me of a clean hospital room with absolutely nothing in it. Just a hook in the middle of the ceiling, a metal chair bolted down to the floor, and a tray of various scalpels and knives. Damian was tied to the chair, his pathetic head hanging forward as his breathing labored. Rico turned to face me, placing a firm hand on my shoulder.

“I see the darkness in you, son. The rage, anger, hatred. Channel that energy, and get as much information out of this waste of life as you can.” Rico grinned at me as he closed the door behind him, instructing Antonio to keep everyone away.

I’d been playing this fucking game long enough to know that he was testing me, testing my loyalty. I felt like a piece of shit for what I’d had to do for Marco... The blood on my hands that weighed heavily on me every day, the hit on Justin, Cassie being taken for his sex slave auction...

My shadow surrounded me, seeping into my skin, my veins. I closed my eyes, looking at the ceiling as I welcomed the darkness in. The sound of my steel-toed boots on the tile floor as I walked over to the tray of knives made him lift his pathetic eyes to meet mine. I picked up a large hunting knife, admiring the wood grip and the balanced weight of it in my hand.

“You... you... fucking... traitor...” He spat as he lifted his eyes to glare at me.

I lunged forward, grabbing his throat as his eyes showed me a hint of fear. My shadow’s wicked grin formed on my mouth as I felt his pulse thundering under my fingertips. His hands gripped the armrests of the chair as I watched his face turn blue. Releasing my grip ever so slightly, he coughed, sucking in oxygen.

“Where the fuck is she?” I hissed through clenched teeth.

“The pretty redhead? I can't wait to taste that sweet pussy,” he snapped back.

My grip on his pathetic neck tightened again as I stabbed the knife into his hand. The blade punctured the hollow metal of the armrest under his hand, and he screamed, blood dripping from his fingertips to the floor.

“Say that again,” I growled as he squeezed his eyes shut in pain.

“F-fuck you, Spencer.”

I stood, placing my hands in my front pockets as I casually strolled back to the tray of weapons. Scanning all my options, I opted for a similar-looking knife. I wasn't sure what kind it was, but the blade was sharp, and there were six of them. Stalking behind him, I dragged the blade across the back of the metal chair, leaving a scratch from the tip of the blade.

“Where. Is. She?” I swiped the blade off the edge of the chair, making an intimidating “zing” sound.

“Why don't y-you go f-fuck yourself?”

“Oh, I love it when you talk dirty to me.” I grinned as I swung my hand down, stabbing his other hand.

Groaning in pain, he started to sob like a bitch. *Some assassin you are, you pathetic waste of life.*

“I'm not going to ask again, Damian.” I sauntered over to the tray again.

“W-why... I thought you w-worked for M-Marco.” His pathetic stuttering was annoying me.

“Do you seriously think I fucking wanted this?” I twisted my body, my fist connecting with his jaw. “Do you fucking think I like doing the jobs you fail at doing?” Another punch. “Where the *fuck* is Cassandra?” Blood flew out of his mouth with my third punch, his head hanging as he teetered on the edge of consciousness.

“Y-you think you sc-scare me, West? You'll have to do better to get... get anything else from me,” he stammered, trying to act tough.

“Mmm, is that a challenge? I was hoping you'd let me have some *real* fun with you. I love it when my bitches have some fight in them,” Finding another knife from the tray, I dug the tip of the blade into the soft skin under

his eye, dragging it down his cheek, and leaving behind a cut as he tried to hide the pain. “Where is my sister?”

“I-I went to Chicago. M-Marco had m-me get her. She was w-with Bella, but M-Marco took her. Bella tried... tried to stop them and she... she got shot.”

A red-hot rage burned in my veins at the thought of Marco touching Cassie, and Bella getting shot. My hands began to shake as I gripped the knife, turning the blade horizontally across his neck. I pressed down hard, and a small line of blood formed underneath the knife. I was teetering over the edge of losing myself again.

“What is Marco planning at the auction?” I hissed as I put more pressure on his neck.

“F-Fuck you Spencer...”

“Mmm, yeah, baby. Keep talking dirty to me.” A sinister chuckle came from my throat as I moved the blade to his hand, still gripping the armrest. I pointed the tip of the blade into the cool metal between his first and second finger, ready to slam the blade down. “Maybe I should return the favor, for the one you cut off my sister.”

“F-Fuck. Y-You,” Damian stammered.

“I’m not going to ask again. What is Marco planning?”

Damian remained silent, staring at me while he tried not to break.

“Fine, have it your way.” With full force, I slammed the knife down, severing his first finger. Damian roared in pain.

“What is he planning?” I repositioned the tip of the knife between his second and third finger.

“It’s a t-trap for Val...Valentina. H-he knows the family w-will come and try t-to shut it down. He’s expecting it, w-waiting. He’s gonna... He’s gonna

kill her and that fire... firefighter asshole she's with." He spat blood at his feet and raised his head to look at me as I lowered the knife.

"Why does he want the detective there? Swiftwater?" I gripped his chin harshly, my thumb and fingers pressing roughly into his cheeks.

"His p-partner keeps digging into his sh-shit. The blonde b-bitch. I hope he k-kills them, the redheaded bitch, too. I hope they s-suffer."

Throwing his chin to the side, I swung my arm down full force. I stabbed Damian in the thigh and he threw his head back, yelling in pain. His screams were music to my ears as I casually strolled back to the cart to get another matching blade.

"You never answered my question. Where. Is. My. Sister?"

"Fr-Fremont Street. The Gold-Golden Nugget."

"Now, now, was that so hard?" I taunted, spinning the knife in my hands.

"Val-Valentina... That dumb bitch... I hope... I hope M-Marco slits her pretty little throat while... while you all watch," Damian stammered as his face began to pale from his blood loss. He hung his head as blood dripped onto his lap from his mouth and nose.

Slowly, I made my way behind the chair, rotating the knife's handle in my palm. Damian's breathing was getting more shallow as he bled out on the floor. Standing behind him, I fisted a handful of his hair, violently yanking his head back. Damian looked up at me, pure hatred in his eyes. He opened his mouth to speak, but before he could, with expert precision, I plunged the knife down in between his parted lips, stabbing him in his mouth. The long blade lodged in the back of his neck, and his pathetic head slouched backwards as I released his hair. His blood pooled and fell from his mouth.

"Keep Valentina's name out of your fucking mouth," I growled, twisting the knife clockwise. The crunch and gurgling sounds his body made sang in

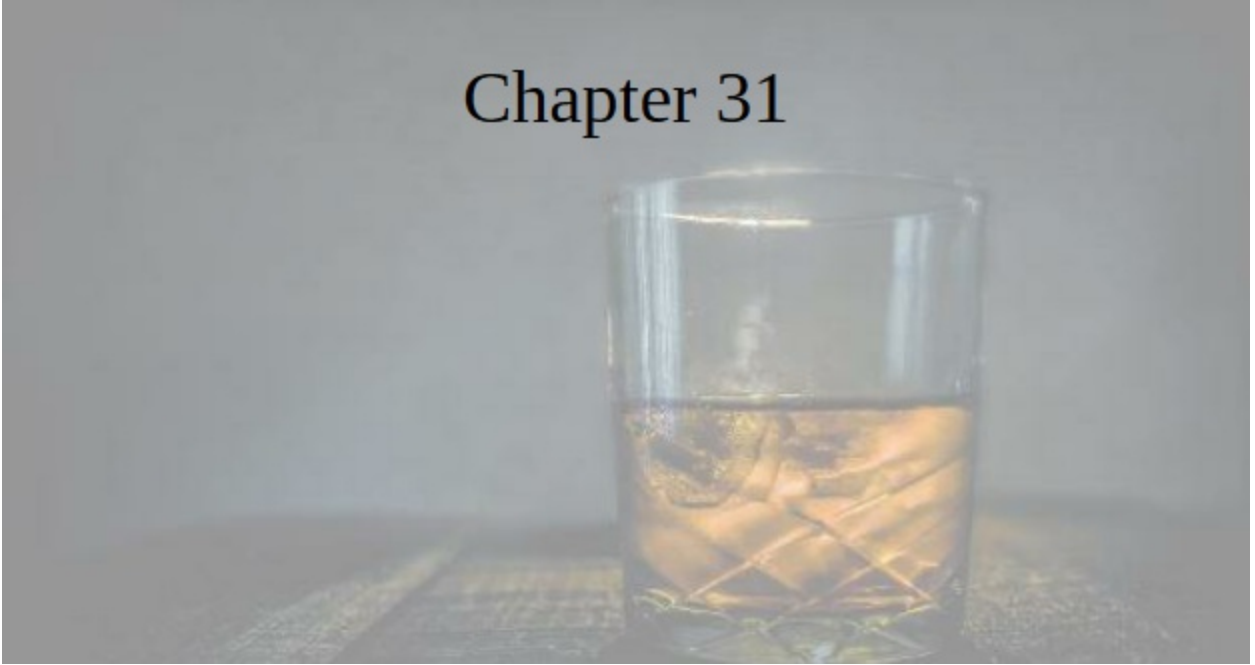
my brain. My darkness feeding off of the kill, the bloodlust consuming me.

I stood tall in front of him, scoffing at his pathetic body. His blood splattered across my chest and coated my knuckles. I rolled my neck to crack it, trying to calm my shadow, to dissipate the darkness. I didn't hear the door open, but suddenly Rico was standing beside me.

“Spencer, are you alright, son?” Rico held out a damp towel to wipe off my hands and face.

“Please let Valentina know she has my loyalty. I'm done with Marco, done with the Calaveras Negras. Just done.” Ignoring the towel, I pushed past Rico and Antonio, not even bothering to clean up. I found my bike waiting for me outside in the warm Las Vegas night. I fixed my helmet on and rode off into the night.

Chapter 31



Justin



I woke to Valentina curled up in my arms. Blinking a few times, I had to make sure this wasn't a dream. She was facing me, with a hand on my chest and her naked curves molding to my side. Her hair was a tangled mess, splayed out behind her like I always dreamed it would be. She shifted her hips slightly, whispering out a small groan, and my dick instantly responded. I brushed her hair behind her ear and her eyelids fluttered open, her hazel eyes an intoxicating mixture of drowsiness and need.

“Good morning, sweetheart,” I whispered as I tilted her chin up to me, kissing her gently.

“Good morning.” She buried her face in my neck.

She hummed and yawned, stretching her arms above her head. As she stretched, she rolled to her back; the soft sheets shifted and gifted me with two perfect breasts. My cock ached at the sight, and I rolled to my side to face her. Cupping her cheek, I guided her plump lips to mine, kissing her passionately. Her hands found my chest as our tongues danced together.

I wanted to worship her body, be gentle, and take my time exploring every curve with my tongue and my hands. Caressing every cut and bruise with my lips. She turned her body to face me, wrapping her arms around my neck as our kiss became more desperate. I pulled away, lifting her chin with the side of my pointer finger.

“You’re so fucking beautiful, Val.” Her sleepy eyes gazed into mine as she subtly bit her lower lip. “Let me worship you like the queen you are.” I kissed her again, pouring my soul into her through my lips.

“Justin...” she whispered as I guided her to lie on her back, interlacing our fingers as I held her hands above her head.

Goosebumps appeared on her skin as I leaned in to whisper in her ear, “let me make love to you, baby. I want to take my time, and worship every inch of your perfect body.” I kissed her down her neck as she arched into me. “Now, be a good girl, and keep your arms up. If you move your arms, I stop. Just like last night.” I grinned as she leaned her head back into the mattress.

Her needy moans made it close to impossible to control myself. My stiff cock was resting in between us. Her hips gently shifted as she tried to find it. I trailed one hand down her arm, to her breasts, as I cupped the soft flesh in my hand, savoring in her shiver at my touch.

“Please...” she breathlessly pleaded.

“Patience, baby,” I whispered as I took her plump nipple in my mouth, kissing and caressing the sensitive peak. Her delicious moans became louder, more needy.

“Justin, please...” She arched as I sucked on her nipple, gently grazing it with my teeth as I released it.

“I fucking love your perfect tits, baby.” I pinched her nipple in between my fingers as I leaned in to kiss her gently. “Fuck, you’re being such a good girl,

keeping your arms up, Val.” I straddled her lap, trailing my second hand down to her other breast, making her moan louder.

“Such... a tease...” She arched her back with every flick, every lick I gave her plump nipples.

“Is your perfect cunt wet for me, baby?” I groaned as I began to slide my body down, trailing kisses down the soft skin of her stomach.

“W-why don’t you find out yourself?” she purred, and I watched her eyes roll back in her head as my lips met her deliciously wet pussy.

I parted her entrance with my tongue, licking slowly up to her clit as she continued to arch and moan.

“You taste like fucking heaven, baby. Look in the mirror and see how perfect you look with your cunt grinding on my face.” Valentina obeyed as she turned her head to watch in the mirror.

She watched me fuck her with my tongue in awe as I scooped her thighs over my shoulders. Her fingers gripped and tugged the bedsheets as my tongue entered her sweet pussy as far as I could get it.

“J-Justin... I’m gonna...” Her hips began to grind on my face as I shifted attention to her clit. She groaned as I teased her pussy with my middle finger while I sucked and licked her.

“Be a good girl and come for me, baby. Come on my tongue,” I said as I lapped up her sweet arousal. I moaned as I inserted my pointer finger into her tight cunt, her arousal dripping down my hand.

Her legs shook as she clenched on my finger. I continued to suck and lick her clit as I added my middle finger to her tight pussy. I pumped my fingers into her torturously slow, and as I picked up speed, she desperately tried to ride my hand, gyrating her hips.

“Justin! Oh god!” Valentina cried as her orgasm came. I thrust my

fingers harder and deeper as her pussy clenched and contracted on my fingers.

“Yes baby, watch yourself while you come on my face and my hands.” Her hooded eyes watched her beautiful, bruised body arch at my touch.

“You’re so fucking perfect, Valentina.” I slowly withdrew my fingers from her pussy, guiding her legs back down to the bed.

She looked stunning, sated, and relieved. A lazy smile fell upon her lips as she lay sprawled out on the bed. I returned to her side, cupping her face and kissing her like my life depended on it.

“I love you so much, Val.”

Suddenly, Valentina was on top of me, pinning my arms up near my ears. Her messy brown hair falling into my face as she held me down by my wrists. A mischievous grin formed on her swollen lips, and my dick got even harder at the sight of her. She leaned forward towards my ear, as her breasts rested on my chest.

I opened my mouth to speak, but she shushed me, placing her pointer finger on my lips.

“Shhh. If you move those hands, I’ll stop,” she purred in my ear, using my own words against me.

I groaned in approval as her intense hazel eyes held eye contact with me.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good.”

Valentina dragged her nails gently down my arms to my chest, leaving a trail of goosebumps. Propping herself up on my chest, she sat herself straight up, straddling my waist. She flung her head back and to the side to get her hair out of the way, and my eyes darkened with desire at the sight. I licked

my lips as her hands trailed down the muscles of my chest, down to my abs as she scooted her body down until her wet pussy met the head of my cock.

Lifting her hips slightly, she pinned my cock to my stomach and started to grind her pussy on my length, coating me with her arousal.

“Holy fuck, Val,” I moaned as she continued to gyrate her hips on my dick. Her hands found her breasts and cupped them both as her head arched back to the ceiling.

I gripped a handful of sheets in my fists, trying hard not to touch her as she continued to grind her clit on my cock, while flicking and pinching her sensitive nipples.

“Justin...” she moaned my name as I struggled to keep my hands above my head.

“Yes, baby, rub your needy clit on my cock.” I moaned shamelessly as she started to pick up speed.

“Work your pussy for me... Yes... Fuck, that’s a good fucking girl... Such a... good fucking girl, Val...” I was trying hard not to come, willing my dick to wait until I could feel her tight cunt on my cock. I could feel her getting closer to the edge of her release as she held herself up on the muscles of my abs.

“L-look in the mirror while I ride your cock, Justin.” She sounded so nervous, but I obeyed as she lifted her hips slightly, and I felt the tip of my dick nudging her deliciously wet entrance.

“Take me, baby. Take this cock. Use me.” I groaned as I lifted my hips, trying to enter.

“You want me to ride your cock, Justin?” Valentina met my gaze in the mirror as my hands gripped the sheets tighter. She slid down ever so slightly, letting the head of my cock barely enter her pussy, then withdrawing.

“Mmm, you fucking tease.” I looked into her eyes, turning away from the mirror.

With her right hand, she pinned my head to the side, forcing me to look in the mirror again.

“I didn’t say you could move,” she purred.

“Oh fuck, baby,” I groaned in surprise as she continued to tease the head of my cock with her wet pussy.

“You’re gonna be a good boy and let me ride your cock until I’m satisfied.” Her eyes were burning with lust as they found mine in the mirror.

“Yes, my queen. Fuck yes.”

Lifting her hips again, the tip of my cock lined up perfectly with her pussy, and she fully seated herself on me as a hoarse, feral moan escaped her lips. She leaned forward, propping herself up on my chest as she bounced her ass on my thighs, our skin slapping together as she chased her orgasm.

“Justin... Fucking touch me, please.” Instantly, my hands gripped her hips as I thrust into her.

“Ride that dick, baby. Such a needy, wet cunt hungry for my cock.” She leaned forward completely on me as she continued to bounce her ass on my lap, my dick reaching just the right spot.

Roughly, she pulled my face to look at her and away from the mirror, crashing her lips on mine as I inhaled her moans.

“Harder... Please... More...”

“Does my perfect little slut want more of my cock, baby?”

“God, yes.”

“Fucking hell, Val.” I groaned as she sat up, grinding her hips with my cock fully seated inside her.

I shifted my grip to her thighs as she propped herself up on her knees.

Planting my feet into the mattress, I slammed my cock into her. Her fingernails dug into my skin, and the pain only intensified the pleasure I felt. The sound of the skin of my hips slamming against her ass made me groan in approval.

“I’m so... so close, Justin.”

“Come for me like my good little slut, baby. I want to feel your cunt choke my cock while you memorize how perfect this feels.” My rough thrusts continued, and she reached forward to rub her clit. I couldn’t help my eyes from rolling back, seeing her fingers circling her swollen clit as she continued to take my thrusts.

“Justin... More... Harder... Please...”

I obeyed. Lifting her body so she could prop herself up on her feet and bending her knees into a deep squat, I cupped under her thighs to support her and slammed my hips into her as her delicious pussy started to squeeze on my cock.

“Yes, baby... Come for me.” My eyes closed in concentration as we reached our climax together.

I came hard, and she screamed my name as her pussy clenched down on my cock. The overwhelming orgasm made my whole body shake. As our bodies relaxed, she gently lifted herself off of me and flopped onto her back next to me.

“Fuck...” She was trying to catch her breath as I rolled over to cup her cheeks, kissing her passionately.

“I could get used to waking up to you, sweetheart.” I grinned as I traced circles on her cheek with my thumb and kissed her forehead.

My phone vibrated on the nightstand, forcing me to tear my hand away from Valentina. She cuddled up next to me as I reached for my phone.

“Hello?”

“You stupid motherfucker! Didn’t I tell you to fucking call me...” I held the phone away from my ear as Anna yelled at me. Valentina looked at me with concern and I shrugged. *I knew this was coming.* I mouthed to a confused Valentina.

“A... An...” She kept cutting me off as I tried to get a word in.

“Val? Vallie, are you okay?” she yelled over me. I gave up, handing my phone to Valentina, and I raised my hands in defeat.

“Hi, Anna,” Val said timidly.

“Oh my god, Vallie! Are you okay? Please tell me you’re okay. Do you need anything?”

“I’m okay, Anna. Justin and Rico helped me get out. I’m finally out...” Valentina instantly burst into tears, and I pulled her to my chest protectively, kissing the top of her head.

“Oh, Vallie... Can I see you? Let’s get a coffee?” Valentina looked up at me as if she were asking permission.

“Sweetheart, you don’t need my permission for anything.” I smiled down at her as she trembled, sobbing even harder. I scooped up my phone from her to talk to Anna.

“Please come, Anna. It would do her some good to have company on her terms.” I gave her directions to park in the back and hung up my phone.

“I’m sorry...” Valentina’s eyes were down, avoiding my gaze.

“Valentina, sweetheart,” I gently lifted her chin to see my hazel beauties, “you have absolutely nothing to apologize for. You never need to ask me permission to do anything or speak to anyone. I swear to you, you’re free from that.” I cupped her cheek, brushing her hair behind her ear. She leaned into my palm, still trembling. I kissed her forehead and she sniffled.

“I’m... I’m going to shower before she gets here.”

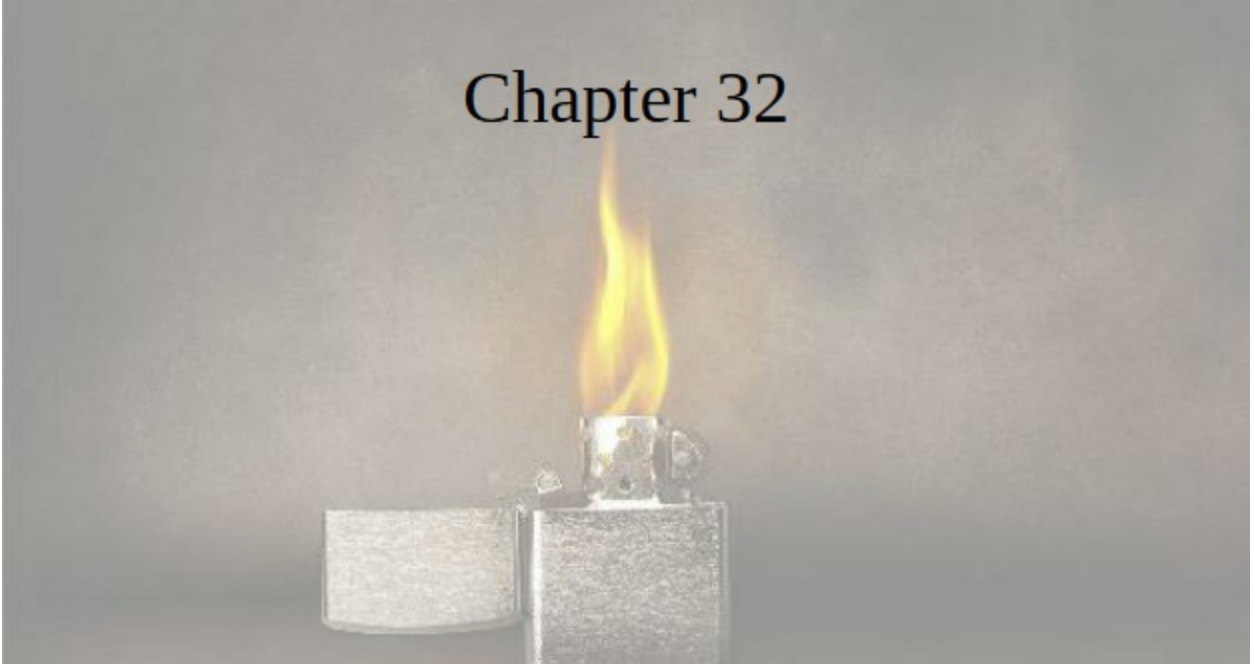
“Of course, sweetheart, take your time. I’ll use the other bathroom. We’ll never get out of there if we go together.” I stroked her cheek with my thumb, and she blushed and averted her gaze shyly.

Valentina slid out of the bed, pulling on her silk robe, and sauntered over to the bathroom. Standing in the doorway, she looked back at me.

“Thank you...” She smiled shyly, closing the door behind her.

I kept my eyes on the closed door as I replayed this morning’s events. She had never been that forward before, and I’d never heard her talk dirty before, but fuck, she’s just so perfect. My Val was coming back, her spark starting to show again. Looking at my phone again, I noticed it was already nine in the morning. *I haven’t slept this long in a while.* I shook my head, shaking off my wandering mind, and got up to head to the other bathroom to shower.

Chapter 32



Valentina



The hot water from the shower washed away any remaining drowsiness I felt. I couldn't believe I'd gone from cowering away from Justin's touch to the most amazing sex of my life. Reaching for the bar of soap, I began to wash my body, replaying the morning in my head. I'd never felt so powerful, so sexy, so in control. Marco took all of those away from me, and Justin was letting me explore, helping me find my voice again, my control.

Stepping out of the shower, I wrapped my hair up in a towel and pulled on a large, thick robe that was hanging on the back of the bathroom door. It was the perfect size to help dry my body and keep the chill at bay. The bandage Justin had replaced was falling off, and I put my glasses on to get a better look. It was barely hanging on, so I removed it and studied my injury in the bathroom mirror. I still had a purple bruise around my stitched area.

I can't believe that son of a bitch hit me with his gun. I reached into my mind for a still silent Nikita, as my anger began to build. I held on to the edge of the sink, my knuckles turning white from my grip. Before I could control

it, my fist flew up, punching the bathroom mirror, shattering it into pieces. Glass rained down on my feet, and Justin immediately ran into the bathroom.

“Val! Are you okay?” Justin hissed as he stepped on a piece of broken mirror with his bare feet. Everything sounded muffled, and I could barely make out any words.

“Val!”

“Ding dong! I’m home!” Anna called from the foyer as the elevator opened.

“Val, sweetheart, come back to me. Anna!”

Everything became hazy, and I just stared down at my hand. Blood was dripping down towards my fingertips, creating a thin vein of crimson.

“Vallie? Vallie!” The sound of broken glass crunching under Anna’s tennis shoes triggered something from the deepest, darkest corner of my mind. Bones. Bones breaking... My face... My arm... The crunching... Marco...

I backed away from the mirror, shaking and panicking. The pain from the glass under my bare feet didn’t register in my brain as I kept backing away. Backing into something soft and warm, I twisted my body to face whatever this dark mass was, and all I saw was Marco. His gun aimed right in between my eyes, his cruel smile.

“Haven’t I told you not to run from me, Valentina? Now there will be consequences,” Marco hissed as he loaded a bullet into the chamber.

“N-no M-Marco please.. Please...”

“It’s too late for that, Valentina. I should’ve done this a long time ago.” The gun pressed into my forehead as his finger pressed down dangerously on the trigger.

Closing my eyes, I prepared to die. I would never see Justin again, I would never get the chance to tell him how much he means to me.

Marco pulled the trigger, and then the darkness came, swallowing me whole.

“You’ll never be free from me, Valentina...”

“Val, you need to relax.” Justin’s hands found my arms as I dug my nails into my palms, making tight fists.

“Justin, what’s going on?” Anna’s tone went from scared to serious as my fists began to tremble at my sides. My blood continued to drip to the cold tile floor as Justin kept a firm grip on my upper arms.

“Do me a favor, Anna. Can you head down the street to the drug store and get some more gauze and tape? Grab some cash from my wallet on the nightstand and the keycard for the elevator. We’ll be okay here,” Justin instructed as he tried to meet my gaze that remained on the floor.

“O-okay, sure, no problem. I’ll... Um... I’ll be back, Vallie.” Anna hesitantly closed the door behind her as she put on her motorcycle helmet and left the room. Once Justin heard the elevator door open, his grip on my arms tightened.

I was so fucking angry, I saw red. I couldn’t focus on anything except the pain in my hands as I continued to dig my nails into my skin. It was the only thing keeping me sane, keeping me out of my head.

Suddenly, Justin gripped my chin and forcefully lifted my face to look into his eyes. They were darkened with a mixture of concern and desire, while mine remained angry and defiant.

“Valentina.”

“Get... Off... Me,” I growled.

