



Filthy
HEIR

BAD COMPANY SERIES

DREW JORDAN

Filthy Heir

DREW JORDAN

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Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Also by Drew Jordan](#)

[About the Author](#)

Chapter One

Alex

I'm the boss.

But I'm willing to get my hands dirty.

I enjoy it.

Approaching the boxing bag dangling from the chain on the ceiling, I bounce on the balls of my feet, and roll my shoulders. I tap my knuckles together as I loosen up. I love to hit the bag and kick-box. It's a fantastic workout, using a variety of different muscles.

Adrenaline pumps through me as I take my first jab.

There's a muffled curse of pain.

Not from me.

From the man who is tied up and strung up before me in the bag like a side of beef.

The man who dared to fucking cross me and my family. Making little side deals as if I wouldn't figure it out. Kuzmin Enterprises doesn't allow for double crossing.

My twin brother Luka is the negotiator.

My younger brother Maxim is the enforcer.

And I'm the finisher.

Today I've decided to tie up loose ends.

I jab again, then take a full swing, connecting with soft tissue inside the canvas. There's another muffled cry, louder

this time. The sound both thrills and irritates me.

Fuck with my family?

Wrong.

I let loose with a flurry of kicks and blows, aiming for the head I know is somewhere in there. My violence is never out of control. The total opposite. I'm completely in control. Every punch is aimed with intention, to do the maximum amount of damage.

It doesn't take much.

The screams behind the tape over his mouth lessens until there's nothing, and the squirming and wiggling slows.

I give my one last kick, sweating streaming down my back.

The bag is still.

This is the very definition of multi-tasking.

They say do what you love and you'll never work a day in your life. I live by that creed.

Unwinding the tape from my left hand, I turn to my man. "Take him down. Make sure he's dead."

I head for the showers, pleased with my workout.

"She's financially desperate," Armani Virtue says to me. "And stubborn."

"Just the way I like them," I smirk, raising my martini glass to my lips and taking a sip. I frown at the drink. It's not dirty enough. It's never dirty enough. "I'm looking forward to breaking her."

Armani frowns almost imperceptibly. Has my old friend and one-time mentor grown a conscience? Unlikely. But he has a new bride and the woman we're discussing is her best friend. Even the staunchest of bachelors fall prey to the power of the pussy.

I eye him in amusement. “You can pay me back another way if you’re uncomfortable with this.”

I know the reaction that will get and I’m right. He immediately bristles and turns his attention back from where the woman we are discussing is sitting with his wife on a sofa. He’s hosting this cocktail party for the express purpose of my introduction to Quinn Virtue’s friend. He shakes his head at me, expression now under control.

“Of course not, Alex. You did me a favor. I just know my wife is going to be upset when she finds out her best friend is a liar. I hate to disappoint my wife.”

Three months earlier I had backed Armani up with muscle and a word to my old man and my powerful father-in-law. At times, he’s done the same. Me and Virtue have negotiated various interests between us now and in the past. Money, guns, power, and positions. The important things. This time it was him on the receiving end, another time it will be me. It’s an arrangement that has worked well.

Georgia Ryan is really just a little gift, because he knows I like women with big tits. It’s like receiving a watch for my birthday or a nice bottle of bourbon. A token gesture for me to casually enjoy.

Or that was the intent, anyway.

Then Virtue found out there was more to the girl than he realized and what he found in her past had us both raising an eyebrow or two. It definitely makes her much more interesting. She’s not just another woman that will serve as a passing amusement for one night.

No. My plans go far beyond tonight.

“Such a pretty little liar,” I say. “I can’t wait to see what spills off those sexy lips. Besides my cum, that is.” The thought of fucking her mouth so she can’t talk, can’t feed me a bunch of bullshit, makes my dick harden as I watch her hand trail across her cleavage absently, like she can sense my stare.

I want to come in her mouth then have her push the salty stream out between those plump red lips so that it drops onto

the rounded swell of her tits.

Now that is a perfect image.

“And you’re going to do Georgia a service,” he adds. “Even if she doesn’t know it.”

I doubt she would appreciate it if she did know about it. Most people don’t want to be rescued by the very person who capsized their boat. I’m not sure about his phrasing either. A service makes it sound like I’m pumping her gas for her or doing her landscaping.

I’m not doing anything so simple or kind as either of those.

“I don’t know if I’d call it a service so much as a complete shift in her reality.”