“No.”

“I said... Get... Off.” I shoved my hands into his chest, attempting to push him away, slamming him against the door to the bathroom. His grip on my

chin released, but his hand found my hair at the back of my head. He gripped a handful at my scalp, yanking my head back to meet his gaze again. Red hot desire shot straight to my core as Justin leaned his head in towards my ear.

“Make me,” he purred in my ear. His hot breath on my skin made me shiver. My eyes watered as I tried to lift my head to resist his firm grip on my hair. The stinging pain at my scalp made me groan, and I felt his lips turn up into a grin as he bit down hard on a small section of skin underneath my ear.

My hands were still on his chest, blood from my palm now soaked through his t-shirt as my body reacted to his touch. I needed the pain... I wanted the pain... I dug my fingers into his shirt, stretching and pulling at the damp fabric until it started to tear. My nails dug into his chest as his grip on my hair tightened.

“So my perfect little whore wants it rough, then. Is that what it will take to get Marco out of your head?” Justin’s other hand ripped the bathrobe open, instantly cupping my pussy, harshly inserting two fingers. “Do I need to fuck your wet cunt until you bleed for me instead of him?” He withdrew his fingers, then slammed them back inside me as a hoarse, needy moan came from my throat.

Justin’s dark, lustful eyes never left mine as he continued to fuck me with his hand, slamming his fingers in and out of me. The combination of the wet sounds of my pussy taking his fingers, and the pain at my scalp, made my mouth water. Suddenly, his mouth crashed down onto mine, as he withdrew his hand and his grip on my hair, to rip the bathrobe the rest of the way off of me. Pushing himself off the door, he scooped me up under my thighs to place me on top of the bathroom counter. All of my neatly placed toiletries were knocked to the floor, or into the bowl of the sink, as he roughly pushed me

onto the cool surface. He pulled his torn shirt off and kicked off his sweatpants. His hard cock already at attention and ready for me.

I was still lost for words and so fucking angry. I desperately tried to bring myself down, but I wanted Justin to use my body. I wanted him to mark my skin. I wanted him to fuck me like his perfect little whore, like I was worthless and nothing.

Justin stepped between my legs, pushing one thigh open with his hand, my injuries out on display. His eyes scanned my body, stopping at the healing bruises along my ribs. He stroked my cheek, down to my ribs with the backs of his fingers as my body shook with impatience.

“Whiskey,” he whispered in my ear, as his other hand brushed gently against my neck.

“Wh...What?”

“Whiskey. You say whiskey, I stop, sweetheart.” He gripped my neck with his large, tattooed hand. I gasped at the sudden, delicious pressure, as the tip of his cock teased my pussy. “Words, Valentina,” he purred.

“Yes... Whiskey...” I whined, arching into his touch.

“Good... Girl...” His pause and his grip on my ribs came simultaneously. Justin dug his thumb and fingertips roughly into my healing bruise as he held my neck with his other hand. My hands gripped the edge of the counter as I arched my back at the pain, trying to fight the tears threatening to fall. Justin pulled me by the neck towards him, crashing our lips together.

“Ju... Justin...” I gasped as the tip of his cock pressed on my pussy. His grip on my ribs continued as he pulled my ass to the edge of the counter. He pressed me down by my neck, and I flinched as the skin of my naked back made contact with the cool marble countertop. He released my neck as his hands trailed down my sides, cupping my breasts, then finding the fresh

bruise from his fingers on my ribs. He traced my new mark delicately with his fingers, groaning in approval, before continuing to trail down until he found my hips. Lining himself up, he pulled my hips harshly towards him, impaling me on his cock.

“Fuck, Val...” Justin hissed as I propped myself up on my elbows, my forearms resting on the counter, and my fingertips digging into the cool marble. Reaching up, he gripped my neck and squeezed, pulling me towards him. His hot breath tickled my ear as he continued to fuck me hard on the counter. “Now you’ll remember that I marked your skin again, Val. *I fucking did.*”

I moaned and cried out as his relentless, rough thrusts continued. The sound of our panting and skin slapping together had me hanging over the edge, and I was ready to dive off with him.

“Mine,” he growled possessively in my ear, his grip on my neck tightening again. “You... Are... Fucking... Mine...” Each pause a deliciously rough thrust into my pussy.

“Yes... Yes Justin...” I moaned in response as I slammed myself onto him, meeting his thrusts.

“My perfect little whore. Fuck... Taking this cock so fucking perfectly, Val.” I groaned in response to his words as he pulled my lips to his.

“H-Harder...” I begged.

“I told you, Val... I will fuck his memory out of existence... As long as it takes... As hard as you fucking want...” Each pause was a harsh thrust that had me seeing stars. He released my neck, picking me up as his cock stayed inside my wet, aching pussy. I wrapped my legs around his middle, and he slammed me into the wall. The sudden pain at my back made my pussy clench on his cock as he held me under my ass to continue his thrusts.

“Justin... Oh my god...” I cried as his cock inched deeper and deeper into my pussy with each thrust.

“I’ll fuck this perfect cunt until you start praying to me like I am your god, Val. You hear me? Are you going to beg me to stop? Or are you going to take this cock like a good fucking girl?” He groaned as I dug my fingernails into his back, dragging them up towards his neck. I wanted to mark him as he marked me.

“Never... Never fucking stop...” I gripped his hair, pulling his mouth to mine, as my thighs began to twitch, my orgasm building.

“I didn’t say you could come yet, Valentina,” Justin purred as he pulled his cock out of me, leaving me shaking with need. Groaning in protest, I tried to arch into him, desperate for contact.

“Wh... What? Justin...” I shamelessly begged for him to continue. Justin held me firmly against the wall, his hands still cupping my ass, as I tried to grind my hips into him.

Justin's hooded eyes looked up into mine, and he smirked at me as my patience wore thin.

"Fine then, if that's how you want to play..." I kicked my legs out of his grip, planting my feet on the floor. "Two can play this game, Justin." I stalked towards him as he backed away, a wicked grin on his lips. "Don't..." I held up an authoritative finger as Justin opened his mouth to speak. I swallowed my fear and tried to find what little courage I had left in my mind as I faced his glorious, naked body.

A little help would be nice, Nikita...

“On your knees,” I commanded, slowly taking another step towards him. His eyes darkened with desire as he licked his lips. His grin was still on his lips as he lowered to the ground, his delicious cock twitching as I

approached. Broken shards from the mirror were still under our feet and knees, but neither of us cared to notice. Justin reached his hands up to my legs, but I raised my foot to step on his shoulder and push him down to sit on his heels. “I didn’t say you could touch me,” I purred.

“Yes... ma’am...” Justin groaned, eye level with my still wet pussy.

“Funny thing is, *you* don’t get to decide when I come. *I decide.*” My foot slid down his back so I was resting the back of my thigh on his shoulder. One of Justin’s hands found the back of my other leg, while the other held the top of the leg draped over his shoulder. “You’re going to take care of this pussy until I say to stop.”

“Fuck, Val...”

My hands found his hair, and he pulled my pussy to his mouth, his tongue trailing up my entrance. *Oh my god, he listened, he—* Justin interrupted my thoughts, sucking on my clit, making me throw my head back. His fingertips gripped my legs harder as I rocked my hips on his chin. The stubble of his beard teased my sensitive skin, heightening the pleasure.

“Just... Just like that...” I hoarsely groaned as my orgasm began to surface.

“I fucking love your sweet cunt...” Justin hummed as I started to grind on his face faster.

“F-Fingers...” His tongue felt so fucking good, I could barely speak.

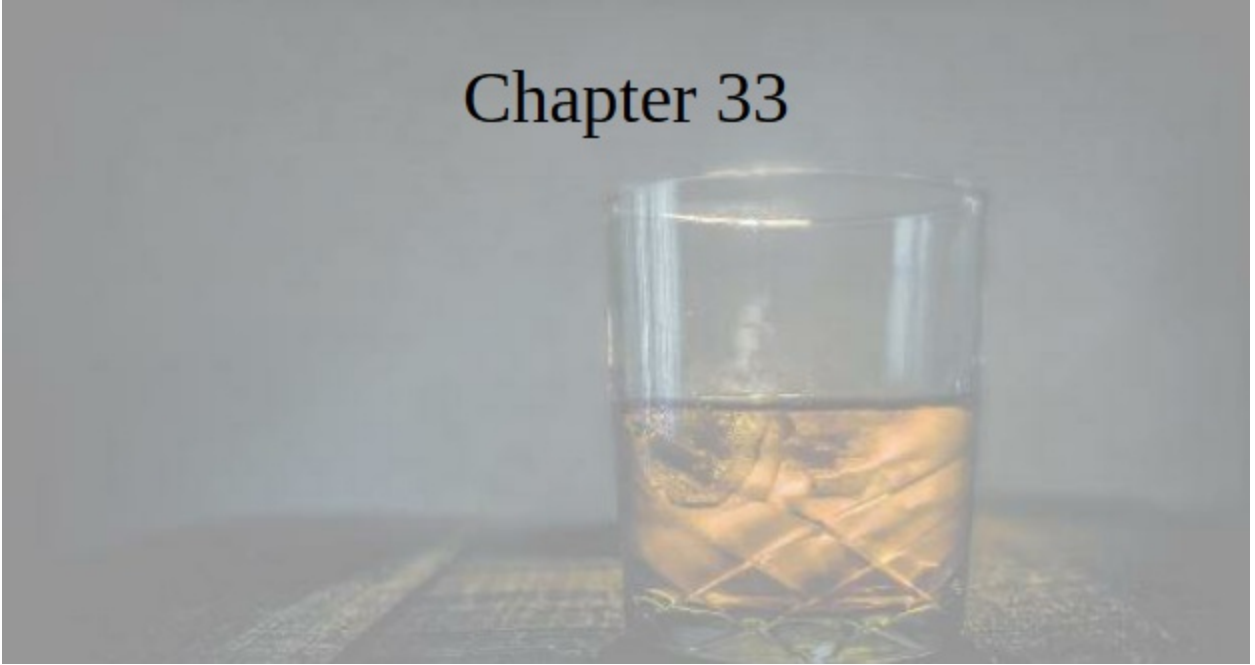
“Yes, my queen.” Justin quickly let go of the back of my thigh, inserting two fingers into my pussy.

“Y-Yes...” My legs shook as my pussy began to clench on his fingers, and Justin continued to lick and suck my clit.

The most intense orgasm I had ever felt tore through my body, leaving me panting and sweating. All my weight resting on Justin’s shoulders.

“God, I love you, sweetheart. My perfect Valentina.” Justin picked me up, carrying me to the bedroom, as we kissed passionately. Broken pieces of mirror fell from our bodies as we moved.

Chapter 33



Justin

Valentina had just put one of my t-shirts on, and I pulled on my sweatpants, as Anna rushed back into the room, her motorcycle helmet still on.

“So, I didn’t know which to get, so I just got them all, and—” Anna froze in place as she saw our various states of undress. “Oh my fucking god, seriously? If you wanted to fuck, you should’ve just said so!” She ripped off her helmet, pretending to be shocked, but acted overly dramatic. With the back of her hand on her forehead, she feigned a look of disgust.

“I—” A hot, delicious blush blossomed on Valentina’s cheeks.

“Seriously, though, are you okay, babe? You really zoned out in there; it worried me.” This time, genuine concern shone in her icy blue eyes.

“I’m sorry, Anna. I just...” Tears welled in Valentina’s eyes, and Anna shoved the bag of supplies in my chest and ran to her. She opened her arms, but Valentina hugged her own arms before sobbing into Anna’s shoulder.

“Oh Vallie, I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry...” They cried together as Valentina released all of her pent-up emotions. I saw her knees tremble, and she stumbled forward into Anna.

“I’m sorry, I-I got a little... um... dizzy...” Anna caught her as she stumbled forward again, and I immediately rushed to her side.

“You’re looking pale, Val. Let’s sit down, okay?” I guided her to sit on the edge of the bed. “I’m going to check your stitches.” Gently brushing her messy hair aside, I examined her stitches. She was healing well, but was still very bruised.

“How’s your head, Vallie?” Anna asked as she peeked over my shoulder.

“It’s okay, not as sore as I was expecting.” A small smile found her lips.

“Okay good, now shower so we can go get coffee and go shopping!” Anna offered a hand to Valentina, and she took it.

“Spare bathroom, please. I’ll have the one with the broken glass cleaned up.” I pointed across the hall, and Valentina gave me a sly, knowing smile.

Anna helped Valentina to the restroom, and my phone rang on the nightstand.

“Hello?”

“Good morning, principino. How is Valentina? Is she well?”

“Good morning, Father. She is much better; Anna is here to visit with her.”

“That is good news; I am happy to hear. I am sorry for forgetting to mention this, but we have a meeting scheduled with The Collective this evening at seven. I know she is still getting acclimated to things, but it would bring confidence to them to see Valentina. They held her mother in high regard during these meetings. It would help to have her there if she can be.”

“Increase their confidence in what, exactly?” I asked as Anna came back into the room, her arms crossed, and her brow furrowed in concern, trying to listen to the conversation.

“I do not want to overwhelm her with all these details, son. Not until she makes a decision in regard to stepping forward as our queen. But I can give

you a general explanation.”

“Anything would be helpful, since we’re both new to this.”

“Mafia ties run deep, even outside of Las Vegas, son. There are 3 main families that oversee all of our operations across the country. The Fiorellis are here in Las Vegas, the Contis in Chicago, and the Morettis in New York. Nikolai Conti, Enzo Moretti, their guards, myself, and Antonio, one of Vicente's men, are always in attendance.”

“They come from that far away just for a meeting?”

“Yes, it is important we meet regularly to ensure our operations are running smoothly, and to discuss any issues we may come across in our respective areas.”

“If she comes, what would she need?”

“I am having a rack of clothes sent up from the boutique. I asked Emily, the owner, to prepare what Valentina had in the fitting room. Please also let her know the items on black hangers are all gifts from Spencer. Emily let me know he left some money to pick some things Valentina might like.” I smiled, nodding in approval at my friend’s thoughtfulness.

“I am having them sent up now. Justin, could you please send the elevator down to floor three?”

“Yes, doing that now.”

“We will be discussing finances, mostly, and Marco.” Rico sighed.

“What? Why Marco?” My question caught Anna’s attention, as pure hatred flashed in her eyes. I held up a finger; I wasn’t sure if this was information I could share with her yet.

“You now know he’s the leader of the Calaveras Negras, the cartel that has been our main supplier. Marco has... auctions. We have one of Vicente’s

men go to every one to purchase as many girls as he can, so we can help them get home.”

“Wait, what? Girls?” I asked as Anna looked at me, impatience and frustration on her face.

“Yes, principino. Marco has begun an underground auction for young girls. He sells them to men as... Well, you get the idea...” Rico hesitated, and I couldn’t help my gasp. My whole body shook with anger and disgust. I shook my head and went to meet the elevator.

“I will meet you at the elevator on the third floor at six-thirty. Please let Valentina know anything she wears will suffice, but the men would respond well to a more business professional look. I know she picked a few lovely things at the boutique.”

“Sure. I’ll let her know when she gets out of the shower.” I hung up the phone, seething with anger. Meeting the elevator as the door opened, I wheeled in the garment rack as Valentina came from the spare bathroom. Going to her side, I gently turned her cheek to meet my eyes.

“Rico sent up what you picked at the boutique. The black hangers are gifts from Spencer. We have a meeting tonight, sweetheart.” I raised an eyebrow, giving her a knowing look as she subtly nodded.

“Wait, Spencer? Like Spencer West? That motherfucker picked out women’s clothing?” Anna crossed her arms again, cocking an eyebrow. I shrugged in reply.

Valentina studied the various garment bags with tears in her eyes. I silenced her anxiety with a kiss. My tongue nudged at her lips, requesting entry. She quickly granted it, deepening our kiss, and my hand found her cheek as I gently held her. She gently pulled away from me and reached for a note taped to one of the hangers.

You got this Val. Knock them dead. Justin too ;) -Spence

I smiled at his note and left Valentina to look through her clothes with Anna while I went to shower.



Twenty minutes later, I came out of the bathroom to Anna standing behind Valentina, zipping her into a skin tight, deep red dress. She turned to face me, and I was floored. She was the most beautiful fucking thing I'd ever seen. The dress had long sleeves and sat almost off her shoulders. My eyes trailed down her body, examining how the fabric hugged her delicious curves. It ended in a tight pencil skirt with a slit to her mid thigh, and all I could think of was how perfect that dress would look pooled at her feet.

Valentina smiled at me as she turned back around to strut around the room for a very enthusiastic Anna.

“Yes, ma’am! That’s the winner!” Anna applauded, nodding her head in approval.

I leaned on the door frame of the room, crossing my arms. *There’s my Val. My Queen.* My phone rang in my pocket, and it was torture tearing my eyes away from Valentina.

“Hey Spence, what’s up, man?”

“We need to fucking talk.” His serious tone had me on high alert as I met Anna’s concerned gaze.

“Anna’s here with Val; come on over to the suite.” I gave Spencer directions to the back parking lot and left the girls to go meet him.

Spencer leaned on his Harley, deep in thought, when I made my way outside. He looked troubled, and it was very unusual.

“Hey, JC.” He crossed his arms and kicked a few rocks on the ground at his feet.

“What’s up with you Spence? You seem off.”

“We need to talk...” Spencer sighed as he reached in the chest pocket of his leather jacket, handing me a crumpled up envelope. “We need to talk about this.”

Trying to smooth out all the creases, I opened the envelope and pulled out a fancy, formal looking invitation.

“Some fancy auction? Black tie attire and masquerade-type masks required? What is this about?”

“We really should talk inside, man. We need Rico, too.” Spencer sighed, and I nodded, leading the way back to the elevator. On our way up, I texted my father to meet us at the elevator.

A minute later, the three of us made our way back into the suite. It was very quiet, oddly quiet. We all looked at each other, immediate concern on Spencer and Rico’s faces. Spencer pulled his Glock out from his waistband, and Rico reached to his shoulder holster as we slowly entered the foyer.

“Pssst!” A small, dainty hand waved over the back of the couch.

I ran over and found Anna with a sleeping Valentina. She was back in her silk robe, resting her head on Anna’s lap, dried tears staining her face. Spencer and Rico holstered their guns.

“Here, JC. Swap?” Spencer handed me a throw pillow from the loveseat. I gently cradled Valentina’s head as Anna slipped out and put the pillow underneath her. She sighed in her sleep, getting settled in, and Spencer draped her blanket over her body.

Anna stretched as we all made our way back to the sitting room.

“Detective Graham, what a pleasant surprise.” Rico placed a kiss on top of her hand as she placed it in his.

“Good to see you, Rico,” Anna winked and Spencer rolled his eyes. “So who’s going to tell me what the fuck all this is about? There’s some shit going on, and I seem to be the only one who doesn’t know about it.”

Rico poured us all a few fingers of whiskey and handed us glasses as Spencer hung his head.

“I work for Marco.” His sudden confession caused me to choke on my whiskey.

“Wait, come again?” Anna’s glass was frozen at her lips.

“You fucking *what?*” I lunged at him, grabbing him by the lapels of his leather jacket, causing him to drop his glass. Slamming him into the wall behind him, I threw a punch that he easily dodged, and my fist went through the wall next to his head instead.

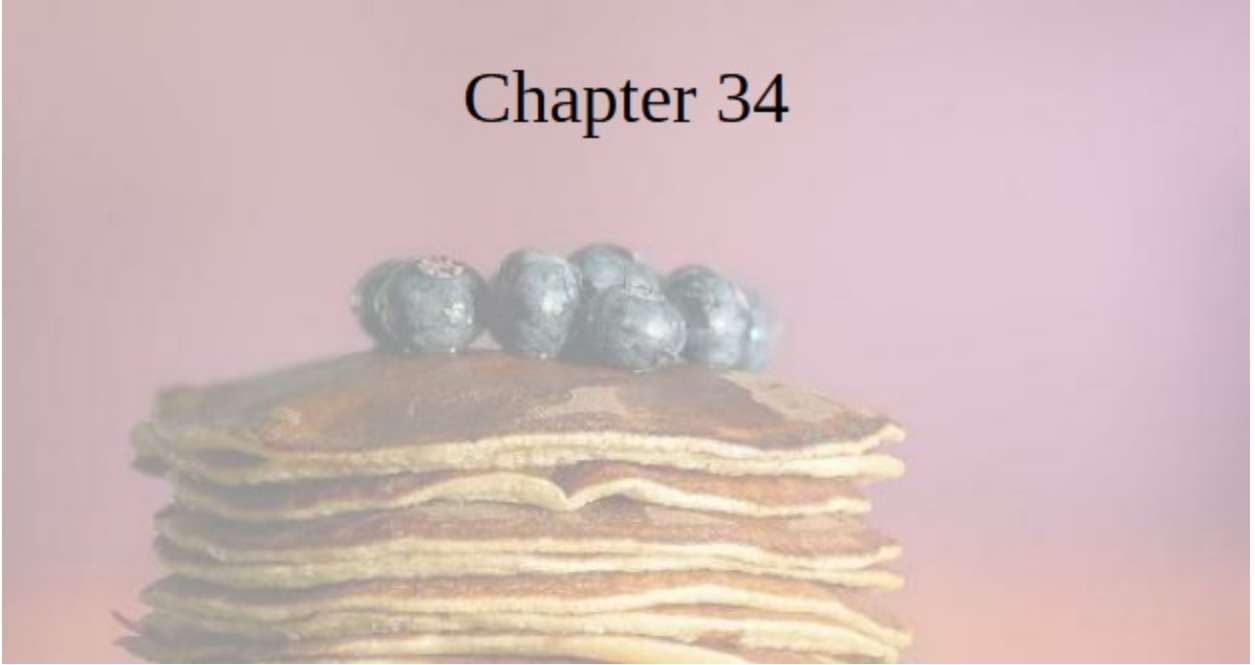
“Justin, enough!” Rico hissed. “Do not wake Valentina with this.”

Anna came to my side, placing her hands on my arm, still holding Spencer’s jacket.

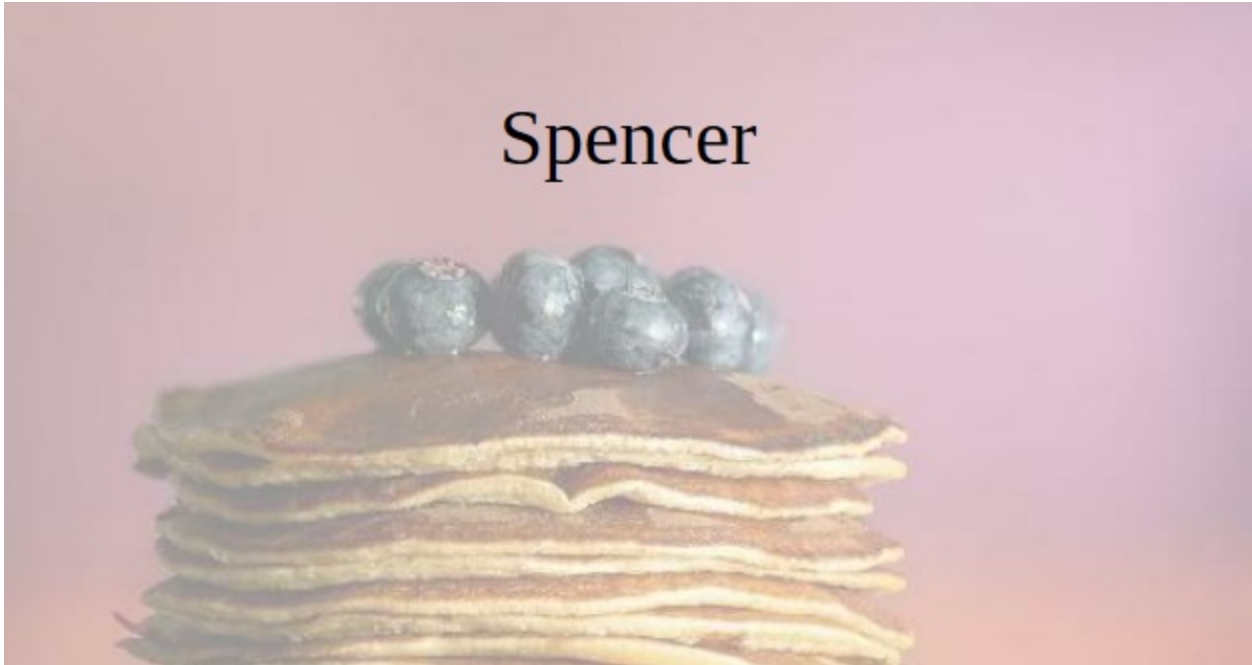
“That’s enough, okay? You crazy fuckers need this energy to take down Marco, not each other.” She gave me a crooked smile as I released Spencer.

“Justin, fuck, I’m so sorry. Please let me explain...” Spencer dropped to one of the recliners, burying his face in his hands. Rico put a comforting hand on his shoulder as Anna and I just stared at each other in stunned shock.

Chapter 34



Spencer



The hardest fucking thing I've ever had to do in my life was watch Cassie drive away with Anna. This was a close second, telling my best friend my ugly truth. I didn't realize how much the look of utter disgust on his face would affect me, as I painfully tried to fight off my shadow self.

"What the fuck, West! Spill it!" Anna's glass slamming on to the bar cart made me jump.

"I-I..." I hated how fucking pathetic I sounded.

"Please, calm down for a moment. Give him a chance to speak and listen." Rico's calm, but firm voice eased my anxiety enough to look up from my hands to see Valentina standing in the doorway.

"W-What's going on?" Valentina yawned as she went to Justin's side. "Spencer, are you okay?" Genuine concern shone in her eyes as I looked away from her to a still disgusted Justin.

"Please, let me explain."

"You have five minutes before I kick you the fuck out of here." He put a protective arm around Valentina as I stood to face the only family I'd ever

known.

“Two... Two years ago,” I shook off my nerves and looked my best friend in the eyes. “Two years ago, I was walking Cassie to work. She used to stay here with me and worked at that Hell's Kitchen outside of Caesar's.”

Rico handed me my glass, and I downed it, nodding in thanks.

“Marco was there with Luciano, in the fucking alley behind Cassie's work entrance.”

“M-my half brother?” Valentina looked puzzled.

“Yes, he was mid-deal or something with Marco when he came up, trying to pick up Cassie. Said shit about getting her a better job with a body like that. He reached for Cassie, and I punched the motherfucker right in the jaw. He stumbled backwards, tripping over one of those parking stones, and hit his head. He was high as a fucking kite, and the blow to the head killed him. Val, I swear... This was all a big accident...”

I couldn't face her—this woman had been through so much, partly because of me, and I couldn't bear it. My eyes found the floor as I heard her sniffle.

“Go on, son,” Rico nudged.

“Marco told me who he was, threatened that the Fiorellis would kill Cassie and me for what happened... I couldn't... I couldn't have that happen to Cassie.”

“That's why...” Anna sighed. “That's why I was assigned to get her to Chicago... They just told me she was going to protective custody. I didn't know all the details...”

“Marco made me agree to be his little errand boy, and earn the Calaveras Negras' protection from the Fiorelli's. But please... Please, Justin. Marco fucking took Cassie. He—” I was interrupted by Valentina throwing her body on mine, wrapping her arms around my middle.

She sobbed into my shirt, and I was unsure what to do with my hands.