Armani smiles briefly. “She said she wanted a rich man to fuck her. Dreams can come true.”

“I am definitely going to do that. I can’t believe she told you that, by the way.” I take another sip of my martini and watch Georgia talking to Armani’s wife, Quinn. She looks animated but in an irritated way, probably because everything in her life has gone to shit, partly thanks to me.

She’s a natural beauty with a perfect body, but she’s gone and dyed her hair a deep red color that I can’t stand. I also want to rip the blue dress she’s wearing off of her and make the sequin mess disappear forever. It’s fucking ugly. But those aside, I have a fantasy or two of my own when it comes to her.

“She was drunk. Vodka seltzers by the pool. Saying every thought that popped into her head and in that moment incapable of making good decisions.”

“There’s nothing like a party girl by the pool.” I will never turn down a blowjob from a coked-up twenty-something in a bikini. But any more than that and it gets messy because they’re noisy and demanding and I don’t tolerate demands from anyone.

Not even my wife.

Which is why Nicolette is being served with divorce papers as we speak.

Not ones she has to sign.

Final divorce papers. I pushed the divorce through without her knowing about it, because that's when money and anger can accomplish.

She broke the rules of our marriage. For five years, she has demanded I leave her alone and I have. Not once have I been inside her body since our wedding night. She's an ice queen who spends my money with wild abandon and I've allowed that because I respect her father and I respect her.

But now she refuses to give me a child.

All while demanding that I not have a child with another woman.

She can't have it both ways. Either she gives me a child or someone else has to. If she can't agree to those terms, our marriage is pointless.

So it's done.

My father is furious that neither me nor my two brothers have produced children and he's dangling a winner-take-all prize in front of us. The first to have an heir gets the whole damn thing. The company. The connections. Everything he's worked to create and fought for in the organization. Power, money, protection.

I want that prize. I'm going to be the first to produce an heir.

Divorce papers for Nicolette will infuriate her father, who runs the Italian arm of the mafia. I've never wanted to piss off her father and I've always treated his only daughter well and with respect, no matter how icy she is to me.

But now...

The timing of Virtue's brief on Georgia is absolutely fucking impeccable. I can't have asked for a more intriguing solution to a complicated problem.

Armani's man gave me a rundown on her, but I dug deeper.

And what I found makes her perfect for me. I'm going to fuck her and I'm going to keep her.

From across the room, Georgia turns and locks eyes with me. I stare back, unsmiling, unbending. Her hand pauses at her cleavage. She brushes her fingertips back and forth, back and forth over the impressively high swell of soft flesh.

Oh, yes, this is going to be fun. Come-on-me tits are definitely my personal favorite.

"You're too old for party girls," Virtue says. He claps me on the shoulder. "Time to start your family and secure your future."

"You are absolutely right."

She's still meeting my gaze, unwavering, boldly.

What is she thinking as she watches me? Does she think she has the power because she has the pussy? Does she think she's there to go home with a rich man for a simple one-night stand? I wonder if she has any idea what is about to happen and how from this moment forward I make all the rules.

I like ammunition. I like power.

I want to *own* a woman.

I will own Georgia.

The anticipation has me hard as a rock.

I stand up straighter and adjust my tie. "Time to go kidnap my new mistress."

Virtue raises his glass of bourbon in the air as a salute to me. "I wish you luck."

I pat my pocket. "Luck is for the unambitious. I make my own luck."

Chapter Two

Georgia

My mother always says that good luck means to open your mouth and shut your eyes.

Closing your eyes changes the perceived flavor. What looks unappealing may taste delicious and you've shifted your luck yourself.

I don't think that applies to this party.

Closing my eyes won't make any of these men any more palatable.

"Every man in this room is the same," I say to my best friend, Quinn, shoving a piece of cheese in my mouth in an attempt to assuage the grinding hunger pangs and the headache dully pounding behind my eyelids. I wish I could close my eyes but that's out of the question. "I've never seen this much small dick energy in my life."

She eyes me and shakes her head, amused. "I thought you had a fantasy about hooking up with a handsome suited stranger at a party."

I'm not sure this can be called a party. It's more like a shopping excursion. Filthy rich men fostering business connections and searching for a random woman to fuck. Their wives are at home, and like haute couture, are only taken out for special occasions. The women present tonight are the equivalent of ready-to-wear, right off the rack. Everyday use for these men. There's a handful of these beautiful young

women, wandering around, laughing seductively in short dresses, trying to entice a buyer.

I'm supposed to be one of them and I'm supposed to be grateful for the opportunity to suck off an old rich guy. Quinn hasn't said it out loud, but it's clear this is her way of trying to both help my financial situation and distract me from it. Yet I don't have the acting skills some of these women clearly do. My face is too loud. Every thought I have is displayed vividly in my facial expressions.

My mother insists the key to securing a woman's future is to smile, flirt, fuck.

I always thought that was horrible advice, but in this case, she isn't wrong. I need a man to save me. It makes me angry, but thinking about my mother causes a wave of nausea to roll over me that isn't just from the pervasive hunger. It's fear that her cancer will take her away from me this time, permanently. It's fear that I need to stand up and choose one of these men, pride be damned.

I have to do it for my mother.

For my little brother.

To save myself.

That's my reality.

Desperation. Anxiety. Fear.

What Quinn is referencing is a romantic, humorous, sexy fantasy that I may have mentioned once or twelve times.

"You know that hooking up at a party with a guy who turns out to be rich or famous or both is something I only talk about when I'm drunk," I tell Quinn. "I'm frighteningly sober right now. Besides, that scenario involves a charming stranger who has a disarming smile and is incredibly modest for a billionaire. Which is why it's a fantasy, because I don't think modest billionaires exist. No one here is anything less than completely impressed with himself."

I understand why and I don't resent them for it. They're rich, they're powerful, they get what they want. No one gets

ahead in the corporate world by being modest and self-effacing. You have to be powerful to grab more power, that is the truth. To the victor goes the spoils and all that.

But I don't have any desire for what Quinn has with Armani, where he is in complete control, her wedding ring like a vice, growing tighter by the day.

Quinn is dressed like a flapper from the nineteen twenties, feathers in her dark hair. She's always been thin so even in the loose dress I can see what she's trying to hide. A tiny baby bump. She's run her hand over it absently at least three times in the fifteen minutes since my arrival.

She thinks I haven't noticed, but I do. I also notice she hasn't touched any alcohol, and she keeps glancing over at her husband with a sly, secretive smile on her face.

She's pregnant.

She's gone and gotten herself knocked up by the man twice her age who blackmailed her into marrying him.

Yet, she tells me all the time she's the happiest she's ever been, and I do actually believe her. She likes to be taken care of, to have the most important and stressful decisions in life made for her. It works for her and I remind myself daily to respect that. This is her marriage, and her future.

My mother felt the same way. *Open your mouth and shut your eyes.*

It's just not something I can visualize for myself, because of my own past, and I feel guilty for that. I have an opportunity to ease my mother's financial burdens, and yet I can't stomach taking it, even if it will solve all my financial issues. I'm independent, I'm too stubborn, I have a bulldog determination to use my degree to create a career for myself. I want to take care of myself, not be beholden to anyone.

Yet all that I have to show for it is bills, debt, and an empty stomach. I press my hand to my forehead. I feel lightheaded again, a consequence of not eating enough recently.

If there is one, just one man in this apartment right now who is in any way attractive to me, I know I need to flirt with

him. If I can't imagine a lifelong commitment like Quinn has agreed to, I need at least a few months with a sugar daddy to save me from the mess I'm in. I need money and I need protection.

If I have to open my mouth and close my eyes to make it happen, I will, even if I choke on it.

Not only are the bill collectors catching up with me, I'm terrified my past has as well.

It was a simple text from an unknown number.

Does Quinn know about boarding school?

No one knows about boarding school. Well, that's not entirely true. Three people do. One is dead and one is me. That leaves him.

"I'm sorry you're not having fun," Quinn says, interrupting my thoughts. "I hoped this might get your mind off of things."

That makes me feel bad. Quinn is a generous, caring friend. It tears me up inside that I haven't been honest with her about my past, but I can't stand the thought of losing her in my life.

"I am having fun. I get to spend time with you." I smile and reach for my full glass of champagne, but my vision blurs from the sudden movement. I freeze, hand still outstretched, waiting for the blackness to recede, and the apartment to come back into focus.

"Are you okay?" she asks, frowning.

"I think I'm hungry," I admit. My mouth is filled with hot saliva. I decide to ignore the bubbly until I've eaten. I carefully reach out for the tray resting on the coffee table and toss a handful of nuts into my mouth. "I haven't eaten since yesterday morning."

"Georgia! You need to eat."