“May I?” I asked hesitantly. As she nodded, I held her gently, and felt tears well in my eyes. Looking up at Justin, I could see his eyes softening as he watched my every move with Valentina. I looked at Anna, who was fuming with rage and ready to fight. Rico nodded at me, like a proud father who accepted me, faults and all. For once in my pathetic life, I had a family and at this moment, with all my friends surrounding me, I vowed to do anything to protect them. We were just missing Cassie...

“Justin... Please, we have to get Cassie. We have to...” I fell to my knees after Valentina released me from our hug, unable to fight the tears anymore. “S-she’s all... all I have left.” I hung my head, letting the tears fall. Valentina stood in front of me, holding my head to her stomach as she gently stroked my hair.

“We have to get Cassie.” Valentina’s words, full of conviction, made something twitch in my brain. It was a need to obey, a need to serve her.

“Does this have anything to do with that invite you showed me, Spence?” Justin pulled the wrinkled invitation from his back pocket.

All I could do was nod my head; Valentina’s gentle hands stroking my hair were calming my darkness. I closed my eyes, letting her comforting touches envelop me.

“Okay, hold the fuck up one minute,” Anna interrupted. “You’re telling me that Luciano Fiorelli is your half brother, Vallie? He was in the fucking mafia!”

I looked at Justin, who then looked at Rico. Anna didn’t know about Valentina, and I felt her hands stiffen slightly in my hair.

“Her half brother made some obvious poor choices with whom he decided to spend his time with.” Rico sighed as he gave me a knowing look.

“You can’t make that mistake, Vallie. Having to deal with fucking bitch ass Marco is enough. You don’t need to get yourself wrapped up in this mafia shit, too.” Anna crossed her arms, holding her empty glass under her elbow.

“I didn’t even know Luciano existed until maybe three years ago.” Valentina stopped stroking my hair and reached her hands down to help me stand. I took one, quickly obeying her silent command, and stood tall by her side.

“Justin, that invite,” I pointed to the envelope in his hands. “It’s an exclusive... event. Those that receive this envelope with his wax seal on it, are invited to his exclusive auction.” Justin studied the wax seal, a disgusted look on his face as he handed it to Anna.

“Gabriel got one of these invites, it didn’t have this wax seal though. At least not that I noticed,” Anna snatched it out of Justin’s hand. “Please join us for Mr. De La Rosa’s quarterly auction. Sounds like a crock of horseshit if you ask me.” She scoffed, tossing Justin the invitation.

“There’s a rumor that Marco’s auctions are only open to a select few,” Rico said as his eyes darkened in anger.

“Yeah, I’ve gotten word of that too. Gabriel is going to attend to snoop around. I wish I could go just to arrest this motherfucker.”

Valentina went to Justin’s side, holding his hand and leaning into him. Anna began to pace back and forth, and Rico came to my side, placing a firm hand on my shoulder.

“A word, son?” I nodded, following him to the foyer.

“I will speak with Valentina, and The Collective in our meeting this evening. I know she will not hesitate to agree, so I will just let you know that you have all of us behind you. The Fiorellis will do all we can to help. Cassie, as well. We will get her back, Spencer.”

“I need to talk about Cassie without Anna. It’s urgent.” My hands shook as I tried to control the darkness building up in me.

“Alright, son. Give me a moment.” Rico nodded as he returned to the sitting room.

“Anna, my dear. Are you able to help us get a few blueprints or photos of a building where we think Marco is having this auction?”

“Are we gonna blow shit up? Because I’m ready to just rid the world of this asshole.” Anna crossed her arms defiantly.

“Unfortunately, no. But if Spencer is going, it would be helpful to have him prepared for a quick exit in case of an emergency.” Rico sighed.

“Yeah, that’s not a bad idea. Vallie, I’ll be back after your meeting, okay? This will only take me an hour, tops.” Anna put on her motorcycle helmet before pulling Valentina into a tight hug.

“Ride safe, Anna,” she said gently.

“Always.” Anna winked and gave a little wave to Rico as she headed to the elevator.

I took this time to head to the kitchen. Resting my hands on the edge of the sink, I stared at the garbage disposal. My hair began to fall forward in my face, and I reached back to readjust Cassie’s hair band, forgetting about my still taped fingers. Hissing in pain, I quickly gave up, slipping the hair band onto my wrist, and splashed cold water on my face.

“Hey man, are you alright?” Justin stood in the doorway to the kitchen, his arms crossed.

“JC, I’m so fucking sorry. I didn’t know what to do. If I knew about what he did to Valentina...”

“It was out of your control, Spence. I would’ve done the same if Cassie was my sister.”

“I should’ve told you...”

“Are you okay, Spencer?” Valentina’s soft voice interrupted.

“Not quite. We needed to talk without Anna, so Rico helped get her to leave. I’m not sure what she knows about you and the Fiorellis.”

Valentina hugged her arms, looking guilty. Rico joined us and motioned to the dining room table. We all sat and I took a deep breath, preparing myself for this conversation.

“Fuck. I’m just going to say it before I can’t fucking say it. Marco kidnapped Cassie. She was in witness protection in Chicago, but he fucking got her. He had my invitation sent to the station, and when I refused to go, he had the fucking chief hand me a padded envelope with Cassie’s fucking finger in it.” My darkness and my rage were boiling up inside me as I reached into my pocket, slamming a note onto the table under my palm. Valentina snatched up the note and read it, her hands shaking as her face twisted into a matching anger.

“It’s his writing. Did he really send her finger? Are you sure it was Cassie’s?” she asked through clenched teeth.

“Yes, we have the same fucking tattoo.” I showed them my finger and the shitty mustache tattoo. “It had her fucking favorite glittery pink nail polish.”

“Was it a clean cut? Can it be reattached?” Justin asked.

“I rushed it to the hospital on ice, but I don’t know, man. The cut itself was clean, but they smashed the shit out of the severed side. I don’t think she will be able to. Dr. Robertson told me to bring her in within an hour of bringing the finger to them. It’s been two days.”

“Fuck,” Justin hissed.

“We need to discuss this at the meeting tonight, mia cara. We need to prepare and make sure we are the ones to, Rico paused, pinching the bridge

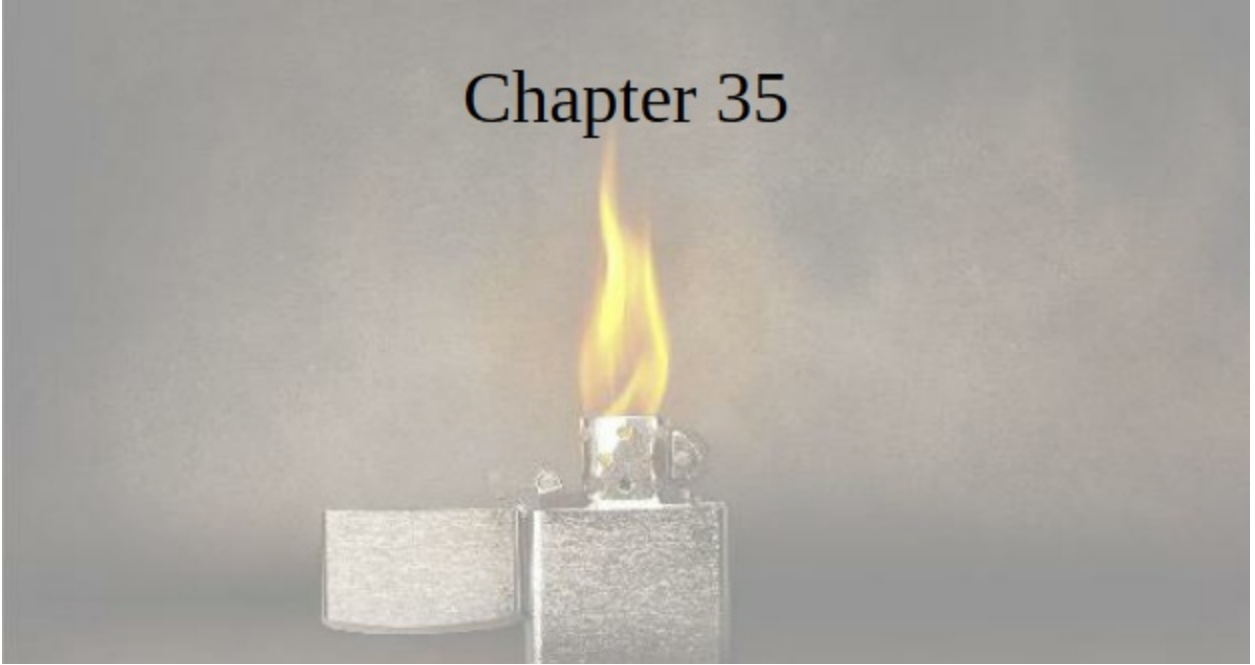
of his nose and closing his eyes as if he couldn't believe he was speaking the words, "purchase Cassie."

"The auction is on tomorrow at four, so it doesn't leave us a lot of time to plan." I rested my head in my hands in annoyance.

"We have the meeting in three hours. We need to let Valentina prepare." Rico stood, buttoning up his suit jacket, and I followed.

"We'll get her, Spencer. I promise." Valentina's eyes were full of power. I nodded at her as I followed Rico to the elevator.

Chapter 35



Valentina



“Wow, he went all out, huh?” Justin grinned as he teased the knot on the belt of my robe as we stood before my garment rack.

“I’ve never owned anything this nice, or this fancy, before. It feels surreal.”

“You deserve this, and more, sweetheart.” His gentle kiss on the top of my head made me blush. “Not bad, Spence.” Justin nodded in approval as he scanned the rack. His hands stopped on the deep red dress I had tried on earlier.

I continued to look through the hangers as a few tears fell. Tears of happiness, which I hadn’t experienced since before I met Marco. My eyes were drawn to that one dress in particular. It was a deep red that almost looked black. I turned the hanger, so the dress was facing me. Slipping it on, it fit like a glove, hugging my curves in all the right places. The dress was long-sleeved with a v-neck, showing off my cleavage in a tasteful way; not too low-cut, which made me more comfortable, since I would be in a room

full of men I did not know. The tight-fitting pencil skirt made me feel feminine and powerful.

The boutique owner had placed various pantyhose in a little bag, and I chose sheer, thigh-high black ones, with a seam up the back. Scanning the rack again, I saw a few shoe boxes and thanked the boutique gods for knowing my size.

The first box I opened had the most stunning deep red pumps, almost the exact color of the dress, and I giggled as I tried them on. Justin was leaning on the wall, watching my every move. The pumps fit perfectly, and I decided to give him a little show.

Turning to face away from him, I slowly untied the belt of the bathrobe and wiggled my shoulders, letting the robe fall slowly to the creases of my elbows. Looking over my shoulder in his direction, I could see him adjust himself in his jeans, and I let the robe fall to the floor. I had a red lace bra on with a matching thong and garter belt.

Acting as if he wasn't there, I kicked off the pumps and bent over to place my foot into one leg of the pantyhose. Gathering it at my ankle, I propped my foot up on the bed, rolling the sheer fabric up my leg slowly as Justin cleared his throat, shifting his standing position. I clipped it in place on the garter belt and repeated the process with the other leg, then slid my feet back into the heels

“Fuck, Val. You’re going to make me bend you over the bed and claim that pussy again.”

Justin’s arms were crossed as he leaned against the wall. His eyes darkened as I sauntered over to him, showing off my new shoes. Suddenly, he lunged forward, throwing me over his shoulder. He pulled my pumps back off and

tossed me onto the bed. I spread my legs for him as he tore off his boxer briefs...

Justin's phone rang, and I wanted to smash that thing underneath the heel of my new shoes. He sighed when he saw Rico's name, but he answered. I sat up, readjusting my garter belt as he nodded, and said, "okay, I'll let her know," before hanging up.

"Rico called, Val. They'll be ready when we are." Justin cupped my cheeks, kissing my forehead. I was suddenly grateful for the interruption. I didn't want to be flustered for this meeting. Justin went to the closet to get his suit, as I continued to finish getting dressed.

Slipping into my dress, I held it in place at my chest and turned to find Justin to help me zip it up. He was buttoning up the cuffs of his shirt at his wrists, and he took my breath away in his all black outfit. Black slacks fit him perfectly, the thighs of them stretching slightly to accommodate his muscular legs. His long sleeve black button-up shirt did the same, fitting tighter around his arms and chest. My mouth watered at the image of ripping his shirt open and—

"Are you okay, sweetheart?"

"Yes, just nervous, that's all." Justin came to me and held my hand, lacing our fingers together, then spun me around as if we were dancing. He placed delicate kisses on the back of my neck as his hands found my arms.

"Please, let me..." Justin's hot breath on my neck sent a shiver down my spine as he trailed kisses up my ear. He pulled himself away and zipped up the dress, standing back to look at me. He licked his lips again, and I felt a blush rise on my cheeks.

"Quit it! We need to meet Rico!" I slapped his arm playfully before reaching for my new pumps.

“Baby, I can’t wait for that dress to be on the floor.”

“You can prove that to me later, Casanova.” I slipped on my pumps and turned around for Justin to show off the outfit.

“Anything you wear is fucking perfection, sweetheart.” I couldn’t help but blush again, as I trembled nervously.

“I’ll be right here with you the whole time, Val. I’m never leaving your side again.”

Quickly, I applied basic makeup, mascara, eyeliner, and a soft pink lipstick. Hand-in-hand, we walked to the elevator, as I tried desperately to swallow my fear and keep my head held high.

We met Rico on the third floor, and he smiled in approval at my dress. Justin placed a protective hand on the small of my back, guiding me gently out of the elevator.

“Absolutely stunning, mia cara.” Rico placed a gentle kiss on top of my hand. I blushed and looked to my feet. “Never lower your eyes to any man, my flower.” He very gently lifted my chin. I tried to hide the tears forming as I nodded in reply.

“I’ll stay by your side the whole time, sweetheart.” He placed a kiss on top of my head and smiled at me.

“There is one stop we have to make before the meeting, mia cara.”

Rico led us down a hallway, stopping at a big, dark mahogany door. It had a gold, fancy “F” on it, and shiny gold trim and filigree. He pulled out a skeleton key with a gold tassel attached and unlocked the door. He pushed it open, standing aside to allow me to enter. I looked up at Justin hesitantly. He nodded as he let me enter before him.

I stepped into the room and gasped at the luxurious office before me. Immediately, I smelled my father’s aftershave and tears began to fall. Justin

and Rico waited in the doorway to give me privacy with my late father's things. There were built-in bookshelves along a complete wall to my right. I walked up, scanning the picture frames, books, and trinkets as I trailed my fingertips along the shelves.

Reaching up to a picture frame with my left hand, I saw my beautiful mom smiling at a three-year-old me as she lifted me up over her head, my arms out at my sides. I traced her smile as tears landed on the glass. I hugged the picture frame as memories of my mom flooded my mind. Replacing the frame, my eyes found my engagement ring. I instantly felt nauseous, and a hot rage began to burn in my soul.

“Get it off.”

“Val?” Justin ran up to me, trying to find my eyes. All I could see was Marco forcing this god-awful ring onto my finger.

“I said, ‘Get. It. Off.’”

Rico shut the door to the office and approached slowly.

“What do you need off, mia cara?”

Everything began to get muffled in my ears again, as I replayed memories of Marco forcing the ring on my finger, then forcing his disgusting cock into my mouth after. I dug my nails into my palms again, desperate to keep myself grounded, but I couldn't feel a thing.

“Valentina,” Justin said firmly as I pinched my brows in anger. Continuing to stare into Justin's chest, I shook with a white hot anger.

“I will wait outside the door. These walls are soundproof, principino.” I heard the office door open and shut as I focused on the same spot on Justin's chest.

“I'm talking to you, Valentina.” Justin harshly gripped my chin, forcing me to look at him.

“Get. It. Off.” I repeated as I shook my face out of his grip. Justin’s dark eyes stared me down, trying to figure out what I meant. Quickly, I raised my left fist, throwing a punch towards his cheek. He caught my fist, squeezing my knuckles.

“Now, now, sweetheart. That’s not playing nice,” he purred as he squeezed my hand harder.

“I won’t miss next time, if you don’t get it the fuck off of me,” I hissed, trying to pull my fist away. The realization hit Justin as he switched his grip to my wrist, studying the engagement ring.

“Looks like we need to learn how to ask nicely, baby,” he pulled me to him by the wrist, our lips just barely touching. “I’ve been meaning to rip this piece of shit off your finger. It’s in the way.” His hot breath on my lips made my mouth water.

He took my ring finger into his mouth, his tongue trailing up and down my finger. As he pressed my finger further into his mouth towards his throat, he bit down on either side of the ring, moving his bottom jaw forward, then backward as he pulled, trying to get it off. Slowly, it inched closer to the tip of my finger until it became painfully tight. Withdrawing my finger slowly from his mouth, he studied it. My finger was getting red and sore as the ring squeezed too tightly at the bend of my finger.

“Sweetheart, I need to get Rico to help, okay? We will finish this later.” He moved my other hand to his hard cock over his slacks, and I gripped his length.

“...Mine,” I purred as I pulled him closer by his cock as our lips crashed together again.

“Fuck, Val. Yes, sweetheart, yours.” He forced himself away from me and adjusted himself in his pants before opening the door for Rico to come in.

“Do you have anything to help cut this?” He showed Rico my red finger, and he smiled.

“Yes, principino, one moment.” He opened a small drawer in the desk and brought out a little tool. It looked like pliers, with a small rotary blade on one side and a handle like a power drill. “Don’t ask why we have a ring cutter, we just do.” Rico winked at me as he handed Justin the cutting tool. Seeing the blade on it made me wince.

“I got you, sweetheart. Let’s get him off of you for good.” I nodded and kept my eyes on Justin as he gently slid one half of the tool underneath my ring. The cutter made a slight whirring sound as he turned it on, and I gripped his shirt with my right hand. Resting my forehead on his shoulder, he pressed on the cutter and quickly sliced through the ring.

“One more time, baby.” Justin turned the ring on my finger, cutting the opposite side, and I heard it fall to the desk with a harsh “ding”.

I couldn’t help it, I burst into tears. Justin dropped the cutter, wrapping me up in his arms.

“Such a good girl,” Justin whispered in my ear for just me to hear. “My perfect Valentina.” Rico reached into his pocket, pulling out a handkerchief, and handed it to me.

“T-thank you.” I tried to compose myself as I dabbed my eyes with Rico’s handkerchief, looking at my red, swollen finger. *Nikita, it’s finally gone. Finally fucking gone.*

“The loss of one accessory means you should have another, my flower.” Rico reached into the main drawer of my father’s desk, pulling out a large, flat black velvet box. He handed it to me, and I stared at the gold initials engraved in the corner.

“M-my...”

“This was your mother’s, mia cara. Every time your father had a meeting, or something important to tend to as a boss, your mother would wear these. The men of the Collective, and our employees, will know you mean business when you have them on.”

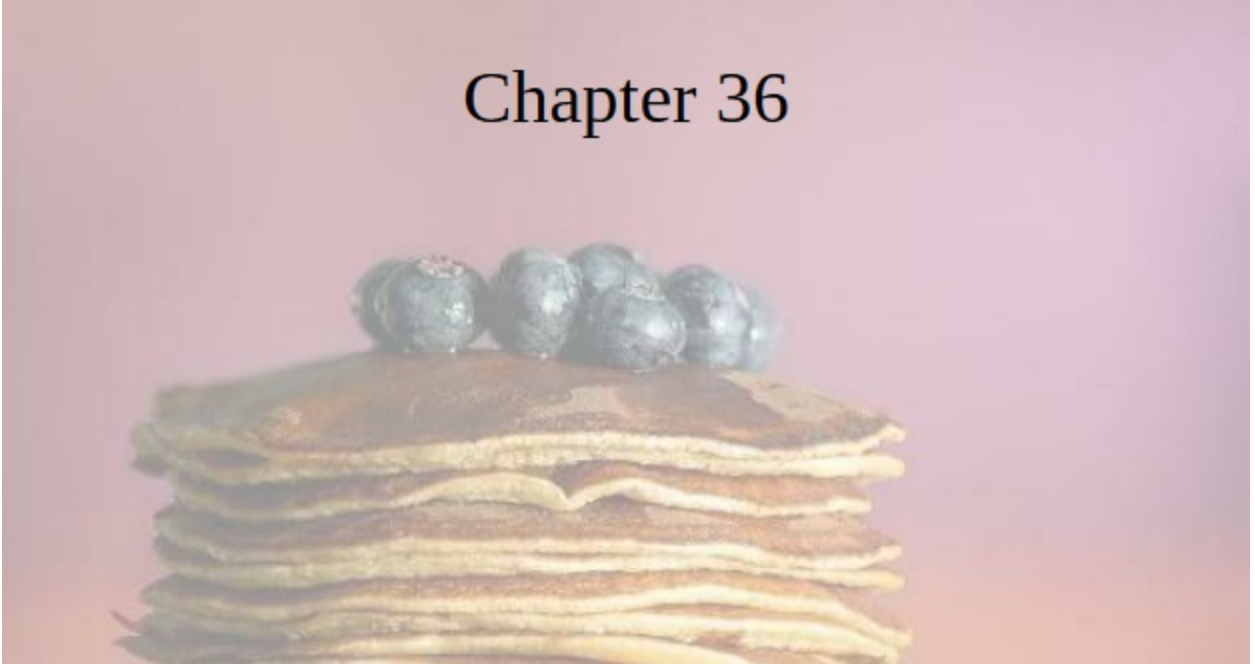
I pulled out the most beautiful string of pearls I’d ever seen. They were absolutely stunning. Studying each one, I remembered my mom wearing them at my engagement dinner that Marco had hosted.

“May I?” Justin held his hands out, and I gently placed my mom’s pearls in them, turning to face Rico. I held my hair up as Justin gently hooked the clasp, trailing his hands down my arms after he finished. Rico looked at me with tears in his eyes, smiling.

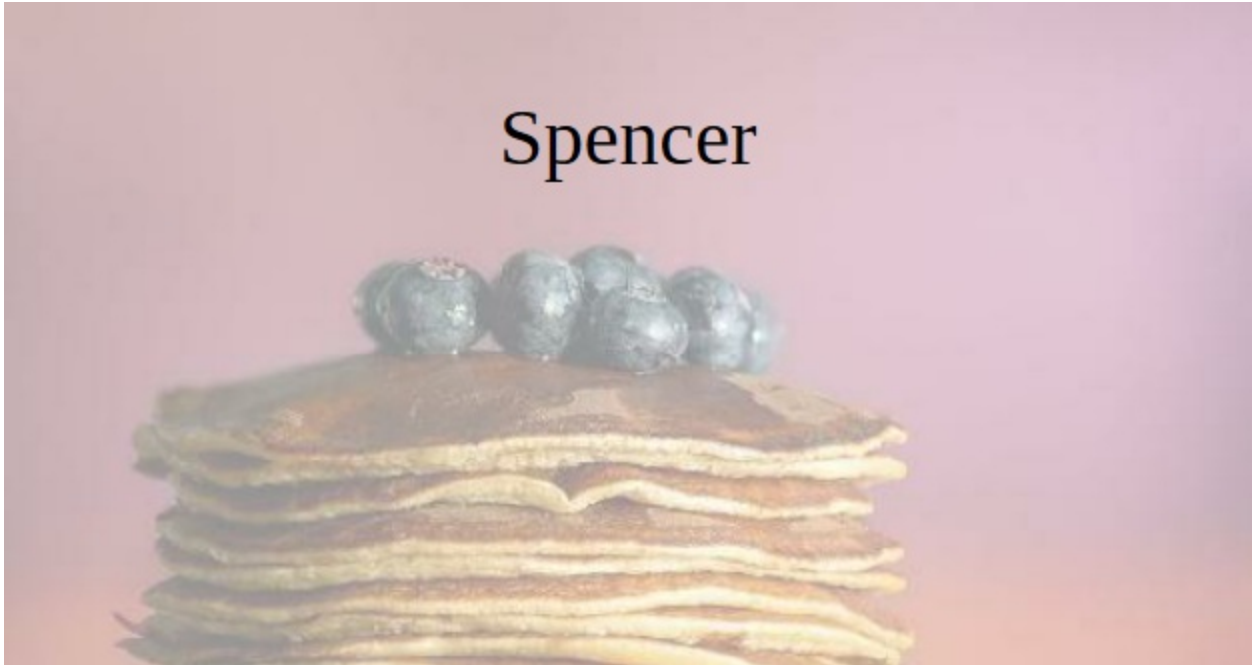
“Oh, mia cara, you truly are beautiful, just like Maria.” Rico kissed the top of my hand, and I tried to keep my tears at bay again. “Come, let us meet with The Collective, they will be arriving soon.” Rico placed the skeleton key in my hands. “This is your office now, my flower. Whether you decide to follow in Vicente’s footsteps or not.”

Holding the key to my chest at my heart, I reached for Justin’s hand, and he led me out of the office. We followed Rico to the meeting, and I focused on my mom’s pearls. Drawing up the memory of her strength and resilience.

Chapter 36



Spencer



Man, I could really go for some fucking pancakes. I was waiting for Anna in the parking lot of the MGM Grand, and I sighed when Anna rode up on her sporty, all black crotch-rocket bike. As much as I hated to admit it, it was hot seeing a curvy, feisty woman straddling a motorcycle.

“What are you grinning at, smokechaser?” she taunted as she flipped up the visor on her helmet.

“Be careful, you donut munching meter maid,” I teased, as I exaggeratingly eyed her up and down. *Not fair that she’s fucking fine as hell.*

“Don’t test me, West. I’d hate for you to mess up your hair, pretty boy,” she shot back.

“Hmm, I’d love to see what happens if I do test you, paper pusher.” Cocking an eyebrow, I sauntered over to her bike, tapping her gauges. Anna leaned forward on to the gas tank with a crooked grin on her face.

“Oh, I bet you would, wouldn’t—” I interrupted her by hitting the killswitch, completely shutting off her bike.

“You stupid motherfucker!” She kicked out the kickstand and got off her bike, ripping her helmet off. She was wearing a pack on her back with two tubes sticking straight up out of it. Most likely the blueprints Rico asked for.

“Okay, perfect, you’re off your bike. Come be my backpack and let’s go to Sirens. Val, Justin, and Rico will be an hour or so in that meeting. I’m fucking starving.”

“I’m no one’s backpack, West. I’ll drive myself over. Unless you want to be *my* backpack, pretty boy.”

“And get to cop a feel while you’re riding? Yes, ma’am.” I winked at her.

“Oh dear god, West, you fucking pervert. Let’s get over to Sirens and meet up with Gabriel. He’s there already waiting.” She put her helmet back on, and got back on her bike, starting it up. Quickly, I clipped my helmet in place and started up my baby. Anna peeled out of the parking lot, and I followed close behind.

Anna was impressive on her bike, expertly weaving in and out of traffic. I pulled up next to her at a red light, admiring her plump ass in her tight black jeans as I approached. Her long, blonde hair was tied up in a braid that laid down her back. As the light turned green, I took off to get in front of her and started patting the top of my helmet, which was biker speak for “cop”. She flipped me off as she accelerated past me, turning into the parking lot for Sirens.

We shared a parking spot, dismounting our bikes and removing our helmets. Using Cassie’s pink hair tie, I pulled up my man bun and quickly tucked my Glock into my waistband while Anna’s attention was on her phone. Adjusting my leather jacket, I nudged her with a fist.

“Let’s go, I’m fucking hungry.”

“Gabriel’s text said he was sitting in a booth towards the back.” Following

Anna in, we quickly found Gabriel. Anna took a seat next to him, and I sat across from them, so I could be facing the front door.

"Hey West, how's it going?" Gabriel took a sip of coffee and winced.

"I'm alright man. Things good with you? Hopefully, it's not too difficult to keep this one in line." I nodded towards Anna as she flipped me off again. "The coffee here sucks ass, but the pancakes are the shit."

"Good evening, Spencer," my regular waitress said with her Jamaican accent as she approached our table. She was in her mid-60s and had dreads down to her ass.

"Hey Miss J, good to see you."

"Good to see you too, baby. Will it be four or eight this time?"

"Eight, please."

"You got it. Need to keep my big boy fed and happy." Miss J patted my stomach, smiling as she looked up at Anna.

"How about you, honey?"

"You know, I'll take some pancakes, too. Just four, though. I need to be able to walk without bursting."

Miss J chuckled, moving to Gabriel.

"I'm okay with just coffee for now, thank you."

"Coming right up." She patted my cheek as she walked away.

"So what did you dig up, Anna?" I asked as she took off her pack with the blueprint tubes.

"Well, it's a really odd venue. The building Rico asked me to look up is really old, and only has one entry and one exit in the main ballroom, where the auction will take place." Anna began unrolling the smaller blueprint as Gabriel looked over her shoulder.

"So why all this planning? It's just an auction, Graham." Gabriel winced at

another sip of coffee. “It’s just some rich snob trying to show off his money..”

“Gabe, you know better. You and Spencer are going into this dude’s auction, and he’s known to have ties to the Calaveras Negras. It’s not a bad idea to be prepared.” Anna gave my shin a small kick under the table so I knew not to bring up anything else.

“Seems shady to me, but what do I know? I’m just a smokechaser. I leave all this investigating to you paper pushers.” I chuckled as Miss J placed my eight-stack of pancakes in front of me. My mouth watered at the sight.

“Jesus Christ, West, do we need to leave the table so you can have some alone time?” Anna laughed as she reached for the maple syrup.

Snatching the syrup away from her, I poured some of the liquid heaven on top of my pancakes while I studied a corner of the blueprint.

“What’s that?” I pointed to a little section in one of the corners with my fork. Anna took a bite of her pancakes, closing her eyes and humming in approval.

“Holy fuck, those are good.” She began to cut another bite with her fork and looked at the blueprint. “That’s an electrical room,” Anna said with a full mouth. “From what I found, it’s where the building’s maintenance keeps their cleaning carts.” Looking up from his phone, Gabriel rested an arm behind Anna.

“I know this guy is probably bad news, but we always have bad news to deal with. Can’t this just be a nice thing for once, and not treat everything we have to go to like it’s a case?” He sighed, then continued scrolling through his phone.

If only you knew who this motherfucker was...

Finally content with the amount of syrup on my pancakes, I sliced into

them with my fork. Miss J came up to the table, her usual smile on her face.

“How’s e...” Her eyes suddenly went wide as she stopped speaking mid-word. She looked at me, confused and shocked, as she looked down at her chest. Blood soaked the front of her blouse, a quick pool forming as she went pale and collapsed at our feet. Anna, Gabriel, and I instantly drew our guns, standing quickly.

The customers in the diner started screaming and scrambled, trying to get out of the room as fast as possible. It was instant chaos as I tried to scan each face as they ran towards the door. Anna and Gabriel aimed their guns in opposite directions, scanning the room, as I checked on Miss J.

“Anna, you find that motherfucker. I need to help her,” I called out to a laser-focused Anna.

“Gabe, get everyone out of here,” she commanded as a bullet flew past her cheek, landing in the booth cushion behind her. Anna ducked behind a partition, scanning the second level seating area, looking for the shooter.

“West! What the fuck is going on?!” Davis, one of the firefighters from my station was kneeling behind a matching partition on the opposite side of the room, peeking his head out.

“I don’t fucking know, Davis. We need to get Miss J the fuck out of here. She’s barely breathing.” Turning my attention back to Miss J, I tried to be as gentle as possible. “Alright, I need to get you out of the area, okay? We’re going over there to Davis.” Her eyes started to roll back as she lost consciousness. I quickly tucked my Glock in the front of my jeans at my stomach.

“West! Go!” Anna yelled as she shot twice, dropping two bodies on the opposite side of the room.

I scooped up Miss J under her armpits and dragged her towards Davis. He

kicked open the backdoor before I could tell him to wait.

“Get down!” I yelled, and Davis dove to the floor. A gunman outside shot in our direction, and I whipped my Glock up, firing two shots, hitting the asshole in the shoulder and the chest. He fell to the ground with a harsh thud, his pistol skidding across the asphalt.

“What the actual fuck is going on, West?!” Davis pulled out his cell to call 911.

“What is this, a fucking ambush?” I could hear Anna yell over the gunfire.

“This is Swiftwater, badge number zero, five, four, nine, six, requesting immediate assistance... Sirens Diner... shots fired... civilian casualties... Send additional units and medic...” The loud gunshots interrupted Gabriel’s call for backup. I quickly turned my attention back to Davis and Miss J.

“Put pressure on her chest; we’re losing her!” I pulled Davis to the floor towards Miss J, readying my Glock and kneeling, my back against the wall next to the open door. Anna was returning fire, covering Gabriel as he helped a mom and her baby get out. The sounds of screams and breaking glass started to become overwhelming. My hands began to shake as I fought memories of the war in Afghanistan.

I allowed my shadow to surround me, numbing my anxious mind. Holding my gun at eye level with both hands, I peeked out to the parking lot from my position near the side entrance. The fucker I shot lay there in a pool of blood, outside a black Audi. Still aiming my gun, I stood and checked every corner and possible hiding spot in the lot.

The front passenger door to the Audi was open as I approached. Carefully, I checked the car to make sure it was empty, my finger on the trigger as I scanned the car. It was empty, except for a small, cigarette pack-sized brown box on the passenger seat. It had Marco’s seal on it, with an envelope with

my name on it attached. I could hear the police sirens coming, so I took the box and put it in my jacket pocket, running back inside the diner to get Miss J out.

Davis was kneeling before her, putting pressure on her chest wound as a trail of tears and blood fell from her eyes to the floor. I kneeled to hold her hand, trying to distract her from the gunshots.

“Guess I should’ve gotten four pancakes, huh?” She tried to chuckle, but winced in pain as Davis held his hands on her chest.

My eyes found Anna, her small, powerful body running and diving under tables. Her marksmanship was some of the best I’d ever seen, and she barked orders at everyone like she was queen of this hell. *Fuck, Graham, I’d bow to you any day. My fucking biker babe.*

“West!” Anna roared, pulling me from my thoughts. Before I had time to react, I heard two gunshots and Anna immediately groaned. I whipped my body around just in time to see her fall backwards, knocking two tables over.

“Anna!” Gabriel dove to the floor to cover her as he continued shooting at a masked shooter who attempted to run out the front door.

The sounds of police sirens continued to get closer as I stood to my full height. The masked thug turned around one more time, aiming his gun at Anna and Gabriel.

“He sends his regards, you fucking traitor,” the masked man yelled in my direction. Before he could say anything else, I fired my Glock once, shooting him between the eyes. He fell backwards, falling through the glass of the diner’s window to the sidewalk outside.

Gabriel was breathing quickly and heavily, turning his attention to a now unconscious Anna.

“G-Graham?” He brushed stray hair from her braid out of her face as he

tried to check her pulse with shaky hands.

"Let me." I pulled Gabriel off of Anna. "You need to get the cops in here and clear the place. We don't need any more of these assholes shooting at us while I tend to Anna. Go deal with the cops, and let me do my job here." Gabriel hesitated, then nodded as he stood to walk out the door, already barking orders at the deputies that arrived. The deputies and Gabriel split off, running in different directions, clearing the building.

Turning my attention to Anna, I could see a black eye forming where she hit her head, and she had thin trails of blood dripping from her nose and the corner of her mouth to her chin. I tucked my Glock back into my waistband and scanned her body. She was still wearing her leather riding jacket. Her long blonde braid was coming loose, and bloody strands fell in her face.

"Anna, please tell me you have Kevlar on." I brushed away her hair and started unzipping her leather jacket, praying to see her bulletproof vest.

"West! Headed out with Miss J!" Davis called out to me.

"Okay!" I yelled back. Time seemed to stand still as cops ran all around me, looking for other victims and making sure the masked assholes were all either dead or in custody.

Turning my attention back to Anna, I slowly unzipped her jacket, careful not to make any sudden movements in case she got shot anywhere. I cursed under my breath when I was met with a bloody white tank top and no Kevlar vest. She wore her badge on a chain around her neck, and it rested in an awkward position along her cleavage. Very slowly, I moved it aside, and she flinched at the movement.

"Spencer..." Anna groaned in pain.

"Hey, meter maid." I smiled at her, trying to keep the light in her eyes.

"You f-fucking ass... asshole." She tried to chuckle, but it made her cough

and groan in pain.

"I need to move your badge, detective." My serious paramedic act made her cough again.

"M-my chest..."

"I know, babe. I'm trying to see how bad it is, so stay still for me, okay?"

Anna sniffled, and I felt her body tremble as she tried to hide tears. I moved her badge, and blood began to freefall from her chest. I immediately put pressure on it, calling for Gabriel.

"Sp-Spencer..." Anna sobbed as her face began to go pale.

"I got you babe. You need to hang on for me." My shadow twitched inside my mind, but I had to stay in control; I had to.

"Spencer... P-please... Don't leave m-me." Anna's body began to shiver, and I draped my leather jacket over her as I continued to put pressure on her chest.

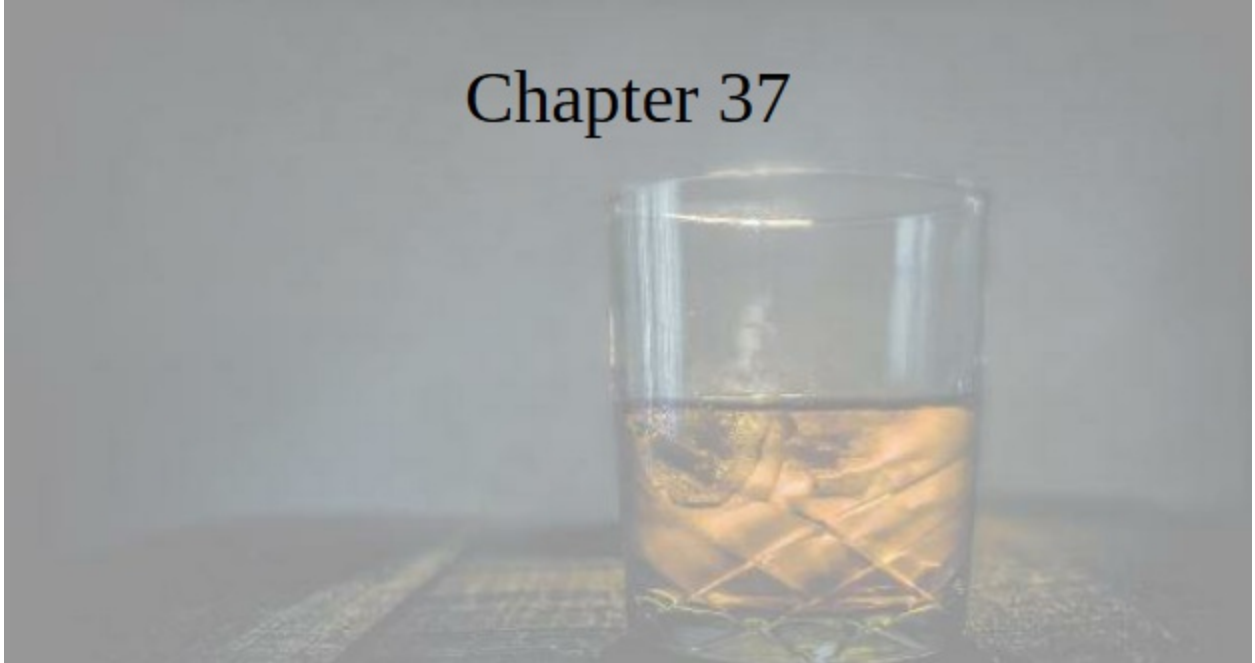
"I'm here, Anna. I'm not leaving you, I promise."

"I still w-wish you were m-mine..." Anna lost consciousness before she could finish her sentence, tears falling from the corners of her eyes.

You already have me, Anna.

"Fuck! Someone get the fuck over here and help me! I got an officer down!" I roared over the chaos.

Chapter 37



Justin



Valentina and I followed my father to a conference room with the same ornate doors as Valentina's office. A tall, burly man was waiting outside the doors, dressed in black slacks and a button-up shirt rolled up to his elbows.

"Valentina, this is Antonio. He was your father's bodyguard while he was here in Las Vegas."

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Miss Fiorelli. If you will have me, I would be honored to continue to protect you and your family." He placed a hand on his chest, bowing his head to Valentina.

"Please, just Valentina, or Val, is alright. I'm still trying to get used to all the formalities..." Valentina's nervous eyes met Antonio's, as his gaze softened in understanding.

"I will be in there with you, for you. If you need anything, or need to get out of there, just look at me and we will leave." Valentina nodded a silent thank you, and Antonio opened the door for her to enter. I followed immediately behind her. Two well-dressed men were seated at a large table,

and two bodyguard looking men stood behind them. Holding Val's delicate hand, I led her into the room, and the two men stood as she entered.

"Miss Fiorelli, it is a pleasure to meet you. I am Nikolai Conti, I lead the Chicago family. This here is Bruno Vittoria, my tech-savvy muscle." He flashed a friendly smile as Valentina released my hand to shake Nikolai's. He placed a gentle kiss on top of her knuckles before releasing her hand, and I saw her body tense ever so slightly. "Please pardon me for saying, but you are stunning. Just like your mother." Nikolai smiled as he noticed Maria's pearls on Valentina's neck.

"Enzo Moretti, Miss Fiorelli. I run the family in New York City. My second-in-command, Dante Caruso." Dante bowed his head to Valentina.

"Nice to meet you all," Valentina replied firmly. "Although, I'm still Fiore, not Fiorelli. This is Justin Campbell." I nodded my head at the two mafia leaders, then looked at Valentina.

"Campbell... Your name sounds familiar? Have we met?" Nikolai asked as he shook my hand.

"No, I don't believe so. I've never been to Chicago." Nikolai looked at me cautiously.

"And who the fuck are you, exactly?" Enzo asked, cocking an eyebrow. "Seems pretty fucking suspicious to have someone we don't know here." Enzo placed a hand on the gun in his hip holster under his jacket.

"It is a little strange," Nikolai agreed. "Rico, what's going on here?"

"Justin is my partner and has seen first hand what Marco has done. You have my word he's here to help and does not have any ulterior motives." Valentina was firm, like a true queen. I had to will my cock to behave as the power in her voice stirred something deep within me.

"He has also worked with me before we had these issues with Marco,"

Rico added. Valentina flinched slightly at my father's words. *I need to tell her about that...*

Bruno started tapping and scrolling on a smaller tablet behind Nikolai, and I knew he was looking into me and my background.

"Alright, let's get started, shall we?" Rico pulled out a chair for Valentina, and I took a seat at her side. Nikolai and Enzo seemed to relax across the table, and I placed a protective hand on her thigh to help keep her anxious leg from bouncing.

"I apologize for interrupting Rico, but may I ask how caught up you are, Miss Fiorelli?" Nikolai asked.

"Please, Valentina or Val is fine. I still haven't changed my name back to Fiorelli, and I'm not used to the formalities." Valentina's soft smile was radiant. I felt Valentina's leg start to relax under my palm as she got a smirk from Nikolai in response.

"Yes, Maria had let us know she gave you a different last name. Let our fathers know, I mean. But anyway, I'm sure this whole situation has been deeply difficult and very different for you. I apologize if I was too forward, Valentina." Nikolai apologized with what seemed like genuine empathy.

"I know I have a lot to catch up on, but please continue as if I wasn't behind." Valentina's firm, confident tone made my dick ache again. *My Queen.*

"We need to discuss the auction Marco De La Rosa is hosting tomorrow." Rico sighed, and Nikolai's and Enzo's eyes instantly darkened "One of ours, Spencer... His sister, Cassie, was abducted from witness protection in Chicago and is being forced into the auction."

"That sick fuck was in *my city*?" Nikolai hissed.

"From what we've found out from one of his men, he wasn't personally

there; Damian was. Also, the officers assigned to check on her were Marco's men, as well." My father crossed his arms, leaning back in his seat.

"Damian is a weasel. He needs to be dealt with as soon as possible," Enzo said coldly.

"That has already been... taken care of. He was sent to abduct Valentina here, in her casino. Spencer and I have taken care of it, and he won't be hurting anyone ever again." Valentina cocked an eyebrow, but looked at my father with gratitude in her eyes.

"That saves us the trouble. I hope it wasn't too messy," Enzo said nonchalantly as he leaned back in his chair, placing his ankle on his knee and crossing his arms.

"Then, let us discuss how to get Spencer's sister, and if we know how many other women he has this time." Nikolai sighed as Bruno handed him a notepad and pen.

"Dante will still be going as he usually does," Enzo began. "I'm assuming if Cassie is your man's sister, she will either be up for a higher price or a lower one. I'd imagine that Marco would try to sell her for a lower price than the others to fuck with his head."

"Do we know where he keeps the girls before the auction?" Valentina asked. "Is it possible to get to them before the auction even starts?"

"Marco changes the location every time, so it is difficult to plan, mia cara." Rico sighed.

"Yes, every location has been different, so we aren't able to scope it out first. After the invitees arrive, they are invited into a room where they are given another location to go to. They receive an armed escort to said location," Nikolai explained.

Valentina's face was laced with anger as every new word Nikolai and Enzo

said was a new piece of disgusting information she learned about the man she spent five years of her life with. She adjusted her glasses on the bridge of her nose to try to hide a tear.

“Every time... Every time he came here to Las Vegas while we lived in California, was to s-sell girls?” Valentina’s tough exterior started to crack, and I gently squeezed her thigh under the table, reminding her I was there.

“It is important to remember, mia cara, that you are in no way at fault for Marco’s actions. Every twisted thing he has done, and is doing now, does not reflect on you.”

“How can we help get Cassie?” I asked to get the attention off of Valentina. Her leg continued to shake under the table, but it wasn’t fear in her eyes, but pure hatred and anger.

Bruno handed his tablet to Nikolai, and he quickly scanned the contents on the screen, then looked at me after handing the tablet to Enzo.

“You are a paramedic, yes?” Nikolai asked, and I nodded in reply. “That will be most helpful if any of the girls have injuries that are urgent. As you can imagine, these women will probably not be comfortable with men, so we will get them to the Fiorelli’s medical floor as soon as possible. In regard to Cassie, we will rely heavily on Dante.”

“Miss Fiorelli, I have successfully participated in all four of the auctions,” Dante said, full of confidence. “Each time I’ve been able to purchase at least 8 girls and return them home.”

“I’m sorry, but Rico, we have a medical floor?” Valentina looked at my father in awe.

“Yes, we have six nurses, two emergency room doctors and two surgeons on call for these auctions. I was waiting to give you these details until you made your decision.”

“I understand,” she replied, looking back at Dante. “Please tell me about the last auction, if you don’t mind.” He nodded and obeyed.

“The last auction was on the old strip, Fremont Street. There is a small restaurant there that has a storage area in the back where the bidding took place. The girls were held in the restaurant area, and when it was time for the bidding, they were drugged to be compliant and placed in the center of the storage room. The bidders were able to walk around and look at them. Marco does not allow touching, but they could be positioned certain ways by Damian.”

Every word Dante spoke caused Valentina’s fists to clench tighter and tighter as they rested on her lap under the table. Antonio checked his phone then leaned in next to Valentina’s ear.

“We need to go, Valentina. It’s Anna,” he whispered.

“What happened? Is she alright?” Valentina’s eyes darkened with the same anger as when we were in the bathroom.

“She’s been shot, Valentina.”

“What?!” She stood up with enough force to knock her chair backwards.

“What is it?” Nikolai asked. He looked ready to strike, as Valentina nodded at Antonio.

“Miss Fiorelli’s friend has been ambushed by some of Marco’s men. She has been shot and is currently in surgery.” Antonio explained as Rico stood, a matching anger in his eyes.

"Rico, the paperwork," Valentina commanded. "May I borrow your pen, Nikolai?"

"Of course." He handed Valentina his pen as she looked at my father.

"Mia cara, this is a big decis..."

"The paperwork, please," she commanded again, and my father nodded.

Reaching into his briefcase, he pulled out a small stack of papers with tabs indicating where to sign.

"Val, are you sure..." She was throwing herself into something she would never be able to come back from. Her life, our lives, would never be the same again.

She placed a hand on top of her mom's pearls, and her eyes met mine. Full of power, anger, clarity. *There's my Val.*

"If this will allow me to have any power to help Cassie, those girls, and destroy Marco... then I'm sure." She quickly scanned the documents, signing every one of them. The last one was the legal document to have her last name changed to Fiorelli. Something sparked in her eyes as she signed it, then she slid the papers to my father and returned Nikolai's pen.

"Miss Fiorelli." My father bowed his head to her as she stood before him.

"Antonio, would you please escort Justin and me to the hospital?" She turned to Antonio.

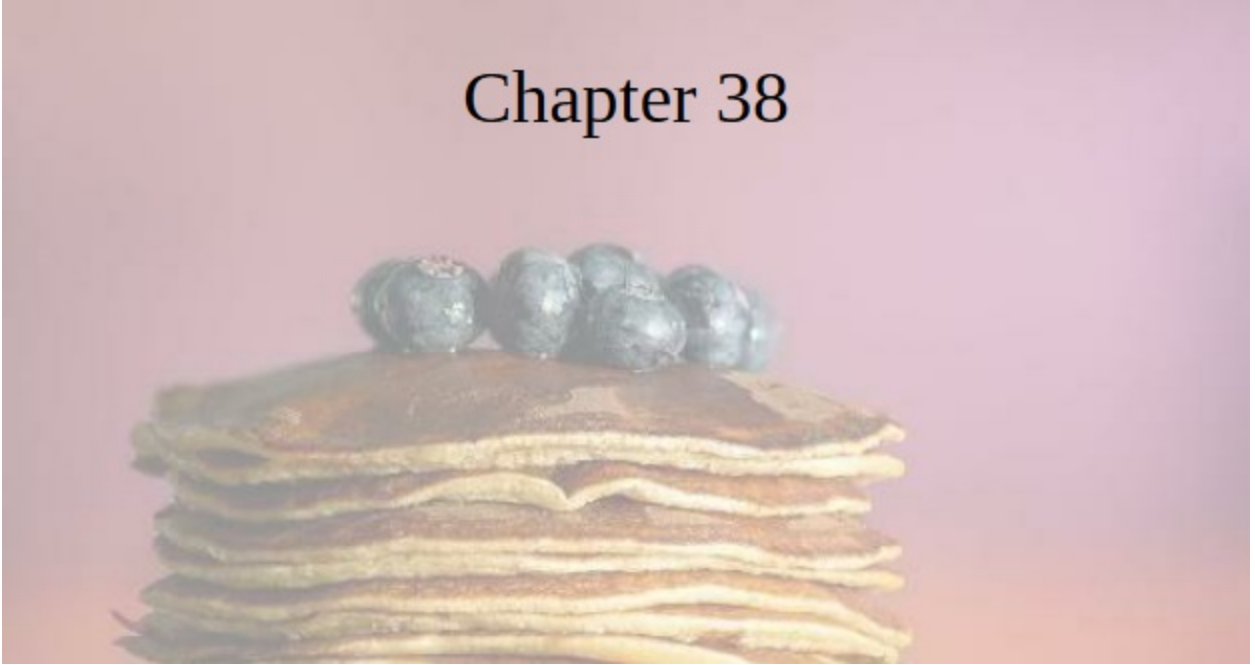
"Yes, ma'am." Antonio nodded.

"Bruno and I will accompany you. I understand you have not been outside the casino since leaving Marco. Please allow us to offer our protection as well," Nikolai offered.

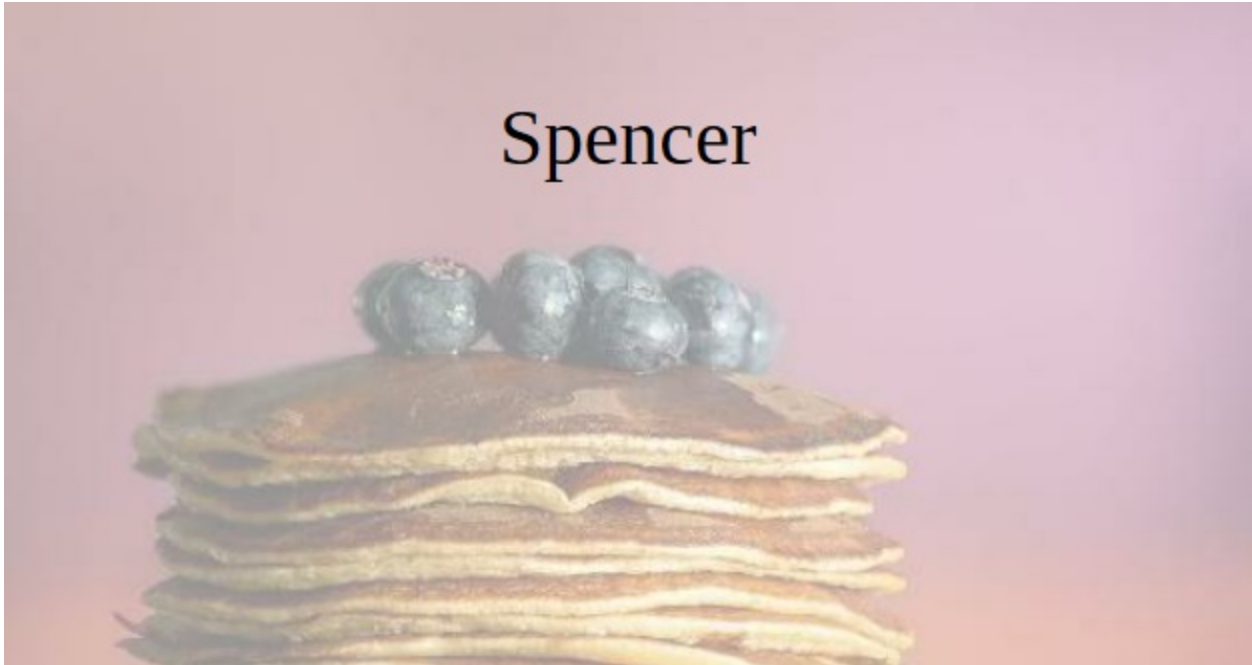
"Yes, thank you." *My fucking Queen...*

Her eyes met mine as I stood to join her, taking her hand in mine as we followed Antonio out of the room, Nikolai and Bruno behind us.

Chapter 38



Spencer



Anna's badge hung around my neck as I sat in the nurse's lounge waiting for her to get out of surgery. I traced the cold metal with my thumbs, feeling the indent the bullet that almost killed her had left. The guilt of working for the motherfucker that almost had her killed had my shadow bubbling up to the surface again. With a sigh, I tried to keep it at bay while I waited for Justin and Valentina.

Standing up to stretch, I went to the window, staring out at the hospital parking lot. In my reflection, I could see I was a mess. Anna's blood smeared all over my white t-shirt, and my leather jacket was just as dirty. Tucking Anna's badge under my shirt, I flexed my hands, trying to fight off my shadow. I hissed at the pain in my fist from my still healing fingers. *I guess the tape came off...*

I put my hands in the pockets of my leather jacket, and my fingertips found the small box I found in one of Marco's Audis. Fiery rage coursed through my veins as I took a deep breath and opened the box. I looked to the ceiling,

dreading to find out what the contents were. With a sigh, I looked in my hands and saw a small piece of paper resting on top of the box's contents...

Just a reminder to keep you in line. - M.D.

Carefully moving the note, I was met with another of Cassie's tattoos. This one was on her back shoulder, a small bouquet of poppy flowers. She wanted to get a tattoo of California's state flower since her dream was to move to California to pursue her art. This slice of skin was about two inches by two inches.

My anger was at a boiling point, and I couldn't take it anymore. Shoving the box back into my pocket, I paced back and forth, desperately trying to calm down. My shoulder connected with a metal paper towel dispenser on the wall as I was pacing, and that was my breaking point. I swung my body around and punched the side of the paper towel dispenser, causing it to fly to the other side of the room.

"Fuck!"

Cassie, please hang in there. I promise this motherfucker will die next time I see him. I'll fucking kill him...

Mama Nancy interrupted my thoughts with a soft knock on the door.

"Are you doing alright, baby?"

"Yes, ma'am," I lied as I bent over to pick up the mangled paper towel dispenser.

"West, are you sure you're okay?" she asked, eyes full of concern.

"I think this one was faulty..." Holding up the dented metal, I tried to use humor to keep her distracted from my anger.

"It never worked properly anyways." She smiled softly as she took the dispenser from me, throwing it in the trash can.

"I'm sorry, Mama. I'll replace it."

“Hush now, she’s out of surgery and recovering in her room, baby. Let’s go.”

Obediently, I followed Mama Nancy to Anna’s room, and she turned to face me once we reached her door.

“She’s very lucky. It will be a quick, easy healing for her, I hope. It could’ve been a lot worse. She’s really lucky to have had that badge where it was, or else we’d be having a different conversation.”

“Yeah, she’s too stubborn to go anywhere, that woman.” I smiled towards the entryway of her room.

“It’s nice to see this soft side of you, baby. Hang onto that. We see so much in our line of work, it’s easy to lose touch with that.” She smiled and patted my arm before she walked away, back towards her desk.

These women will be the death of me.

Between Anna, Bella, and Cassie, I felt like I was being pulled in three different directions. *Anna is the one I could never have. Bella is the one that can calm my darkness. Cassie is my whole world. I would do anything to get my sister back and—*

“Spencer?” Anna’s soft, hoarse voice pulled me out of my thoughts.

“Anna... How are you feeling?” I went to her side.

“The... the blueprints...”

“Don’t even worry about that, it’s okay.” I pulled a chair up next to her bed and held her hand. She turned her head to face me, closing her eyes as tears began to stream down her cheeks. “It’s okay Anna, I’m here.” I thumbed away the tears that fell, and she leaned into my touch.

“I... I never get shot. I was stupid, I...”

“Enough of that, babe.” Her sad, ocean blue eyes gazed into mine, and I found myself inching closer to her.

“I always wondered why... why we couldn’t make this work.” Her eyes closed again as fresh tears began to fall. “You couldn’t handle me, handle all of this.” She groaned in pain as she tried to switch positions on the bed. “But, oh how I’d love it if you tried... if we tried. I’m so tired of being alone, waking up alone, riding alone... Please try. Please...”

“Anna...” Leaning over the hospital bed, I kissed her gently, trying to kiss away her loneliness. *Fuck, what am I doing? We can’t be together, I shouldn’t be doing this... She’s a cop for fuck’s sake, and I work for Marco... This can’t happen...* But I couldn’t help myself.

Our kiss became more desperate, more intense, as one hand cradled the back of her head, slightly lifting her off the pillow to deepen our kiss. Her slender fingers found my hair, and I groaned softly while I reached my other hand underneath her blanket. I couldn’t help myself; I had to touch her. My fingers found a silky smooth leg. Feeling my way up, her legs fell apart involuntarily, practically begging my hand to enter.

All of a sudden, I forced myself to pull away, running my fingers through my hair as I turned away. *What the fuck am I doing?* I shoved my hands in my pockets while my cock ached for her in my jeans.

“Anna, I...” When I turned to find her eyes, she was asleep. A single stray tear fell as her breathing became deep and even, the pumps next to her bed whirring softly. *Her pain medication must have kicked in.*

Fuck. I’m so sorry, Anna...

“Spencer? Is it okay if I come in?” Valentina’s soft voice pulled me out of my thoughts before I could continue my spiral.

“Hey, Val.” I turned to see a worried Valentina in a sexy, dark red dress. *Fuck, these women, I swear...*

“Is she okay?” She immediately went to Anna’s other side, brushing

Anna's blonde hair behind her ear before turning back to face me. "Are you okay?" She eyed my clothes. Movement caught my eye outside the door, and I clenched my fists, ready to fight.

"I'm fine..." *Who the fuck is here?*

"It's Justin and Antonio, it's okay. They aren't coming in until Anna says it's okay." Valentina placed a hand on my tense arm, and I met her eyes. She looked different. I couldn't quite figure out what changed, but she looked... powerful. Powerful and angry...

"You look like a hot boss, Val." I chuckled, trying to calm my shadow. She adjusted her glasses on her nose and chuckled nervously.

"Yeah... I guess it's official now. Signed on the dotted line... What did the doctor say about Anna? Is she going to be okay?" Her nervous attempt to get the attention off of her quickly made me grin.

"Yes, boss. She'll be okay, but she got lucky. Her badge stopped the bullet from doing major damage." I pulled her badge off from around my neck and handed it to Val. She traced the indentation with her fingers, the darkness I previously saw in her eyes beginning to peek out again. "They did an x-ray and CT scan to make sure they got the chunks of bullet out. She'll have a bit of a scar on her chest, but will recover with, hopefully, no issues."

"Everything okay in there?" Justin called from the doorway.

"Yeah, man, you can come in."

Justin stopped in his tracks when he saw the state of my clothes, and I held my hands up.

"It's hers, I'm fine. I didn't get hit." Justin visibly sighed in relief.

"Let me by. That's my partner in there!" The three of us turned our attention to the door. Gabriel had come to see Anna, and Antonio wouldn't let him in.

“Don’t cause a scene. Just give Valentina a moment,” Antonio firmly said to Gabriel.

“She’s resting; I don’t want to wake her. I promise I’ll be back Anna,” Valentina whispered and squeezed a still sleeping Anna’s hand. She placed Anna’s badge down on the tray by her bed and lifted her glasses to dab her tears away.

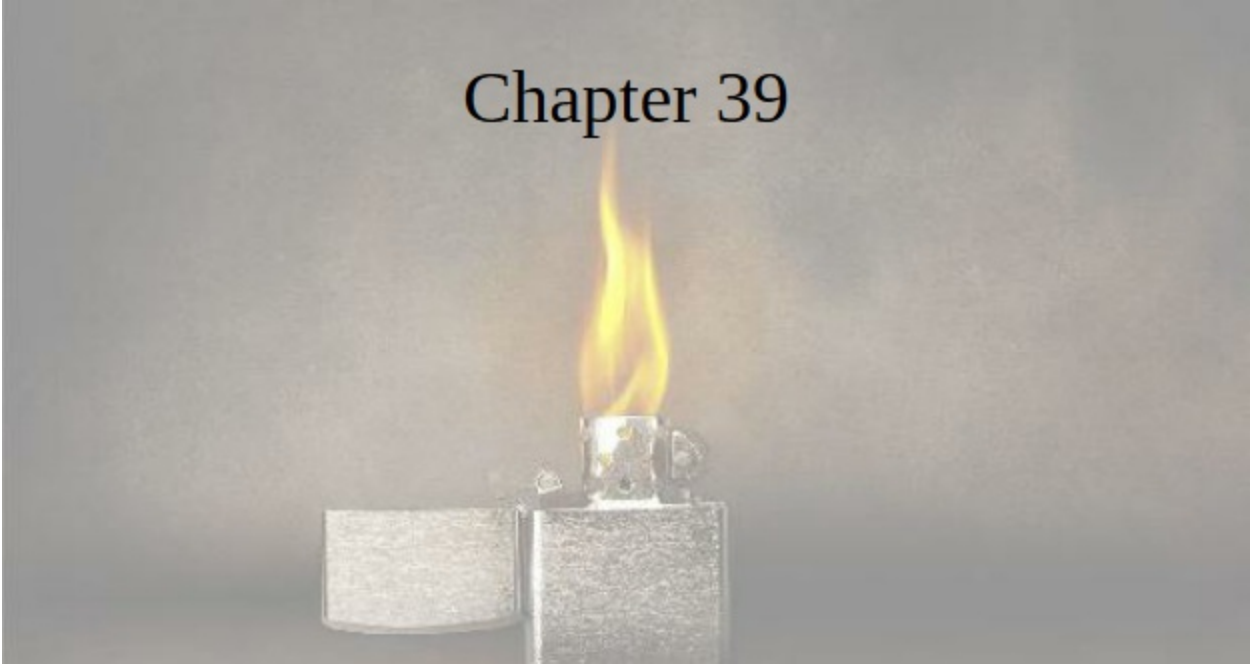
“We’ll wait for you outside, Spence.” Justin nodded and led Valentina out of the room.

I stood at Anna’s side, watching Valentina and Justin walk out of the room hand-in-hand. *That’s what I want, the love I want.* A small, shaky hand reached for mine, and I looked down upon a drowsy Anna.

“Thank you, pretty boy.” Anna pulled my arm down, and I leaned in to give her a hug. She wrapped her arms around my neck and whispered in my ear, “please come out of there alive. I know the auction is tomorrow... Just please... Come back safe.” She sniffled in my ear as I held her.

“I promise, detective.” I kissed the top of her head as my tears fell with hers. “I’ll move your bike to the station to keep it safe.” She nodded into my shoulder as she continued to cling to me.

Chapter 39



Valentina



My eyes caught Spencer and Anna embracing, and my heart ached for her. Anna confessed to me in the casino suite how strongly she felt for Spencer, but they'd never been able to pursue a relationship. Knowing what I know now about Spencer being involved with Marco and the Calaveras Negras, I understood why Spencer would distance himself.

“Let. Me. Pass.” Gabriel hissed at Antonio.

“She’s just saying goodbye to Spencer, then we will leave, Gabriel.” Justin squeezed my hand as Gabriel glared at me.

“What’s your problem, Swiftwater?” Spencer said from the doorway. “Chill out, man. She’s fine. You need to calm your shit down before you go in there and stress Anna out more.”

With a huff, Gabriel stormed over to the restroom, slamming the door. Spencer rolled his eyes and instantly met Nikolai’s gaze. He reached under the back of his shirt and placed a hand on his gun, tensing up.

“West, you okay, man?” Justin nudged him with an elbow, and Spencer’s brows angled with suspicion as he nodded.

“Spencer, this is Nikolai Conti and Bruno Vittoria...” I introduced the two men, hoping it would help Spencer relax. They both nodded a greeting at Spencer as he continued to stare them down.

“Yes, from Chicago. I know who they are by name,” Spencer interrupted. My eyes found Spencer’s, and I tried to silently tell him to calm down.

“Would it be alright if we took this conversation to the MGM? We need to make sure Rico, Enzo, and Dante are involved, as well” Nikolai asked.

“Of course. Let’s head down to the car,” Justin answered, stroking the top of my hand with his thumb.

We turned to head to the elevator, but I noticed Nikolai looking into Anna’s room. I tensed up, hoping he didn’t know she was a cop. I was hoping he couldn’t see the tray by her bed, where I had placed her badge. Cursing myself under my breath for my carelessness, I released Justin’s hand and approached him slowly.

Nikolai looked like he was in awe of Anna. His eyes were soft and gentle as he gazed at her. Peeking into Anna’s room, I could see her matching expression staring right back at him.

“Ready, Nikolai?” He looked at me with a smile and nodded. He nodded a farewell to Anna and walked towards the rest of the group. I gave Anna a wave, and she mouthed “Oh my god,” and fanned herself. I rolled my eyes and followed after Nikolai.

We made our way down the elevator and out of the hospital to the parking lot. Spencer stuck his head between Justin and me to whisper as we walked towards Antonio’s car.

“We can’t let Nikolai or Bruno know her name. I don’t want them to know she’s a cop and have any issues,” he said under his breath. Justin and I nodded in agreement.

“Is twenty minutes enough time for everyone to get back?” Antonio asked, and everyone nodded in agreement. “I am sending the elevator code to the third floor, where we will meet back up with Enzo and Rico.” Antonio typed on his phone, then opened the rear passenger door for Justin and I.

Spencer waved as he walked towards his bike, and Nikolai and Bruno got in their blacked out Corvette.



Ten minutes later, Justin and I were back in the suite. My feet ached, and I was desperate to change into something more comfortable. I sat on the edge of the bed and peeled off one of my heels, groaning in relief.

“If you keep making noises like that, sweetheart, we’ll be late.” Justin’s dark, lustful eyes met mine, and he licked his lips.

“Well, Mr. Campbell. Last time I checked, I was the boss now. They can wait if I decide to be a few minutes late.” Trying slyly to hide a giggle, I smirked at him.

“Uh huh... Well then, Miss Fiorelli, tell me: are they going to wait, or do I need to make this quick?” He stalked towards me, unbuttoning the top four buttons of his shirt.

“Let me get this shoe off, then we’ll talk.” I shook my head and couldn’t help the chuckle that came from my lips.

Justin finished removing his shirt and kneeled in front of me. Gently, he lifted my leg enough to slip off my remaining heel. I tossed my head back,

groaning again as the pressure on my foot from the heel was suddenly relieved.

“Hmm...” Justin trailed his hands up the back of my calves. “I warned you, sweetheart.” He stood, scooping me under my thighs, causing me to fall backwards onto the bed. I inched my way backwards towards the center of the bed playfully, and he removed his shirt and crawled in between my legs. Widening his knees, he forced my legs to spread open, while he inched the skirt of my dress up to my waist, exposing my red lace thong. “Now we’re going to be late.” Justin sat back on his heels, staring at my lace covered pussy, licking his lips.

“Don’t you dare rip these pantyhose or dress. I love them both,” I warned, and he pouted playfully.

“They’re not in the way... This is.” He trailed his fingers up my pussy, over my thong, and I was instantly flooded with arousal. “Fuck, Val. I fucking love how wet and ready you are for me, sweetheart.” He trailed his fingers on my pussy again, until he reached the top of my thong, and inched the damp lace down, tossing it to the side. “Now be a good girl and let me taste your perfect pussy.”

Justin laid on his stomach, scooping one of my thighs over his shoulder as he licked a delicious trail up my pussy to my clit. A loud groan fell from my lips as his fingertips on my thigh gripped harder. His other hand teased the entrance of my pussy as he pressed his tongue into me. It felt so good, I didn’t know what to do with my hands, so I gripped the sheets while the torturous flicks of his tongue had me seeing stars.

“Yes, Justin... Yes...”

He hummed in approval as I started to grind my hips onto his face. His tongue found my clit while his grip on my thigh tightened even more. His

fingers pumped in and out of my pussy while he sucked on my clit, and my whole body trembled as my orgasm started to surface.

“Fuck, baby. Your sweet cunt tastes better than my favorite whiskey.” The sounds of his fingers pumping in and out of my pussy made my back arch off the bed, while Justin dug his fingertips into my thigh even harder. “Be a good girl, and come for me, Val.” He pumped his fingers harder and faster, and his tongue found my clit again. I arched what felt like completely off the bed as my climax slammed into me. “Yes baby, good fucking girl.” My whole body shook as he continued to lick my sensitive clit as my pussy clenched down on his fingers.

Justin crawled up my body, resting his knees on either side of my hips and his arms on either side of my head, caging me in. A smug smirk appeared on his lips, as he knew how intense my orgasm was. I trailed my hands up his arms, tracing his tattoos with my fingertips. He smiled at me when my eyes caught a particular tattoo on his chest.

“Is that...” I was lost for words. My fingers trailed the tattoos on his chest until I reached a beautiful tattoo of a sunflower on his heart. My eyes watered, and I looked into his perfect chocolate eyes.

“They’re your favorite, so it was only fitting to have them over my heart. It was the only way I was able to have you with me when you were in California.” His eyes were so full of love, and I felt so unworthy.

“It’s b-beautiful.” I tried to fight my tears, but they fell anyway. Justin tipped my chin up and placed a gentle kiss on my lips.

“I love you, Valentina. I always will.”

“I love you, too, Justin. Forever.”

“Let’s go to the meeting, boss.” He smirked playfully as he climbed off the bed, helping me sit up. He helped me unzip my dress before he went to the

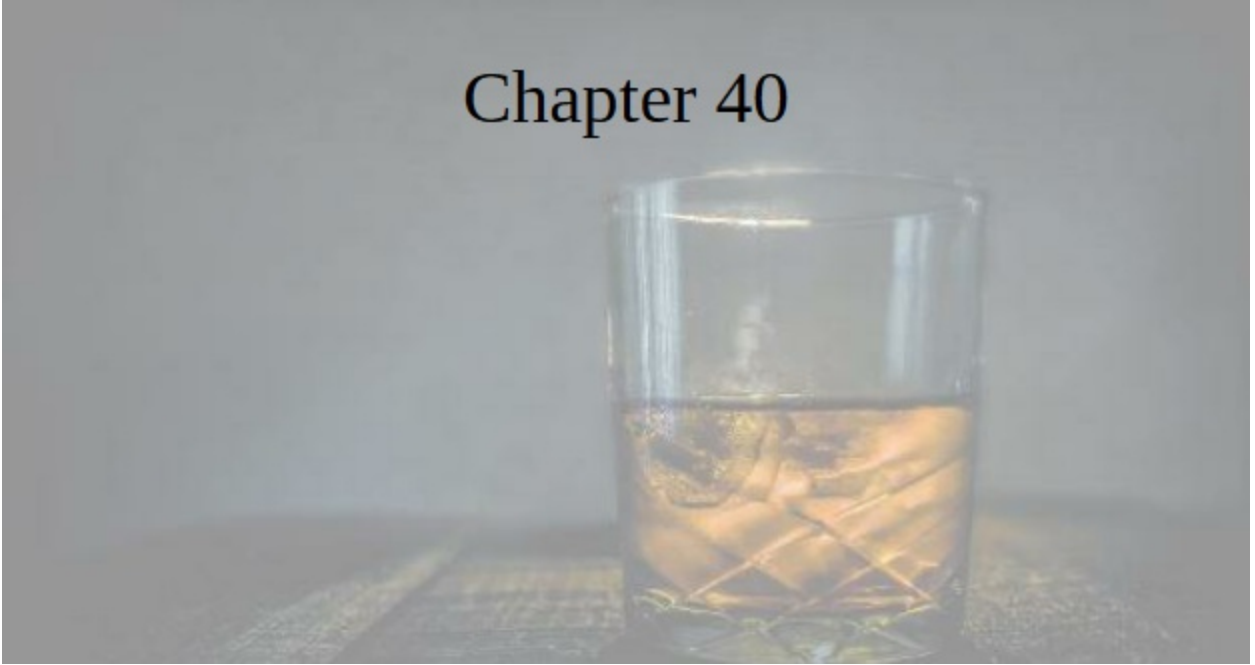
bathroom to clean up.

I found a pair of black faux-leather leggings and a red sleeveless blouse and quickly changed my clothes. I slipped on a pair of sandals, and Justin pulled on a black t-shirt as he emerged from the bathroom.

“Do you have anything Spencer can wear? I’m sure he won’t want to be in those bloody clothes anymore.”

“Yeah, I can grab some of my workout shorts and a shirt,” Justin ran off towards the dresser he was using and pulled out the garments. “Let’s go Miss Fiorelli.” I took Justin’s hand, and we rushed out the door to the elevator.

Chapter 40



Justin



The elevator opened on the third floor, and we were met with Spencer leaning against the opposite wall with his arms crossed. He looked like he was ready to kill someone.

“You good, Spence?”

“Am I good?” He laughed a sinister laugh. “Am I good...? No, I’m not fucking good, JC.” He pushed off the wall, grabbing me by the shirt and slamming me against it.

“What’s going on here?” Rico ran up to us with Antonio following close behind.

“I’m fine, it’s alright,” I said, raising my arms up to show Spencer I wouldn’t fight him.

“He... He... He fucking...” Spencer slammed me against the wall with each pause, before breaking down into tears and falling to his knees.

Valentina rushed to him, kneeling before him and cradling his head, as he sobbed into her shoulder. She looked up to me, her face twisted with an empathetic agony. Spencer kept his forehead on Valentina’s shoulder as he

reached into his jacket pocket, holding up a small box to whoever was near to take it.

Rico took the box, gently opened it, and pulled out a small piece of paper. His face immediately darkened with rage as he looked at the note, then at me. He handed me the note, and I hesitantly read it.

Just a reminder to keep you in line. - M.D.

I went to Rico's side to look in the box and found a small slice of decomposing skin with a tattoo of a small flower bouquet. Rico handed the box to Nikolai, and his eyes burned with anger as he showed Enzo.

"Cassie... Fuck..." I was dumbfounded.

"Spencer, let's go to the conference room and get some water, okay?" Valentina continued to rest her cheek on his head, running her fingers through his hair, calming him down.

I couldn't help but look at Valentina with such adoration. *Her presence calms the most violent storms in us, her touch extinguishes the destructive fires in our souls, and we are not worthy of her. Someone as precious as her shouldn't be caught up with the mafia, but maybe she could change things for the better...*

"Fuck, Justin. I'm sorry, man." Spencer stood and tried to shake off his emotions. "Val, you've got some magic hands, babe. I feel like I've had some intense meditation session or some shit." He chuckled, reaching a hand down to help her up. She smirked at him then raised an eyebrow to me.

"You lucky fucker." Spencer slapped my chest with the backs of his fingers and stood tall, turning to face The Collective.

"Here, Spence." I handed him the clothes, and he nodded his thanks. "You look like shit, man. Hopefully, this helps until you can swing by the dorm for a change of clothes."

“Too bad I don’t fit in kids’ sizes,” He quipped, and I flipped him off.

“You asshole.” I chuckled.

“Shall we?” Rico motioned to the conference room door. A still quiet Enzo and Nikolai turned to go to the conference room.

Spencer offered Valentina his arm, and she took it, leading her towards the conference room, while I followed behind. We all filed into the conference room and took our seats. Antonio took his place behind Valentina, and Spencer and I sat protectively on either side of her. She reached for a water bottle in the middle of the table, offering it to Spencer.

“Spencer, I’d like you to meet The Collective. You met Nikolai Conti from Chicago and Bruno Vittoria.” Nikolai gave Spencer a nod. “This is Enzo Moretti from New York and his second in command, Dante Caruso,” my father introduced everyone before taking his seat.

“Spencer, I am deeply sorry for what this twisted son of a bitch has done to your sister. We will do all we can to help get her back to you,” Nikolai started the conversation.

Valentina silently observed everyone, taking in everyone’s moods and expressions. Her leg began to bounce slightly under the table, and I placed my hand on her thigh.

“Marco is forcing me to go to this bullshit, so I’m game for whatever plan is in place. I just want Cassie back alive.” Spencer’s eyes were full of anger, and Dante nodded at him in agreement.

“I will be going with you to the auction,” Dante stated dryly. “I am always invited to them since I purchase multiple girls each time. We purchase them and return them to their families. Marco gives me VIP treatment since I spend about ten million at each auction.”

Valentina coughed in surprise.

“Ten million? That’s... so much money,” she said under her breath.

“It is a small sum to us, Miss Fiorelli. It is worth it to send these innocent girls home to their families,” Enzo said as he adjusted in his seat.

“I will have twenty million available for this auction, in case Marco sells her for a substantially higher price.”

“Let us discuss plans for the auction,” Rico said. “Our informant has advised it is taking place in Marco’s headquarters at the Paris Hotel and Casino. They said Marco will have twelve undercover armed guards posing as guests and staff.”

“I can give you names of the fuckers that still follow Marco. A lot of his men aren’t thrilled at what he’s been doing.” Spencer crossed his arms. “Someone I’ve met there has said they’re planning to move to get him out of there.”

“Until then, we need to continue with the plan.” Nikolai sighed.

“De La Rosa always has some sort of miniature event before the auction, where he invites members of the more common public, to keep up appearances. The auction is only for a select few. It will have pre-assigned seating, so when you arrive, they will escort you to a chair,” Enzo explained.

“You both will have untraceable ear pieces, but it is important that you keep each other in your sights but act like you don’t know each other,” Rico added. Spencer and Dante nodded in agreement.

“When you get the location to the auction, the GPS locators in your earpieces will lead us to the address, and we will find a place to lie low and wait. Everyone will wear tactical gear and carry the weapons of their choosing,” Rico said, and Valentina visibly stiffened.

“Don’t worry, Miss Fiorelli, it is just a precaution,” Enzo tried to sound calm.

“I understand,” she bravely responded.

“Swiftwater will supposedly be there,” Spencer added. “He told me his invitation was for a wine tasting. He did not have the seal for the auction invite, but I don’t trust the guy. Something is off with him.”

Bruno started typing away on the tablet again, and after about thirty seconds, he placed his tablet in front of Enzo and Nikolai with all of Gabriel’s details. Spencer glanced at me, and I knew it was because of Anna. They couldn’t know about her...

“Looks like he’s been with Las Vegas Metro for 12 years. Detective. Spotless record, no disciplinary actions or lawsuits,” Enzo said as he scanned the tablet.

“Does he have a partner?” Nikolai questioned, and all three of us tensed.

“It doesn’t look like it. It’s blank.” Enzo pointed to a section on the tablet, and Nikolai held his chin pensively.

“He’s clean on paper, but who knows? Keep your eyes on him.” Nikolai looked lost in thought.

“Alright, so what happens when we start... purchasing the girls?” Valentina asked hesitantly.

“Once a girl is purchased, they are clothed and sent to a waiting area. Typically, they are handcuffed to a chair or post of some sort. The buyer has to show proof of the transferred funds into Marco’s offshore account, then they are free to take them... home,” Dante explained. Valentina’s face twisted with disgust.

“Mia cara, they will all come here to our medical floor to make sure they are okay and their families will be contacted. Those who do not have family we can contact will be offered a job here to earn some money and get them back on their feet,” Rico explained, trying to ease Valentina’s disgust.

“If this auction is like all the others, it will be an open floor. They will bring the girls out to the middle of a room, and we can walk around and observe them before bidding. But please remember, Spencer, when we are there, I will not be pleasant. I have a very specifically designed personality for these events that is not my usual one,” Dante said to Spencer. “If I make any remarks about your sister, please know I am trying to keep up my act. I may have to bring up the fact that she has lost a finger and is not as valuable.”

“I fucking hate this, but I understand.” Spencer sighed.

“If anything goes south, our danger word is 'golden',” Nikolai added.

“The auction is at four in the evening. We will meet here at three and make sure everything is prepared before we go,” Rico stated as he stood. “It is late; please get a good night’s rest and eat. We will have the tactical gear sent to your rooms.” Everyone began to stand but Spencer.

“Nikolai, a favor?” he asked.

“Sure, Spencer. How may I help?”

“You ride, yeah? I thought I overheard you mention it.”

“Yes.”

“My friend’s bike is in a diner parking lot, and I need to have it brought here to keep it safe. Would you mind coming with me to get it?”

“Of course. Bruno can drive me, and I will ride it back.”

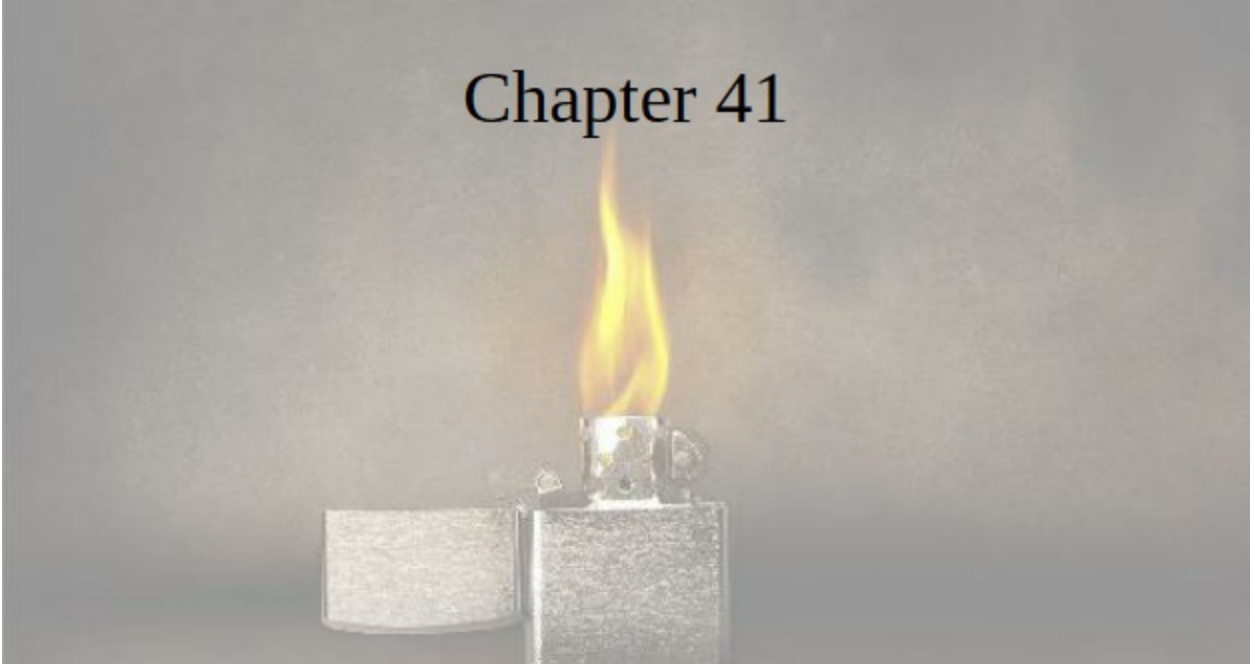
“Thanks...” Spencer sighed.

“Spencer” Rico handed Spencer a room key, “please feel free to use this room to rest and prepare. Get room service and relax as much as possible. I will have your gear sent there.”

“Thanks again.” Spencer gave Valentina and me a nod as he and Nikolai walked out of the room.

“Looks like it’s our turn, sweetheart. Let’s go get some rest.” Valentina nodded and took my hand as we headed back to the suite.

Chapter 41



Valentina



Back in the suite, I stood in the sitting room, gazing down at the lights of the Vegas Strip below me from my favorite window. Hugging my arms, I sighed and rested my forehead on the cool glass while Justin poured us drinks behind me. My whole body felt tense, and I had this overwhelming feeling that something bad was about to happen. Something didn't feel right with Marco's "auction" and the fear of the unknown was overwhelming my mind.

Nikita, where are you? Please...

I was met with silence again, and I desperately needed my mental bad bitch to help guide me through this madness.

Justin's scent suddenly surrounded me as he came up behind me, placing a soft kiss on my shoulder. His touch sent electricity through my body, causing goosebumps to form and arousal to shoot straight to my core.

"Are you okay, sweetheart?" he asked as he stood by my side, handing me my glass. Sipping his whiskey, he followed my eyes and looked at the lights below our feet.

“It’s hard to believe all this is real.” I paused to down my glass in one gulp. “If you told me about all this a week ago, I never would have believed you.” Placing my glass on the cocktail cart, I nudged my glasses back up my nose before returning my gaze to the window.

“I felt the same when Rico introduced me to this world. I’m a firefighter, I’m not supposed to be involved in mafia business. For a while, I was torn between going to the police or keeping my mouth shut.” Justin downed his glass, also, setting it down on the cart. “Until I found out how Marco has men in the police department.”

Scoffing in disgust, I shook my head, pinching my brows together in anger. *How did I not know all of this for five years? FIVE YEARS. He broke me down so much to make sure I would never know...*

Justin gripped my chin, turning my face towards him, pulling me from my thoughts.

“None of that, sweetheart,” he purred.

Yanking my chin out of his grip, I grabbed him by the shirt, slamming his back into the window.

“Last time I checked, *I* was in charge. Not you.” Justin’s dark eyes stared down at me in amusement as I held a small knife that I had hidden on the cocktail cart a few days ago across his throat.

“Well, now, this is interesting.” He smirked, leaning into the blade. “Did you really think I didn't notice you hiding that there the other day?” Justin gripped my wrist, spinning me so my back was against the window, and slammed my fist against the glass, forcing me to drop the knife. He caged me in with his other arm propped up on the glass next to my head.

I tucked my other hand at my lower back while his gaze trailed down my body. He licked his lips as my shirt rode up, exposing my stomach. I couldn’t

help my heavy breathing, my chest rising and falling in perfect tempo with his, while he scanned my body with his dark, chocolate eyes.

Once he was distracted, I resisted against the hold he had on my wrist, drawing his attention there, before dropping to my knees. Quickly, I scooped up his leg behind his calf and drove my body forward, knocking him backwards onto his ass and knocking over the cocktail cart. With all my weight, my now free hand found his neck, and I squeezed while my other hand held the knife I had hidden at the small of my back. I dug the point of the blade under his chin as I looked down at him. My anger rose again as another smug grin found his lips.

“Definitely interesting.” Justin chuckled as he quickly countered, rolling me onto my back and switching positions. He pinned my hands above my head as he crashed his lips to mine. I bucked underneath him, trying to get free, but he was too strong, and I was too starved for his touch to resist. “I forgot how good you were with knives, sweetheart. I fucking love seeing you angry.” He pressed his hips into mine, and feeling his hard cock made my pussy wet. I needed him. Needed him now.

“Shut up and fucking kiss me.” I yanked out of his grip and pulled him down by his shirt until our lips met. I gripped the material as tightly as I could in my hands while he continued to press his dick into me over my leggings.

“Mmm, yes, ma’am,” Justin groaned as I ripped open his shirt, digging my nails into his back. I was desperate to feel his skin under my fingertips. I needed to feel him react to my touch, to the pain, to everything. I tried to unbuckle his belt and pants, but he pinned my arms above my head again. “I need your words, baby,” he purred in my ear before licking up my neck.

“If you don’t get out of those fucking pants...”

“Then what? Hmm? What would you do?” He bit down on the skin underneath my ear. The pain sent more hot, wet arousal to my pussy.

“Then I’ll take care of this myself.” I kicked Justin away, and he sat on his heels as I reached into my leggings and underneath my panties. I was instantly met with damp heat and began to circle my clit while he watched. His eyes were glued to my hand as I started to grind and thrust my hips. He gripped the waistband of my leggings near the seam at the front and ripped them open with all his strength, discarding the fabric over his shoulder.

“I need to see my perfect wet cunt. Will you finger yourself, baby?” He groaned, unfastening his pants and freeing his perfect, hard cock. He fisted himself as I moaned his name and inserted two fingers into my soaking wet pussy.

My free hand found my breasts under my shirt as I pulled my bra down, cupping and squeezing one in my hand. I knew this top was done for when Justin’s hands found the soft, red fabric. He tore it away like it was wrapping paper on a gift before cupping my other breast and pumping his cock while I continued to grind on my hand.

“You do this to me...” My back arched off the floor as my orgasm quickly started to tear through my body. Right as I was about to hit my peak, Justin tore away my hand and pulled my hips to him, thrusting his cock into me. “Harder...” I begged, as my legs began to shake.

“Yes, my queen.” Justin obeyed as he scooped up one of my legs, putting it on his shoulder, and propped himself up on his hands on either side of my head. I wrapped my free leg around his middle, and the new angle had his cock thrusting deeper into my pussy. His thrusts became harder as he slammed his hips into me. My hands found my breasts, and I cupped them, pinching my nipples, causing my back to arch off the floor.

“Yes, don’t stop... Don’t stop...” I begged, while Justin moved his hands to my shoulders to pull me down on to him, his dick slamming so deep into me, I saw stars. He fucked me like this was the last time we would ever be together. It was a delicious mixture of desperation and lust.

“Fuck yes, baby. Your perfect, wet cunt taking my cock so well,” he growled as he continued to pull me into him. “My fucking queen. My dirty fucking queen.” His words made my eyes roll back into my head, and I reached a hand down to touch my clit, desperate to come.

“Make me come, Justin. Make me come... Please...” I begged as I circled my clit. My thighs began to tremble as I circled my clit faster.

“I want my cock to be dripping with your come, baby. Be a good girl and come for me, Val. Such. A. Perfect. Fucking. Pussy.” His hard thrusts sent me over the edge as my orgasm crashed into my body.

Screaming his name, I arched completely off the floor, and he lowered my leg off his shoulder, keeping his cock seated inside me as my pussy clenched desperately onto his length.

“Fucking hell, sweetheart. You’re so fucking perfect.” Justin leaned forward to kiss me, our tongues dancing together as he withdrew his still hard cock from me. Breaking our kiss, I stood, removing what was left of my shirt and leggings. Justin’s dark, lustful eyes watched my every move while he stood with me, his hard cock making my mouth water.

He stalked towards me and I smirked, backing my naked ass up against the window. My hands found his chest as he approached me .

“Justin...” I whispered as I gripped his hard cock in my hands, catching him by surprise. His cock was slick with my come, and I started to stroke and pump him with my hand.

“Val...”

“Shhh,” I hushed him and lowered myself to my knees.

“Sweetheart, no. Never bow to any man, not even me.” Justin tilted my chin up to look at him, but I remained on my knees.

“I won’t bow to any man, except my king.” He opened his mouth to speak, but before he could react, I closed my lips around his cock and pulled him closer to me by the backs of his thighs. The sweet taste of my come mixed with his skin made me groan.

“Val... Fuck...” Justin moaned and leaned forward, his palms on the window. Peeking up at him, I saw him throw his head back, and my pussy became wet again at the sight. Knowing that I was the one getting that reaction from him made me feel more powerful than I ever had before. I wanted to draw out every ounce of pleasure he deserved, and I wanted to see his body react to me when I took control.

I leaned in closer, taking his cock further into my throat, and the low, husky moan that came from Justin’s mouth motivated me to take as much of him as I could. I gagged ever so slightly, and the sensation on his cock made his legs shake. Once he was close to being fully seated in my throat, I closed my lips around his length, slowly sucking and pulling his cock out of my mouth. Once there was enough room, I fisted him while my tongue continued to trail up towards the tip of his cock.

I moved torturously slowly, keeping my eyes on his face the whole time. Justin lifted his head and let it hang forward, his chocolate eyes opening and locking on mine. His hooded eyes were dark with lust while he watched me hollow my cheeks, my hand fisting him and following my lips towards his tip. Once the tip of his hard cock reached the tip of my tongue, I opened my mouth, and circled the sensitive skin with my tongue and started to pump his length with my hand.

“Fuck, baby, my queen looks so perfect taking my cock down her throat,” Justin groaned as I took him into my throat again. One of his hands found the back of my head while he thrust his cock into my throat. My eyes began to water, and I gagged, but I kept sucking and pumping. Alternating my strokes between my hand and mouth, my fist twisted while pumping him. “Do you like me fucking your mouth like my perfect little whore?” Justin groaned as I sucked to the tip of his cock again. Releasing him from my mouth, a thin trail of saliva kept us connected.

“Yes, god yes.” I groaned breathlessly while I continued to twist my fist up and down his cock. Before I could continue, Justin quickly pulled out of my mouth and bent over to pull me to stand and face him.

“I want to come in my pretty, perfect cunt, not your mouth,” Justin purred as he spun me around, my hands finding the cool glass of the window. He kicked my feet further apart as he reached from behind me to cup my breasts and trail his hands down to my wet pussy. “That’s my good girl. Your pussy is dripping for me,” I groaned, as Justin pumped two fingers inside me. “I want the city you own to see me claim you as mine.” He growled as he bent me forward and thrust into me.

“My...city...” I could hardly believe the words as Justin’s relentless thrusts pressed me into the window.

“Yes, baby. Your. Fucking. City.” Justin gripped my hips, pulling himself into me. His hips slapped against my ass as we moaned in unison. I backed my ass into him, meeting his thrusts as his legs started to twitch. I grinned, knowing his orgasm was coming.

“Come for me, Justin. Fill up my pussy with your come. I want to feel you dripping down my legs.”

“Fucking hell, Val...” Justin groaned as he thrust three more times,

gripping my hips hard. We reached our climax together, and my pussy clenched on his cock, drawing out every drop of come. As he withdrew from me, I felt a trail of come dripping down the inside of my thigh.

“Look at your perfect pussy dripping with my come. So fucking perfect.” Justin leaned forward and trailed kisses down my back. I shifted and reached between my legs, scooping up his come with my fingers and inserted my fingers into my sensitive pussy.

“I’m not letting one drop leave me,” I purred as I turned my head to meet his gaze. His dark eyes were laser focused on my hand pushing his come into my pussy.

He scooped me up, and I shrieked in surprise, wrapping my arms around his neck. Carrying me to bed, he gently sat me down on the edge and went to the dresser he used. I tilted my head, gazing at the sight of his perfect ass. He pulled on his sweatpants, and I stood to wrap myself in my silk robe I had laying on the bed. He turned back to face me holding a small, black box in his hands. My eyes went wide as he approached me. Justin kneeled at my feet, opening the box, and tears began to stream down my cheeks. It was a stunning, deep red ruby ring surrounded by a halo of diamonds.

“I’ve completely bared myself to you, Valentina, quite literally.” He chuckled nervously as he motioned to his cock. “You are everything to me, my whole world. You have been since high school. I got this to give you after college, after our graduation, but I couldn’t find it in me to beg you to be with me and not Marco.”

“Justin...” Tears continued to fall as my hands covered my mouth.

“I don’t know what will happen after tonight, but all I do know is that I want you to be mine forever. Please, Valentina. Be my queen. Please marry

me.” Justin’s hands were shaking as he pulled the stunning ring out of its box, reaching for my hand.

I threw my body onto his, sobbing into his shoulder. I kneeled on the floor with Justin, and I gave him my shaking hand, staring into my king’s eyes, so full of love.

“Yes, Justin. Yes.” He slipped the ring on my finger, and we kissed passionately before crying together.

“My perfect Valentina...” Justin kissed my forehead, then helped me stand. I cradled my hand and stared at my engagement ring. It was so beautiful and fit me perfectly. “Baby...” Justin lifted my chin to look at him. He opened his mouth to say something, but instead he kissed me with so much passion that more tears began to fall from my eyes. He kissed me like this was the last moment we would have together, and I was so afraid that it was.

When he pulled away, I couldn’t take my eyes off my ring. *It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen—*

“Val, I...” Justin stopped speaking suddenly after interrupting my thought, and I looked up at him. His eyes looked confused, then rolled back as he collapsed on the floor.

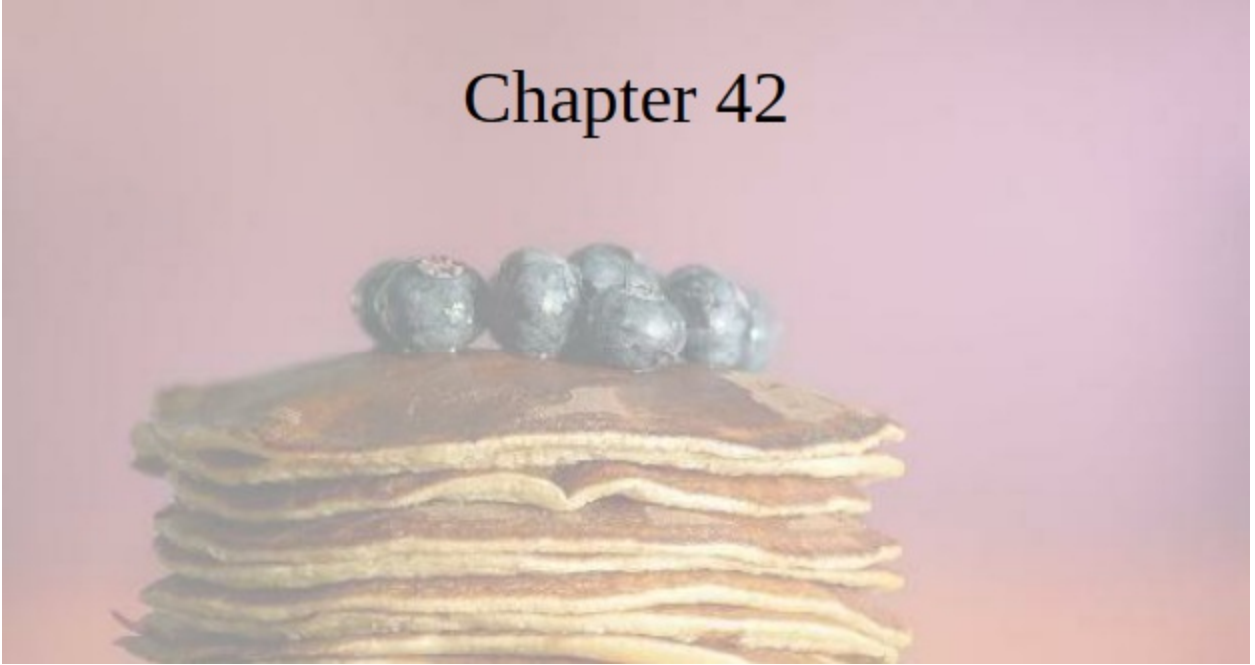
“Justin!” I ran to his side, but fell to the floor as a sharp pain radiated from where Marco hit me with his gun. I heard vague mumbling, and I desperately tried opening my eyes. The room was spinning and blurry, but I could see two figures dragging Justin’s limp body away. I met the eyes of one man in a strange mask, and he quickly turned away, running out of the room as the world went black.

They took Justin...

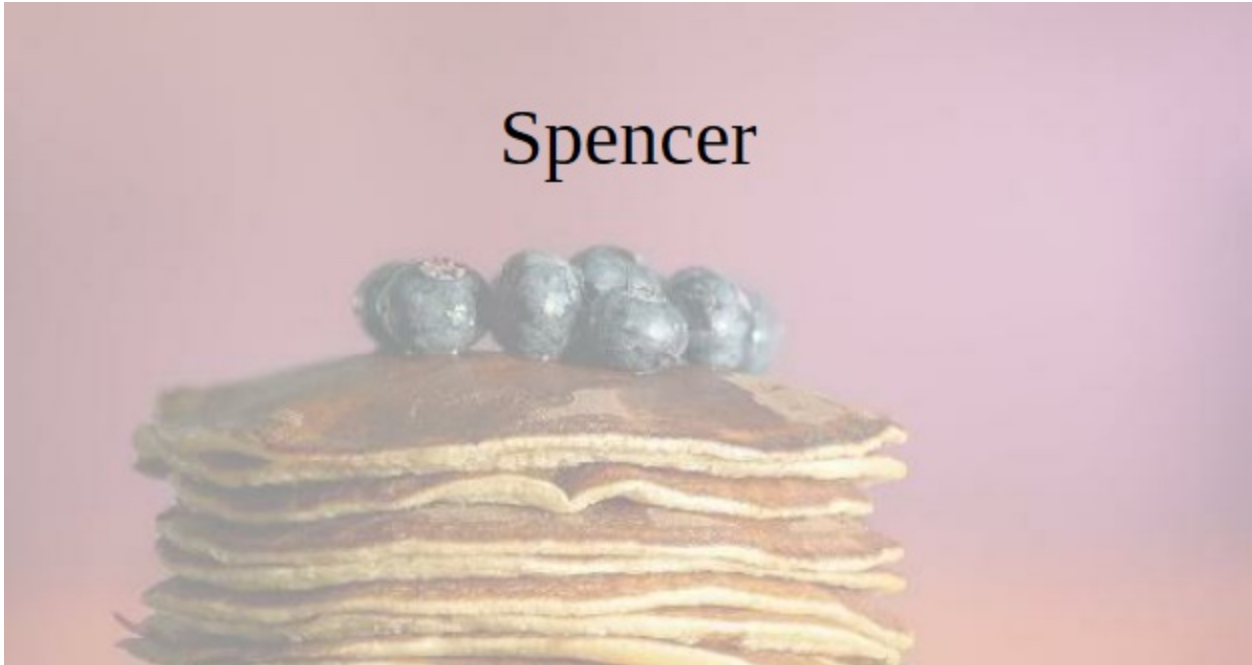
Nikita? Is that you?

They took Justin... Marco...

Chapter 42



Spencer



Rico stormed into my room, almost knocking the door off its hinges. I jumped out of bed, quickly whipping my Glock out from under the pillow and aiming towards the door.

“What the fuck, Rico!” I growled while lowering my gun.

“Spencer, we need to go. Get dressed. It’s Justin...” Rico’s face was twisted in rage, and his hands were shaking.

“What? What the fuck happened?” I asked as I pulled on a fresh pair of jeans and a t-shirt.

“He was abducted from my suite. Valentina was injured, but he was taken.”

“What the fuck?!” I pulled on my boots, not bothering to tie them, and tucked my Glock at my back. I grabbed my jacket off a chair by the door as I rushed after Rico, slamming the door behind me. We ran, taking the stairs and not waiting for the elevator until we reached the suite Justin and Val were staying in. Antonio stood guard outside the door and stepped aside for Rico and me to enter.

As I entered the foyer, a knife stuck into the wall inches away from my face. Valentina stood defensively with her arm out in front of her, blood trailing from her head down her cheek. Nikolai stood behind her, next to a knocked over chair, holding a bloody rag with a stunned, but impressed look on his face. Bruno looked unimpressed, scrolling through his tablet and leaning on the opposite wall.

“A woman after my own heart, Val. That’s fucking hot as hell.” I pulled the knife out of the wall, then walked towards her small body. Her chest was heaving, and her bloody hair made her look absolutely savage. “You left out the fact that you have a thing for knives,” I taunted as I stalked towards her. Her dark, chaotic eyes watched my every move, and I could see her match her breathing to mine.

Holy fuck, she’s good.

Enzo and Dante rushed into the room as I circled Valentina, still holding her knife. Rico stopped them from intervening by sticking his arm out. Nikolai stepped aside, crossing his arms with a crooked grin on his lips while the bloody rag he was holding hung from his fingertips.

Valentina’s eyes never left mine as I scanned her body, making mental notes of her weapons. She was only wearing leggings and a tank top, but I could see knives hidden in her ponytail, at her waist, and behind her back, underneath what I assumed to be a sports bra. I also noticed Justin’s ruby ring on her left ring finger.

You go Justin. I spun the handle of her knife in my hand, continuing to circle her as she turned with me, staying in the middle of the foyer.

Tossing the knife to my other hand, I lunged for her as soon as her eyes left mine and went to the knife. She blocked my wrist, catching me with a left hook to the cheek, splitting my lip. I spit out blood at my feet before lunging

for her again, this time I held the knife the opposite direction, spinning my body, and swiping at her while I spun. She dodged me, but backed up against the wall, and I quickly grabbed her throat, pinning her in place. Her hands grabbed onto mine, digging her nails into my wrist.

“Never give up your back, and don’t corner yourself.” Her brows were pinched in a determined anger, and she nodded. Squeezing her neck slightly, I felt her pulse under my fingers. It was slow and steady, not one hint of fear. Pride welled up in me. *She’s so fucking strong going through what she did and having this much control.* “Let’s get your fiance and my sister, boss.” I released her neck, keeping my eyes locked on hers.



Valentina

Spencer released my neck, keeping his dark eyes on mine.

He thinks we’re done. Nikita purred in my mind. *We’re not fucking done.*

He walked to my side towards Rico, my favorite knife still in his hand. As he was about to pass by my side, I yanked him by the lapels of his jacket, kicking my foot back behind me to knock his foot forward and causing him to fall harshly to the floor. My knife fell out of his hand, sliding to Rico’s feet. By the time his surprised eyes met mine, I was already on top of him, resting my forearm across his neck, the tip of the knife from my hair digging into the bottom of his chin.

“Never assume I’m done,” I purred.

“Yes, ma’am.” He grinned as I climbed off of him.

Turning to face the stunned faces of The Collective, I figured I owed them an explanation.

“Before I met Marco, I trained in hand-to-hand combat.” I shrugged and gave them an innocent smile while their jaws were still on the floor. Looking at Rico, his eyes welled up with prideful tears, just like my father’s used to.

Rico approached me and threw his arms around me.

“My future daughter-in-law.” He led me tight, and I released my emotions into his shoulder.

With tears in my eyes, I stepped out of Rico’s embrace and stood tall facing The Collective. I suddenly felt a wave of dizziness and swayed slightly.

“Val, are you alright, babe?” Spencer asked. Nikolai rushed back over, propping up the chair again, and I sat down. I reached up to my head, and my fingertips met warm blood.

“They hit me when they came in, in the same place Marco pistol whipped me.” I winced as my head began to throb. Nervously, I spun my engagement ring on my finger as blood trailed down my cheek.

“What can we do to help, Miss Fiorelli?” Enzo asked from behind Rico as he stepped forward.

“Here, Spencer.” Rico set down Justin’s medical supply bag. I watched Spencer pull gloves on and open some gauze to put pressure on my injury to stop the bleeding.

“Please let me know how I can help,” Nikolai said as he stood by my side, watching Spencer. “Anything you need, say the word. I’m not a medical professional, but I will assist in any way.”

“Grab that trash bin over there.” Spencer nodded his head towards a little trash can near a desk on the opposite wall. Nikolai rushed to grab the bin,

placing it on the floor at my feet. Spencer discarded the gauze and examined my head. "Looks like they opened some of your stitches, babe. But the bleeding is just superficial. I'll have to give you a couple more."

I tried to sit still as stone while Spencer cleaned up my cut with saline and gave me two new stitches. With Nikita's help, I didn't flinch once.

"Mia cara, are you alright?" Rico asked, concern lacing his face.

"What time is it?" I asked. I was feeling a little dizzy.

"Five until noon," Enzo said as he came into my line of sight with Dante. "Are you alright, Miss Fiorelli?"

I silently nodded once.

"Were you able to see anything, Val? When those fuckers broke in?" Spencer asked.

"There were at least two. The one I saw... He had a mask on," I said dryly.

"What kind of mask...?" Nikolai asked as his eyes immediately found Enzo's.

"It reminded me of a ski mask, with just the eyes and mouth exposed, but it wasn't fabric, and it strapped around the back of his head. It was black, with skull carvings."

"All I know about him is that everyone calls him 'The Phantom' because no one knows who the fuck he is. He is quiet, quick, and leaves no evidence behind." Spencer sighed.

"Justin was talking while I was looking at..." I paused to look at my ring on my hand. "I was distracted, and he suddenly stopped talking mid-word. When I looked up, he collapsed. I rushed to him but was hit."

"If The Phantom will be there tonight, then we really need to prepare," Nikolai said while Bruno started typing away on his tablet.

I looked at Spencer, and his vicious, dark eyes met mine. He wanted blood.

I could feel the darkness rising from his soul, and my darkness hummed in approval. I gave him a knowing nod and stood from the chair.

“Let’s prepare then,” I commanded, and The Collective nodded.



Justin

I blinked, trying to open my eyes and focus on my surroundings. Everything was blurry, dark, and the room was spinning. Trying to gather myself, I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath through my nose before trying to open them again.

My arms and legs were bound to a metal chair with thick rope, and the chair was bolted to the floor. It was dark, and I tried to make out any walls or windows, but the only light was a single lightbulb hanging over my head. My mouth was taped shut with what I was assuming was duct tape. I tried opening my mouth to get the adhesive to start peeling off, but it was too painful. Staying focused on my breathing through my nose, I wiggled my fingers and toes to make sure I didn’t have any spinal injuries. I was barefoot and able to feel the cool metal of the chair on my calves and the cold cement under my feet.

Val... Please be okay, please...

Footsteps began to approach, and I prepared myself to deal with this motherfucker once and for all.

I just need one free hand. Just one...

A heavy sounding door opened and slammed shut. The same footsteps continued to approach as I surrendered myself to my demons, to my anger, my fierce love for Valentina.

“Fancy meeting you here, Mr. Campbell,” Marco casually stated as he brushed dust from his expensive suit. “I hope you find your accommodations to be... comfortable?” I wanted to punch that sadistic grin off of his fucking face.

Just one hand...

“And yes, before you ask, she’s alive.” Marco rolled his eyes dramatically. “I have to admit, though, Justin: what an amazing feeling it was to slam the butt of my gun into her pretty little head again.” Marco closed his eyes and hissed a sharp inhale with puckered lips before exhaling and staring down at me again.

I tried desperately to jump at him, fighting against the restraints with all my strength. I twisted and pulled against the rope until it started to burn my skin. Marco straightened his jacket, yawning like he was bored, and pointed towards the door he came in.

“Lights!” he said.

Fluorescent lights illuminated the room, and the sudden brightness made me squint. Once adjusted, I was looking out a large window, facing an empty room. Chairs were set up around a small stage, with what looked like a stripper pole in the center of the platform.

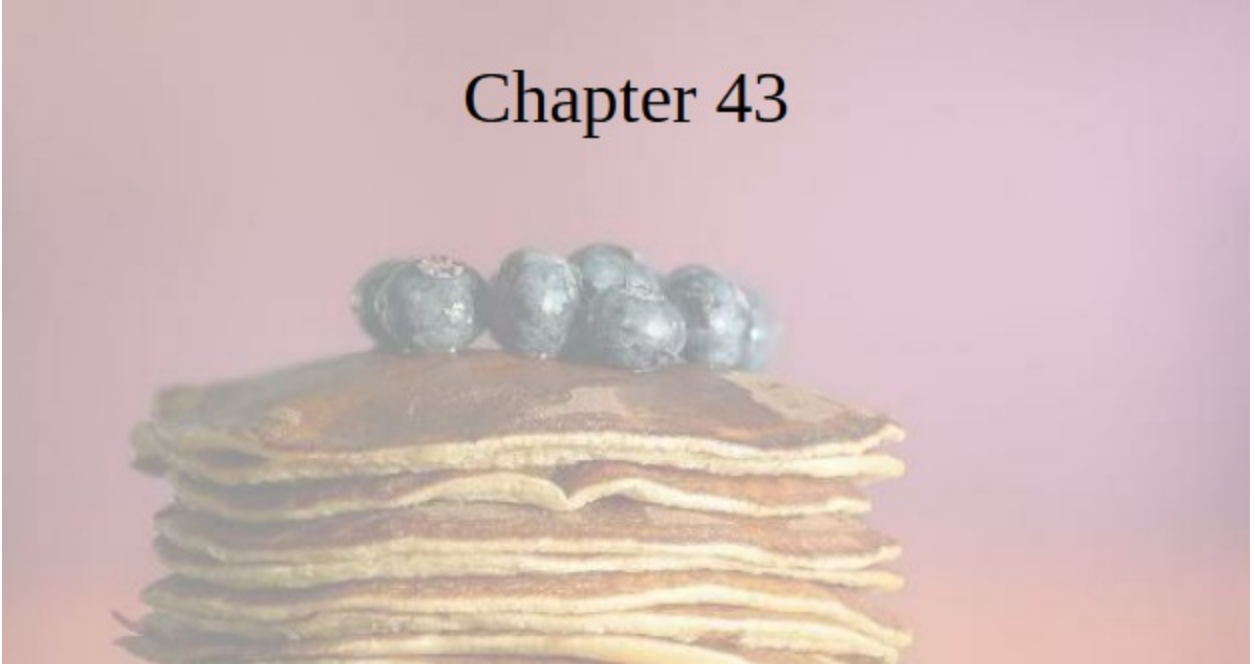
“Enjoy the auction, Justin. Hope you enjoy the view, since it’s the closest you’ll ever get to having any pussy again.” Marco grinned at me while I tried again to lunge forward, groaning behind the tape on my mouth. “It is a one-way window, by the way. Once I finish selling off all the whores, including Spencer’s sister, I’ll slit your precious Valentina’s throat for your viewing

pleasure.” Marco began to walk away towards the door, but he stopped to look over his shoulder. “And there’s nothing you can do about it.”

The heavy door slammed again, and I stared into the door as my anger built up in me.

You will never lay a hand on Valentina again. I’ll die before you fucking touch her...

Chapter 43



Spencer



“I could really go for some fucking pancakes.” I sighed, talking to myself as I stood alone at the floor to ceiling window in the sitting room to get some privacy.

Fatigue was starting to tear through my body, and I was desperately trying to fight it off. *Cassie... I need to get Cassie, then I can worry about sleep.* Pulling out my phone to check the time, I sighed again when I saw it was barely one in the afternoon. Time seemed to be crawling, when all I wanted to do was bust in Marco’s fucking door and get Cassie back.

A soft knock on the wall behind me pulled me out of my thoughts. I turned to find Valentina already dressed in her tactical gear, holding a takeout container in her hands.

“Justin told me this was your favorite. I thought it would be a good idea if we all ate first.” She handed me the takeout container, and instantly my mouth watered at the scent.

“I fucking love pancakes.” I sat on my ass right where I was, not even bothering to find a chair or table. Opening the container, I was met with still

steaming hot, fresh pancakes. "Fuck yeah. Thanks Val." She handed me a bag with syrup and utensils, then sat down right next to me on the floor with her own tray.

"I fucking love pancakes, too," she said as she poured way too much syrup on hers... *Just how I like mine...*

"Hopefully, Sirens opens back up soon, and hopefully, all this just fucking ends today. We can take Justin and Cassie to get the best fucking pancakes in Nevada."

"Yeah, I'd like that a lot," she said with a mouth full of pancakes.

"So tell me, what's with the knives? Seems really out of the blue."

"Before I met Marco, I took self-defense classes that were taught by a Navy SEAL. I caught on super quick, and when we learned to defend against knives, I found out I was really good with both defending and fighting."

I was impressed. Any kind of SEAL training is brutal.

"I guess with everything I had gone through with Marco, it just got pushed so far back in my mind, and I lost it. Something he couldn't take since he took everything else..."

I faced her just in time to see a tear fall from her eye, and she hung her head. Leaning forward, I wrapped my arms around her and let her cry on my shoulder.

"We'll get him, Val. I promise."



Valentina

With everyone fed, we gathered in the foyer to get ready to leave. I looked at Spencer, and he was just as angry as I was. The darkness in his eyes seemed to match the anger I felt deep in my soul.

I like him. Nikita said in my mind.

We spent an hour making sure our tactical gear fit. I was wearing thin, looser fitting black cargo pants and a long sleeve compression top with a built-in kevlar vest. I was able to move freely and fit my knives perfectly thanks to Enzo's last-minute customizations.

"Mia cara, I hope you can put these to good use," Rico said, his arms crossed over his chest. He nodded to Antonio, who handed me a small bag. It was a set of 12 throwing knives with my father's crest etched into the handle.

"Your father's knives; he was quite talented, as well."

Tracing my fingers across my family's crest, my anger started to build again.

He tried to take this from us. He was going to kill you to take the family. We have to take care of him tonight. Nikita whispered in my mind.

"I will kill them for this," I hissed in a voice I hardly recognized as I fastened a knife sheath to my thigh.

"Yes, mia cara. They will all burn."

"Speaking of burn..." I walked back to the bedroom, to my duffel bag I had brought from Marco's house. Shuffling through it, I found Marco's Zippo and tucked it away in my pocket.

Motherfucker will burn for what he's done to us.

"They will all burn," I repeated.

"Two hours," Dante called from the foyer of the suite. "We should head over to the location and find our anchor point."

"Val, would you like to ride with me? My baby always helps calm my

mind. Maybe it can help you, too, before shit hits the fan,” Spencer offered.

“Sure, I’d love to.”

“I will take our van, and Dante will take the Corvette since they know him in that car. Spencer, you can follow the van, and Dante will follow you,” Rico said, and all the men nodded as they each picked up a bag of weapons before filing out the door to the parking lot.

Antonio came to my side, carrying my bag for me, and I turned to look out the window of the seating area. He waited at the door, turning his back to give me privacy.

“We’ll get him, Val.” Spencer came up next to me, wrapping an arm around my shoulder.

“What if...”

“None of that, babe. We’ll get him.” Spencer pulled me to him, and I rested my head on his shoulder while I hugged my own arms. “Congratulations, by the way. Justin wouldn’t shut the fuck up about that ring since he ran into you at the grocery store.”

My king... Justin, I’m coming. Please stay safe.

I smiled and patted Spencer on the chest.

“Let’s get going.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Spencer offered his arm and bowed like we were at some fancy ball. Slipping my hand in the crook of his elbow, he led me to the door towards the parking lot, with Antonio following close behind.

I love you Justin... I’m coming...



Spencer

Fifteen minutes later, we all met in an abandoned building half a block away from the restaurant where the meet-up before the auction was taking place. Valentina sat in an old chair she found in the corner of the empty room while Antonio stood guard at the door.

Dante walked into the room, brushing off the sleeves of his Versace suit. He looked like a rich asshole; it was perfect. He looked at me, cocking an eyebrow at my casual outfit.

“Marco will know something is up if I show up in a fucking fancy suit. I hardly listen to any of his instructions, so I have to look how I always look, with my jeans and leather jacket,” I explained.

“Makes sense.” Dante nodded in agreement.

“Thirty minutes, gentlemen,” Nikolai said as he checked the magazine of his gun before clicking it in place. “Remember, the trouble word is ‘golden’. These earpieces have GPS locators, in case things go... awry.” Nikolai handed Dante and me earpieces.

“‘Golden’. Got it,” I replied as I put the tiny device in my ear.

“‘Golden’, copy,” Dante replied.

Nikolai reached for Dante’s suit and placed a gold tie pin on his tie, then turned to me and stuck a black pin in the seam of a zippered pocket on the chest of my jacket.

“Very small, untraceable cameras. We will keep an eye on the whole situation from both of your points of view,” he answered my silent question.

“Dante, you head over first in the Corvette, and Spencer will head over ten minutes behind you,” Bruno added.

“Stay safe, you two,” Valentina said from her chair, and Dante gave her a nod before turning to me.

“Anything I say in there is an act. Please remember, Spencer. In case I have to sound a little less... sympathetic to Cassie.”

I nodded while readjusting my hair in Cassie’s hair band. Valentina stood before us like a queen.

“Only one request. If things get messy,” Valentina said firmly. “I get to kill Marco. I want him to die by my hands.” Her dark, vicious eyes sent a shiver up my spine, as she reached out to hand us our masquerade masks.

“Yes, ma’am.” Dante answered, and I nodded my head to her.

Dante and I walked out to his Corvette and my baby. Straddling the seat, I checked my Glock again, and made sure it was loaded.

“See you there.” Dante climbed into his Corvette and peeled away.

I’m coming, Cassie. I’m coming.

Ten minutes passed, then I headed to this fucking auction with a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach.



Valentina

Spencer and Dante had been gone for an hour, and I was growing impatient. I started pacing back and forth, my mind going wild with anger, fear, anxiety... I was having a hard time keeping myself focused.

“How much longer?” I asked Rico. His eyes were on a small television screen watching the security cameras. Nikolai watched a different monitor that was streaming from the cameras planted on Dante and Spencer.

“Looks like they are serving drinks to the attendees, mia cara. Almost.”

We need to get in there. NOW. Nikita hummed in my mind.

I have to get to Justin... Is he even going to be there? What if he's not there? What if they hurt him...?

My fist flew into the wall as my mind started to spiral out of control. The darkness was building up inside me, and I was losing control. Enzo looked up from the magazine he was reading, cocking an eyebrow.

“Miss Fiorelli...” Nikolai stood to face me, but stopped in his tracks as one of my knives flew towards his face. Quickly, he dodged it and ran forward, pinning me against the wall with his forearm. “Trust me, I know how much it hurts to have who you love taken from you...” His calm eyes flashed with pain for a split second before softening. “We will get him back. Please control your anger; don't waste your energy on the wall.”

I nodded in agreement, holding his gaze until he released me.

I'm never standing down from a man ever again.

“Come, let us plan.” He held his hand out to me, and I placed my hand in his, following him back to the screens.



Justin

My head leaned forward as I tried to calm my mind. With my chin to my chest, I could see the sunflower tattoo etched over my heart. I had to stay calm. I had to get out of this and find her. I had to find my fiancée. Lifting my head, I stretched my stiff neck in circles to try to relieve some of the tension from being tied down in this chair.

Those fuckers must have drugged me when they brought me here. I felt more lucid and less groggy, but my head was throbbing. I could feel my skin underneath the duct tape starting to itch and get irritated.

The sound of the heavy door opening again pulled me out of my thoughts. I willed all my strength to rise in me, and with each approaching footstep, my rage grew stronger.

“Are you ready for our entertainment, Mr. Campbell?” Marco’s smug grin came into my line of sight. Trying again to lunge out of my restraints, I groaned in pain when I felt a warm trickle of blood drip from my wrist. “Now, now, Justin. Look what you’ve done.”

“Don’t fucking come near me,” I growled through clenched teeth after Marco tore off the tape covering my mouth.

“Oh, but it’s too tempting,” Marco taunted as he rolled up the sleeves of his dress shirt to his elbows. “I’ve been waiting for this moment for a long time, Justin. There are consequences to those who touch what’s mine.”

His fist connected with my jaw, tossing my head to the side. Bringing my head back to center, I chuckled at him.

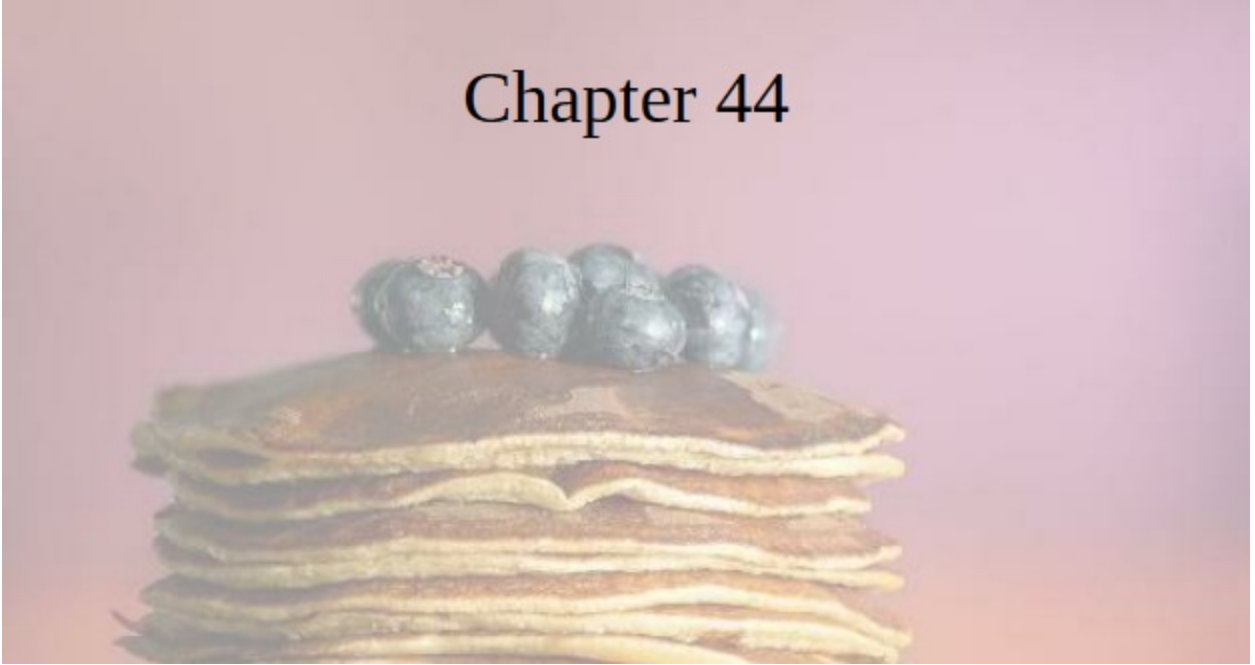
“What’s yours?” A wicked grin fell from my lips as I harnessed all my rage and glared at him. “She was *never* yours.” Marco’s fist connected with my jaw again. “I cut that piece of shit ring off her finger, you bitch. And

guess what? She's wearing *mine* now." I spat blood at his feet after his second strike.

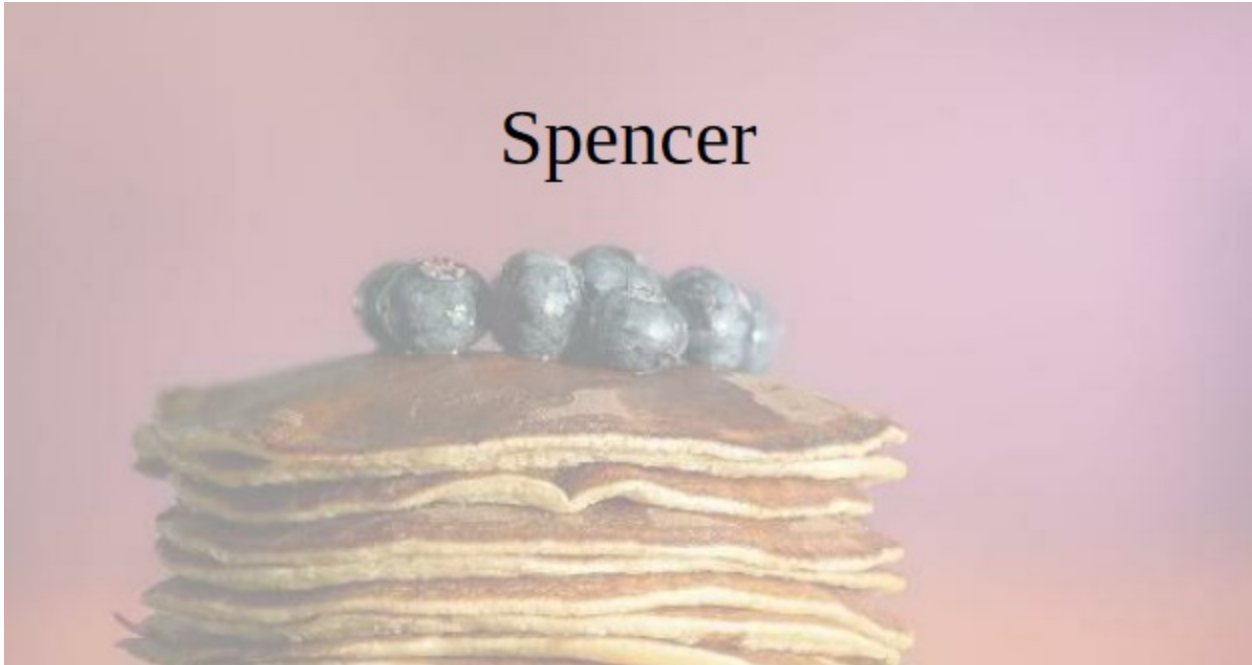
"I'll let you feel like you've won for now. Enjoy the show, Justin." Marco gestured towards the window with his arm as men in masquerade masks started to file in, being escorted to seats around the stage. I saw Spencer and Dante walk in, and three men had to force Spencer to sit. "His pretty cunt of a sister is up last. Enjoy." Marco fixed his sleeves, leaving me in the soundproof room.

You will fucking burn, Marco.

Chapter 44



Spencer



Of course Marco would host a fucking wine tasting to drag shit out. By the time the servers brought the dessert wine around, I was ready to lose my mind. I caught a glimpse of Dante out of the corner of my eye, while I crossed my arms, ignoring my glasses. He was playing a good act, dabbing his mouth with the corner of a napkin, placing it in his lap. Like a rich asshole...

This stupid fucking mask itches the fuck out of my face.

“I would like to thank you all for joining me today.” Marco stood at the head of the table, raising his wine glass.

Gabriel sat across from me, looking just as bored as I was, holding up his glass. He rolled his eyes before taking a sip and placing it down.

“What is this for, West?” he asked me from across the table. “I should be helping Graham, not drinking some fancy ass wine.”

“Tell me about it.” I pushed my chair out to stand with everyone else as they began to leave. Gabriel stood as well, but he looked distracted. “You

good, man?” I asked hesitantly. Something was off with him tonight, something... big.

“Yes, my apologies. I’m just thinking that I hope they’re able to fix up Sirens soon. I miss that damn good coffee. “

“Yeah... Well, tell Anna I say ‘hi’. I already miss bugging that smart ass.”

“Will do, West. See you around.” Gabriel put his hands in his pockets and followed the crowd out to their cars.

Something is off with Gabriel... He hated the coffee at Sirens... He winced when he drank it, now he all of a sudden loves it?... What the fuck is he up to...?

A hand suddenly found my shoulder, and I spun around, ready to fight.

“You have been requested in the back room now, Mr. West,” one of the servers said, motioning her hand towards the back door. Dante and four other men were moving through the door, and I cracked my neck before following.

“Good evening, gentlemen. I am pleased to have you all with us this evening. I hope you find tonight’s selection to be...” his wicked eyes met mine, “delicious.”

I met his gaze while the other men mumbled in approval. He winked at me before buttoning his suit jacket and exiting the room.

I can’t wait to watch you bleed out at my feet, you sick fuck.

“Sir?” One of Marco’s assholes pulled me from the delicious thought of ripping out his throat with my bare hands. “This way please, sir.” He led me to the parking lot and to a blacked-out Audi. The back passenger door opened as I approached, and my eyes saw Dante get into the car in front of mine.

“I’ll ride my bike. Not getting in this car.”

“I’m sorry, sir; that’s not how this works,” the thug warned, placing his hand on his holstered gun.

“Spencer... *Just get in the car,*” Rico said in my earpiece.

Reluctantly, I climbed into the backseat, and the car drove us to the auction.



Valentina

“Spencer... *Just get in the car,*” Rico said into the microphone connected to Spencer’s earpiece.

Enzo and I helped gather all of our equipment, and Rico carried the wireless monitor to watch Spencer and Dante. Quickly, we all got into the van while Antonio drove us to follow Spencer’s GPS signal.

“Son of a bitch,” Rico hissed. “They’re going to the Paris Hotel and Casino.”

“I was hoping your informant was wrong about this.” Nikolai’s brows pinched in anger. “Bruno, I need to know every exit, every fire escape. Every possible way out.”

“Yes, boss.” Bruno typed away on his tablet.

I was seething with pure rage the closer we got to Marco.

It’s almost time, almost time for revenge. Nikita sang in my mind. I closed my eyes, allowing the intrusive thoughts to feed my rage.

“He knows I’m coming, knows we’re coming,” I blurted out. “Why else would he be doing this here and risk getting caught? It’s such a big, very public place.”

“You’d be surprised what happens just outside the public eye, mia cara.” Rico sighed.

“I’m living proof of that...” I accidentally said out loud. Rico and Nikolai’s eyes met mine as I tried to keep the tears from falling, and focused on the monitor.

Antonio followed Marco’s cars to a parking lot off the back side of the casino. Parking on the opposite end of the lot, we watched as the five Audis parked and dropped off each man. Dante was the first to arrive, and he buttoned his suit jacket as he stood from the car and adjusted his mask. Spencer was next, followed by three others.

We watched Spencer and Dante enter the auction room on the monitor. It was a pretty large room, with a few chairs and a platform with what looked to be a stripper pole in the middle. There were large, long mirrors on the walls and a bartender in one corner. Each man, except Spencer, got a drink and sat around the platform.

“Gentlemen, welcome.” I flinched hearing Marco’s words. My hands shook as I balled them into fists. “Let us begin, shall we?”

Let it out—all the anger, the pain, the hate. Feed it to me so we can end this... Nikita purred in my mind.

Each girl that Marco brought out to the platform looked to be no more than twenty-one years old. They were drugged and handcuffed to the stripper poles so the men could circle them and get a full view before bidding.

Dante successfully won 4 out of 6 girls, and Bruno was already arranging for Nikolai to get the other two from the assholes who purchased them. The whole show made me sick to my stomach.

“To close this evening, we have an extra special selection for you, gentlemen.” Marco’s twisted eyes were on Spencer with every word. He

snapped his fingers, and one of his men carried out a small, naked body. Cassie's red hair was matted and messy, and she had bruises all over her body. She had a bandage on her shoulder blade where Marco had her tattoo cut off, and her hand was wrapped where her finger was severed. The thug tossed Cassie to the floor, not even bothering to handcuff her. "This is the sister of a man who betrayed me. I will offer her to any one of you for free or take bids on who gets to kill her."

The men grumbled in approval as Cassie tried to sit up on the floor. I gripped my knife by the handle so hard. I was getting ready to lose my mind.

"We have to get in there," I roared.

GET IN THERE.

"Not yet, mia cara. Let Dante get Cassie out." I barely heard Rico over the rage in my mind as I swung open the door, ready to kill.

"Shit. Dante, get Cassie now. We're making entry," Rico said into Dante's ear piece as I kicked in the door to the auction.



Spencer

My eyes never left Cassie until I heard the back door being kicked in. Each man at the auction, and at least five of Marco's men, all aimed their guns towards the door.

"Before this gets out of hand, you can throw in that red-headed cunt with the rest of my purchases. I'll include an extra twenty grand for the trouble,"

Dante said over his shoulder to Marco, as he aimed his gun at the door, as well, to keep up appearances.

Valentina looked like death incarnate as she stalked into the room, knife in hand.

I've been waiting for this moment.

My shadow quickly consumed me as I locked eyes with Valentina, giving her a nod.

“I always knew you were a smart one, Valentina,” Marco mocked as he stepped forward in front of everyone’s guns. “You came back to me.” Valentina glared at him with a hate I’d never seen before. It twisted her soft features into someone I didn’t recognize.

“I’m not here for you,” she spat. “Where. Is. Justin.” She stalked forward slowly, scanning all the guns that were aimed at her.

“Mr. Campbell? Oh, my dear, he’s a bit... incapacitated at the moment.” Marco’s wicked grin made me wince.

Justin, please be alive.

Valentina looked right at me, and I could swear I could hear her in my mind.

Let's do this.

With a flick of her wrist, one of Valentina’s throwing knives stuck into the forehead of one of Marco’s customers, dropping him quickly. Whipping my Glock from my back, I quickly shot two of Marco’s guards closest to Valentina as she rushed after a now fleeing Marco.

“Cassie!” I roared, as one of Marco’s men snatched her up, running towards the back of the room. I quickly dodged bullets, ducking behind a dried-up stone water fountain.

“Fucking ‘golden’ if you haven’t noticed yet!” I yelled.



Justin

My eyes went wide in surprise watching Valentina swiftly move through the room, expertly dancing with her knife, dropping bodies and looking absolutely ferocious. My cock twitched at the sight of her perfect body dodging attacks and the way her eyes darkened as she killed one of Marco's men. Trails of blood splattered across her face as she swiped the knife she was holding, slicing one of the men in the neck.

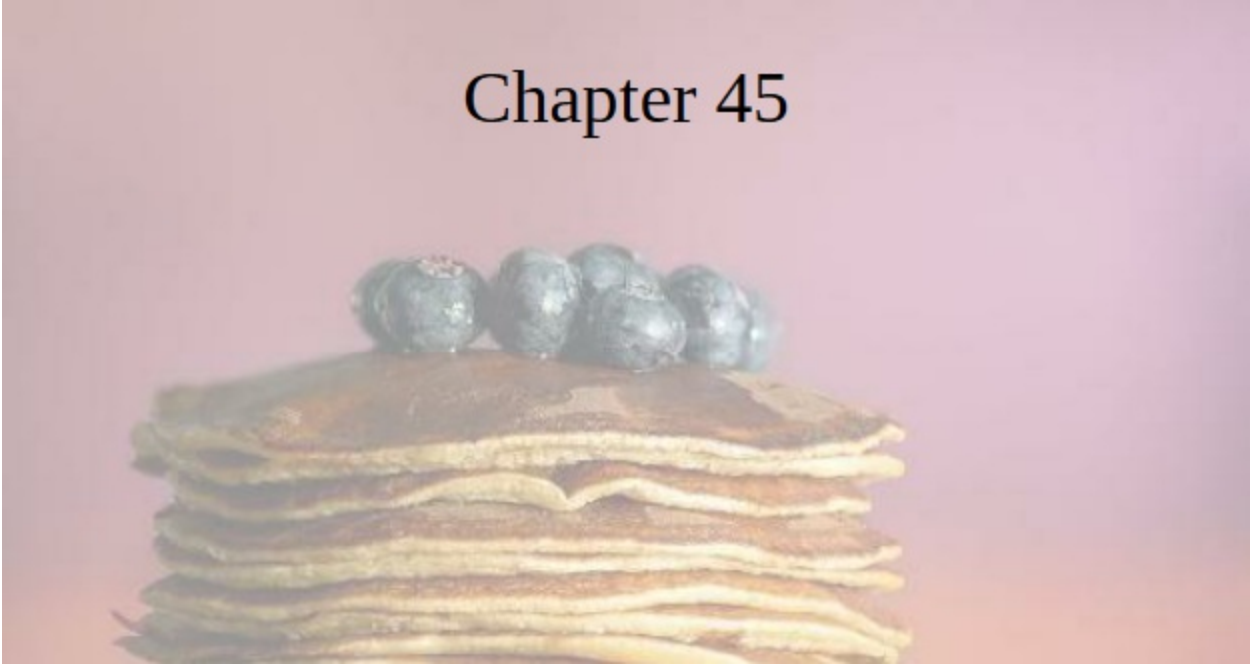
"Justin!" she called for me, and I tried screaming back, but it was no use in this soundproof room. Pulling again against the rope restraining me, I tried fiercely to free myself. The pain in my wrist from where I had sliced it open was almost too much to bear, but I forced my body to pull while I yelled out in pain. Blood started to fall to my fingertips again, and I had to stop before I cut myself too deep.

"Valentina!" I roared, praying she would hear me. I kept my eyes on my brutal queen as she killed the last of Marco's men around her.

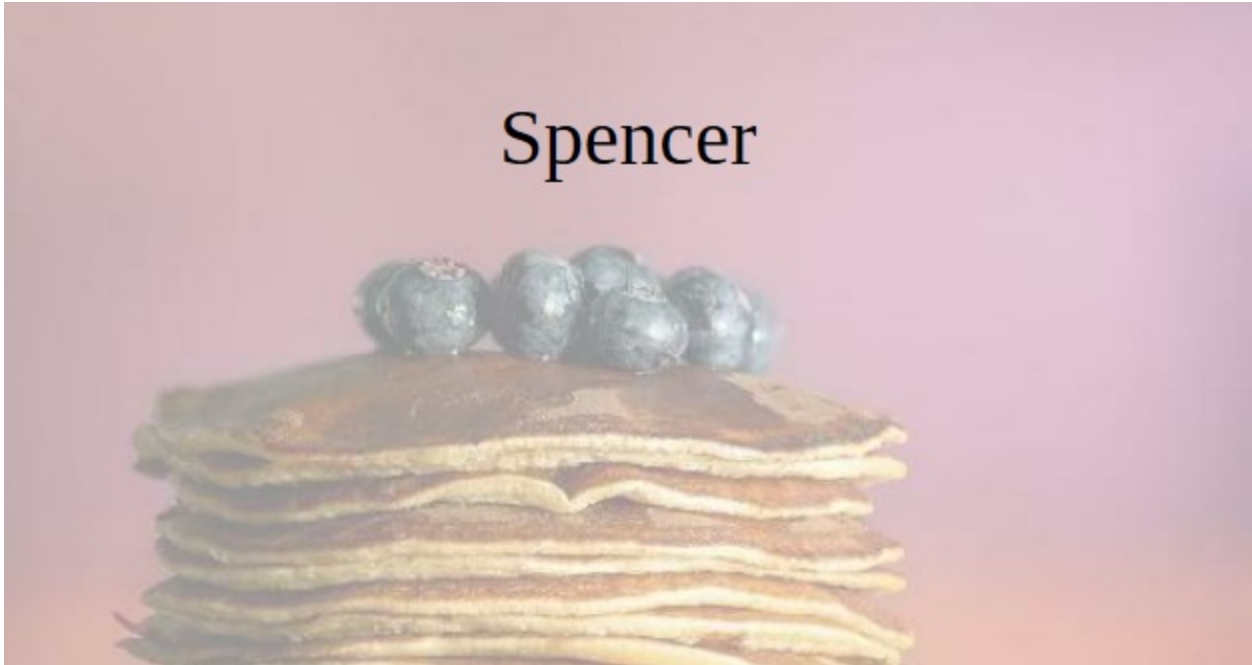
Spencer held one of Marco's men by the neck as he pointed his gun underneath the man's chin. He mumbled something to him, then shot him. My eyes found Dante, who was rushing towards the back with Marco to get the girls he had purchased, I assumed. As soon as I thought it was quiet and over, at least fifteen more of Marco's thugs kicked in doors and surrounded Valentina and Spencer.

They stood together in the middle of the room, chests heaving as they nodded at each other. All I could do was watch as my best friend and the love of my life fought to the death.

Chapter 45



Spencer



“Well, this is pretty shitty,” I joked, as Valentina and I stood back to back, surveying all the thugs that had just come into the room. They were all armed in different ways—guns, knives, chains, and one had brass knuckles.

“The ones... with guns first...” Valentina was trying to catch her breath as we made an on-the-spot plan.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Dante leaving through an emergency exit with 4 girls and Cassie over his shoulder. An instant sense of relief flooded through me, allowing me to focus on the task at hand.

“Yes, boss,” I replied as I felt my shadows rise up from my feet, invading my body. I welcomed all the hate, the agony. I let it surround me like I needed it to survive, and I took a deep breath in, inhaling the rest of the darkness into my body. Cracking my neck, I shot two shots: one to my left and one to my right. Two bodies fell, their blood pooling around them.

“Here we go. I love you, Spence,” Valentina said before taking off to my right, knife in hand.

At that moment, Rico and Nikolai kicked in another door and began shooting at Marco's men. I ran after Valentina, shooting the men she couldn't see as she made her way to the back towards Marco.

Running out of ammunition, I released the empty magazine, letting it fall to my feet, and pulled a fresh one out of my jacket pocket. As soon as I reloaded, I shot again, missing one of the men, but shattering one of the mirrors.

Glass rained down on Valentina, and she stopped in her tracks. Justin.

Justin was slumped over, bound with ropes to a chair bolted to the floor. Valentina jumped into the hidden room through the broken window and kneeled before Justin, wrapping him in her arms.

"Justin! Please! No, no, no... Please!" Valentina sobbed. I kept my back to her, shooting to draw attention away from her, then she yelled my name.

"Spencer! Please! He's not breathing!"



Valentina

I held my king in my arms as his limp body leaned forward onto my shoulder. I hoped he had just passed out, but quickly realized he wasn't breathing.

"Justin! Please! No, no, no... Please!" I cried out.

This can't be happening, this can't...

"Spencer! Please! He's not breathing!" I begged Spencer while I cradled Justin's head against my shoulder.

“Fuck!” Spencer groaned and threw his body over the broken window into the room with us. He stood, holding his shoulder as he made his way over. “JC, you better get the fuck up, man.” He moved his hand away from his arm to check Justin’s pulse and blood gushed from a bullet wound.

“Spencer... Your shoulder...” I was breaking, desperately trying to keep my grip on reality, trying to focus on Justin and getting him out of here, but I was slipping.

Let me in... Nikita begged in my mind. Let me in, let me take over and end this...

N-no... I can't do that again. Please, no... I shook my head as I held it in my hands, fighting Nikita in my mind. I couldn't let her take over again. Last time she—

“Val! He’s breathing!” Spencer called, instantly shifting my focus.

“V-Val...” Justin groaned softly. I fell to my knees in front of him again, cradling his face in my hands as I kissed him with everything I had.

“I love... love you, Val...” Justin whispered before passing out again.

“Justin... Please don’t... Please don’t leave me.” I sobbed into his lap, but the sound of footsteps drew my attention to my right.

“Spencer? Are you alright?” a firm, female voice said.

“Miss Fiore?” a familiar male voice said immediately following.

I looked up to see Julio, Marco’s driver, holding a gun to his side, and a woman in a sling holding a brutal-looking whip.

“Ju... Julio?”

“We must leave, Miss Fiore. It is not safe here anymore,” he urged as the woman went to Spencer’s side. He was lying on his back, holding his shoulder again.



Spencer

“Bella?” I groaned as I lay on my back. “Aren’t you a sight for sore eyes?” I chuckled as she kneeled next to me.

“Still a fucking brat, I see.” She smirked at me before turning her attention to my shoulder.

“We match now,” I joked when I saw her arm in a sling, bandages on her shoulder showing through her tank top. “Are you alright?”

“Hush, Spencer. I’m fine. The bullet shot straight through, but you need to get out of here and go to the hospital.”

Bella stood, picking up her whip, and she expertly flung it forward, catching one of Marco’s men by the neck. Yanking him to the floor, she stalked up to him, stepping on his throat. My cock twitched in my jeans, seeing her work that whip. I eyed her up and down while she stood on his neck.

She can use that on me any day...

“Nice to finally meet you, Valentina,” Bella said casually as she broke the thug’s neck. “I’m sorry for not introducing myself sooner. I’m Bella De La Rosa. Your ex future sister-in-law.” She rolled her eyes as Valentina’s jaw dropped.

“Don’t worry, I’m on your side. I’ve been against Marco for a long time. Julio here is my second in command; rather, he will be once we get rid of

Marco.” Anger burned in her eyes as she admitted she was here to kill her brother.

I stood to face Bella, her intense eyes meeting mine. I had the overwhelming urge to submit my soul to her, but we still had to find Marco.

“Let’s split up to find him. Spencer, can you still move and shoot? I will head towards the front, Julio to the left, and you to the right. Valentina should stay here with Justin and get the restraints off,” Bella commanded, and all of us nodded.

“Thank you, Bella...” Valentina said with angry tears in her eyes.

“You can thank me by killing the motherfucker,” Bella replied before turning to me. “Marco had planned on killing you tonight. Please be careful... If anything happens... Just please... Please play dead and just wait for him to die. I will come back for you.” Bella had a knowing look on her face, and I knew then that I wasn’t making it out of here.

Cassie... I love you.



Justin

“V-Val...” Valentina was sawing away at the ropes that bound me to the chair, and I saw Spencer start to make his way out of the room, but fell to a knee, groaning in pain.

“I’ll get you out, Justin, I’m... almost... there...” She paused as she finally cut through the last rope. She started to unwrap my legs, then my arms, before pulling my head to her chest.

“Baby...” Her angry, scared, hazel eyes looked into mine. “My fucking queen. I love you so much, Val.”

“I love you, too, my king.”

Clap. Clap. Clap.

Justin and I turned our heads towards the sound simultaneously. Marco looked even more sinister in his black masquerade mask.

“Oh, how romantic,” he said dryly while rolling his eyes. “Come, Valentina.”

Valentina stood, facing Marco. She stood with a new confidence, new strength, and the way she gripped the knife behind her back made my soul buzz in anticipation.

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” she spat.

“I figured you’d say that,” Marco said as he rolled his sleeves up to the elbow. Valentina’s eyes flashed with fear, but she quickly shook it off as he opened his mouth to speak again. “You will come with me if you value their lives.” He motioned to Spencer and I. Spencer was on one knee, holding his shoulder. His face became pale from the blood loss.

“Leave... them alone...” I growled almost breathlessly.”

“Hmm, playing hero still Justin?” Marco chuckled as he pulled out a gun from his waistband, aiming it at Spencer.

“Don’t you dare...” Valentina hissed as she stepped in front of Spencer.

“Val... Val, no.” Spencer groaned.



Spencer

“Val... Val, no,” I groaned as she stood in front of me.

“I’m not letting you hurt anyone anymore,” she spat at Marco, before grabbing her knife and charging towards him.

Valentina lunged at Marco. He barely dodged her strike and fell to the ground, dropping his gun.

“Hmmm, interesting. Seems like you’ve hidden a secret talent from me, Valentina.” Marco stood defensively, adjusting his mask, ready to fight.

Valentina’s eyes darkened as she stood, gripping her knife. A small smear of blood dripped from the tip as Marco reached for his bicep, finding a cut.

“You fucking bitch,” he hissed as he charged at her, grabbing her by the wrists, and pushing her into the wall.

“V-Val...” Justin was teetering on the edge of losing consciousness again, and I quickly forced myself to stand to catch him before he fell out of the chair.

Valentina’s eyes left Marco and went to Justin. As soon as she looked away, Marco swung his fist, punching her in the jaw. She fell to the ground harshly, and I jumped up.

“You motherfucker,” I growled as I lunged for him. He turned to face me and my body froze right before I could touch him.

Stumbling backwards a few steps, I started to feel nauseous and dizzy. The taste of blood on my tongue made me wince as it pooled in my mouth, and Marco’s dark, sinister eyes lit up as he smiled. I looked down and saw Valentina’s knife in my side, angled upwards towards my heart. From a distance, I caught Bella’s gaze and her eyes went wide when she saw the knife. She ran over as Valentina stood back up.

“Marco, you...” Valentina froze when she saw the hilt of her blade in my

side. Marco came up to me, ripping the blade out.

“V-Val, I’m so... so sorry...” I whispered as I fell to the ground. Darkness was coming to claim me, and all I could think of was Cassie. *She was safe. She was...*



Valentina

“V-Val, I’m so... so sorry...” Spencer gasped as he fell to the ground. *My knife... He used my fucking knife.*

“Spencer!” Justin roared as he stumbled down to the ground next to him.

Bella rushed into the room, kneeling before Spencer, checking his pulse. A pool of blood was forming under his lifeless body.

“Spencer... No... Please...” Bella cried. Her tears fell onto Spencer’s face as she tried pulling Spencer to lie on his side one-handed.

Time seemed to stand still while Justin rushed forward, ripping off Spencer’s shirt. Bella tore her arm out of her sling, roaring in pain as she put pressure on Spencer’s side with both hands. Spencer coughed and started to pale, the pool of blood underneath his body growing larger and larger.

“You’re not doing this to me, Spencer,” Bella cried while she continued to groan in pain, keeping pressure on his side.

“B-Bella...” Spencer groaned as she pressed harder, desperate to stop the bleeding.

“Justin! Please...” Bella begged Justin.

“Fuck! If he didn't tear the knife out...” Justin was fumbling with Spencer's torn shirt, trying to bunch it up to hold on his side. “It needs to be as tight as possible, air tight until we get him to the hospital. Let go.” Bella and Justin immediately switched places, and Justin pressed as hard as he could to stop the bleeding.

“H-Hey, Camp...Campbell.” Spencer tried to chuckle while Bella kneeled in front of him, cradling his head.

I stood protectively between Marco and my friends, ready to kill him if he took one step closer. His dark eyes looked bored while he adjusted his rolled-up sleeves, which only fueled my rage even more. Pulling another blade from its sheath around my thigh, I stood at the ready.

“N-no, no, no, Spencer!” Bella cried as her bloody, shaking hands felt his neck for a pulse. She leaned forward, placing her forehead on Spencer's, and seemed to whisper something to him as he groaned in pain one last time. “He... He's gone... He can't be gone...”

“What? N-no, he can't... He can't be...” Justin reached for his best friend's lifeless hand, trying desperately to feel a pulse in his wrist.

Bella gently placed Spencer's head down and stood to face Marco with angry, savage tears in her eyes.

“Oh, come on, Bella. You're going to cry over that waste of life?” Marco scoffed as he stalked towards Justin. “Now for this one.”

“You won't *fucking* touch him.” I threw my body in between them, landing a punch to Marco's temple. He stumbled backwards in shock.

“You fucking bitch,” he hissed.

“Valentina, move...” Bella groaned as she pulled Spencer's Glock from his waistband, aiming it at Marco. Once I moved, she fired his gun at Marco until the magazine emptied.

Marco took off, diving through a doorway leading to a hallway. I started to make my way towards him, and once I was closer, I heard shuffling and began moving more carefully.

What the fuck is he doing back there? Nikita asked cautiously in my mind.

I continued to inch my way towards where Marco was hiding when he suddenly lunged out at me, wrapping his hands around my neck. His dark eyes behind the mask looked unfamiliar somehow as I clawed at his arms.

Why are his sleeves rolled down? Nikita was screaming in my mind, but I forced myself to ignore her while I tried to fight him off.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Bella reach down for her whip on the floor and fling it to the side, catching Marco around the neck. She pulled him away from me and forced him to his knees. He clawed at the tight strand constricting his neck, and with it still wrapped around him, she threw the whip to the ground, turning to me.

“He’s all yours. I hope you fucking rot in hell, Marco,” she spat as she turned her back on her brother, walking away from him.

Picking up the knife he used to kill Spencer with from the ground, I kneeled in front of Marco and lifted his chin with the flat part of the blade.

“I told you, you’re fucking done hurting me.” I reached back, and Marco’s eyes looked unrecognizable as they flashed with fear. I drove the knife forward into his chest, then ripped it out savagely. “You’re done hurting Justin... Spencer... Cassie... Everyone.” My knife plunged into his chest with each pause. Still choking and bleeding, Marco tried to stand from kneeling.

My hands were soaked in his blood, the red warmth dripped off the tip of my blade, leaving a trail of death as I moved behind him. Standing at his back, I grabbed him by the hair to force him to look up at me upside down.

“Fuck you, Marco.” With all my force, I pierced his neck with my knife until the blade stuck out the opposite side. Blood began quickly pooling as Marco slumped over, gurgling and turning pale.

It's done, he's gone. He's finally gone. I'm free...

Looking down at Marco's dead body, I stepped on the side of his head, yanking my knife out of his neck. More blood flowed from his wounds and surrounded my feet. The wave of pleasure I felt from watching the life leave his eyes was like nothing I'd ever felt before.

The pleasure I felt was short-lived, as all my anger, my pain, my trauma came crashing into me. This man underneath me caused me so much pain, ruined my life, stole everything from me. He killed my friend, he took Justin...

Before I could stop myself, I straddled Marco's dead body, reaching my knife over my head. I screamed as I held my knife with two hands, slamming it down over and over into his chest and face. With each upswing, trails of blood painted the walls, the floor, my body. Once his face was unrecognizable, I climbed off of him and sobbed on my hands and knees.

My glasses fell off my face to the ground as I hung my head, and I reached for them, sitting back on my heels to try to see through the blood coating the lenses. I reached over to Marco's dead body and yanked on his collared shirt until it became untucked. Using the clean fabric, I wiped off my glasses, leaving behind a bloody smear on his stupid, expensive shirt. Once they were clean enough to see through, I rushed to Spencer's side.

“Spencer... P-please... You can't leave me yet. You can't...” I sat on my heels, holding him to my chest as I started sobbing uncontrollably. Stroking his dirty, bloody hair out of his face, I rocked him back and forth while Justin

watched us. “Justin, he... he can’t leave me... Not yet... I-I need to tell him... He...He needs to know that...”

“V-Val?” Spencer coughed, and Justin sat up quickly.

“Spence! Please, man, please hang in there. We need to get you back to the hospital,” Justin begged.

“P-please, V-Val. Please t-tell An... Anna...” Spencer’s hooded eyes began to roll back as he was losing his fight.

“I know, Spencer. I’ll tell her, I promise.” Justin was trying not to cry as he clung on to his friend’s hand.

“C-Cass... Cassie...” Spencer exhaled his sister’s name, then his body went limp in my hands, a single tear leaving a clean trail down his bloody cheek.

“N-No...” I sobbed hard into Spencer’s hair, and I caught a glimpse of a figure moving behind me in the reflection of Spencer’s blood on the ground.

Quickly, I turned to face the movement and found the man that had broken into the suite—the man with skulls carved into his mask. He was standing over Justin as he sat on the ground, aiming a gun at his temple, his other hand behind his back.

“Touch him again, I dare you,” I growled through clenched teeth. Blood dripped from my hands as I stood tall, gently placing Spencer’s body down as I glared at the masked man.

“Don’t come any closer!” This pig tried to sound tough through his voice distorter, but his pathetic hands shook as he pressed the gun into Justin’s skin.

“V-Val...” Justin’s eyes rolled back, and I saw the syringe sticking out of his neck. This asshole sedated him...

“Let. Him. Go,” I purred as I continued to stalk towards him. His eyes held my gaze, and I tilted my head slightly... They looked so familiar. “Who are

you...”

Before I could move any closer, the masked man shot a taser gun at me, the barbs stuck in my chest as it shocked me and forced me to fall to the ground. Teetering on the edge of consciousness, I saw his feet as he dragged Justin out of the room.

Get up. GET UP! GET THE FUCK UP! Nikita screamed in my mind.

I forced my arms to push my body up to sit back on my heels.

“Justin...” A car’s tires peeled away as I stood and stumbled to the open door.

Falling to my knees outside in the hot, humid Vegas night, I tried to cry, but no more tears would come. Antonio rushed to my side from the van, while Rico and Nikolai ran towards me from the other side of the parking lot.

“Miss Fiorelli...” Antonio kneeled before me, lifting my chin. My dark, hollow eyes met his concerned stare.

“Mia cara... Are you alright?”

“Valentina?” Nikolai said.

“M-Marco. H-he killed... killed Spencer.”

“Wh... what?” Rico stared towards the exit I had come out of, tears streaming down his face.

“That mask... masked asshole took Justin.”

All of their eyes were laced with concern as I quickly stood and turned to walk away. I stumbled, trying to keep my balance, and dropping my bloody knife as I walked away from my past.

“Valentina, wait!” Dante called as he hopped out of the van.

I jumped into one of Marco’s Audis that had the keys in it still, and peeled out of the parking lot, leaving The Collective in the dust.



Twenty minutes later, I found Marco's house. I stood in the street staring at hell, before leaving bloody footprints up the steps to the porch. With all the strength I had left, I kicked the door open.

I stood in the living room, my body trembling as the anxiety hit me full force.

Let me in...

"Okay, Nikita..."

Closing my eyes, I shattered the glass box that housed all my pain, my trauma, my hate. Nikita's darkness surrounded me, consumed my mind and numbed me. Opening my eyes, I felt like I was looking through someone else's. I didn't feel like I was in the room anymore, like I was watching someone who looked like me move throughout the rooms.

Nikita pulled Marco's Zippo lighter out of my pocket and placed a wicked grin on my face as she walked us through each room, lighting curtains, paper—anything that would catch fire. In the kitchen, she turned on all the gas burners on the stove and continued to stalk through each room, lighting anything flammable with the Zippo.

Once satisfied, she walked us to the front lawn to watch our handiwork burst into flames. It only took ten minutes for the house to be fully engulfed, burning away any trace of Marco from my life.

Go to Anna. I heard Nikita say before I tucked her away back into my mental box and tucked the Zippo back into my pocket.



After a quick five-minute drive, I pulled up in front of Anna's dark house. It started to rain, and my blood-soaked clothes and matted hair clung to my skin as I knocked as hard as I could until she opened the door.

She saw the state of my clothes, and her eyes went wide in shock.

"V-Val... Babe, what happened? Are you okay?" she asked as I stared into nothing.

"I need your help..."

A Note From the Author

Thank you so much for reading my debut novel. The road to writing this book was long, and difficult, but telling my story through Valentina has helped in my journey of healing. I hope everyone who has experienced any pain of any kind from your loved ones, knows that you're not alone and I stand with you. We got this. We'll get through this together.



I have so many people to thank for helping me along my journey. I have been lucky to have been supported by the best group of people I have ever met. I never thought my time on social media would have resulted in lifelong friendships, and this book wouldn't have happened without everyone.

First of all, Sarah. My freaking amazing editor. I have no words to describe how grateful I am that we met each other. You were the very first person

willing to read and hear about all the chaos in my brain, and helped my voice be heard. Thank you for being willing to face my demons with me, and for fixing all of my comma chaos. (Which I'm sure you're doing right now.) It was very difficult for me to share my story with anyone, and you made me feel like my story was worth telling. I cannot wait to embark on this Tormented journey with you!

Connie, I absolutely love you. I couldn't ask for a better best friend that I've never met in person. Thank you for standing by me through all the anxiety and emotions around getting this book written, and for being my biggest cheerleader. I know this book would be FAR from done if it weren't for you!

To my beta readers: Connie, Daleina and Cortney. I put you three through absolute hell with all the plot planning, changes and character development... I am so grateful to you for being unbiased and giving me the best constructive feedback. You three are stuck with me for the whole series!

To my AMAZING, kick ass street team on Instagram: I LOVE YOU ALL. All the time and effort in constantly sharing my posts, and stories, getting my book some attention... From the bottom of my heart, I thank you so, very much. I'm so lucky to have you all on my team. Out of all the books out there, and amazing authors that you can ARC read for, and help promote, you chose me and Anchor Point. It blows my mind to have so many of you believe in my story and characters so much. I couldn't ask for a more amazing group of gals!



To Kory and Daniel, I wouldn't have gotten this far without my little family here at home. We have learned and grown so much together in the few months of this writing process, and I'm looking forward to what our future has in store. Everything I do, I do for you Daniel. My little deaf superhero. Mama loves you.



Don't forget to leave a review! Your reviews mean the world to a little indie author like me!

Let's keep in touch!

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About the Author



Sarah lives in sunny southern California with her husband, and four year old son. When she's not writing, she is reading, crafting, and playing in the sand with the little minion. She has three interconnected series planned! Stay tuned for all the dark, juicy, unexpected shenanigans! Be sure to check out

Sarah's website for signed paperbacks, and a shop full of Tormented swag!
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