I completely agree. I love food. But I'm unemployed after being fired from my job for no discernible reason and I'm being evicted from my apartment in ten days. I have massive

student loan debt, a pile of my mother's medical bills to pay for, and exactly eleven dollars and forty-two cents in my back account. Yesterday I opened a lonely can of tomato paste I found in the back of my cupboards, added water to it, and the crumbled remnants at the bottom of the tortilla chip bag. I heated it on the stove and called that a meal. Tortilla soup.

That's how broke and desperate I am.

I have no plan. No escape route. No ability to fix any of this. I don't know where I'll live or how I'll put food in my mouth and at moments when I'm least expecting it, it slams into me like a wrecking ball, a giant concrete weight of pressure and anxiety. It takes my breath completely away, robs me of my ability to think or move or breathe.

I can't fix my mom's breast cancer and I can't fix my spiraling circumstances and it's the first time in my life there is no solution. There's no way out on my own.

So I understand the appeal of wanting to be taken care of, to have all of your money worries wiped away by the magic wand that is Armani Virtue or any one of these wealthy men. At night in bed, I just close my eyes and visualize all of my worries and struggles being washed out with the tide. A calm gentle ocean glides in with a warm hug and drags every bill back out to sea, to be consumed, disintegrated by the salt water.

I'd be lying if I say I don't enjoy hanging out with Quinn at Armani's penthouse apartment. I let her order food for us on his dime, and I swam in his pool, accepted a ride home from his driver. I'm going to be sleeping on their sofa for a few days once I'm evicted before going... *somewhere* after that. I'm not sure where yet, but I promised Quinn no more than five days crashing at their place because they're newlyweds and I don't want to take advantage of them.

I appreciate Quinn's friendship and Armani's seeming generosity at the same time I don't trust this world that she's suddenly in, this world of wealth and questionable business practices, where bodyguards carry guns and criminal activity is commonplace. I know the danger of this world.

I also know the benefit.

I can't solve my problems on my own, but I can defer and deflect them. I can use and take just like any of these men and I can twist their desire for me into protection and power.

It's a world I don't belong in, no matter my past. I can't trust any of these men, but more importantly, I can't trust my father, who wants me dead.

So here I am, no matter how I feel about it.

Find the right man and then smile, flirt, fuck.

"I've been saying all year I needed to lose ten pounds," I say, going for humor. "I'm already down five."

"That's not funny," she says softly, reaching out and squeezing my arm gently.

It's really not. My voice sounds reedy and sharp even to my own ears. The comment falls flat. I grab for my champagne glass, knowing I shouldn't be drinking it when I've barely eaten in days, but unable to resist the lure of the distracting sweet liquid. I drink half of it in one swallow.

"I wonder where Armani is." Quinn glances around the room, seeking her husband.

What does it feel like, I wonder, to need to know where someone is at all times? To be so connected to them that they consume your thoughts, that you can't remember being a solitary human soul, with nothing tethering you emotionally? Does it feel wonderful or is it stifling?

I know what it was for my mother.

Maybe it's different for Quinn. Maybe I should envy her.

But I don't. Love feels like a trap to me, a way to be vulnerable. You fall for a man and he grinds you down into dust until a breeze lifts you up and you disappear into obscurity, mingling with the horizon.

I glance around, slowly, aware that any sudden movement might trigger another bout of lightheadedness. Armani and Quinn's apartment is the penthouse of a building in midtown

Manhattan. It boasts floor-to-ceiling windows and a large patio with the pool that I've lounged beside several times. There is catering staff in the kitchen preparing heavier appetizers but for now there are mere nibbles. I'm anxiously waiting for the hot food to appear. There are probably thirty guests, though it's hard to gauge in the cavernous main living space. Everyone looks dispersed, scattered.

Some of the men are dressed casually, including one that's wearing a tracksuit, but most are in suits, like they came directly from the office. A few glance over at me, but they appear to dismiss me as readily as I dismiss them.

Quinn gestures to the left. "There he is. He's with Alex."

I sigh, trying to muster up the energy to care that she's found her husband. I definitely don't care who Alex is. Shaking my fist full of nuts, I toss a couple into my mouth.

Following her pointed finger, noting that she's now blowing her husband a coquettish kiss, I direct my attention to the bar. Armani is leaning against the rented bartop that is being serviced by a bartender, giving his wife an indulgent half-smile. I shift my gaze, feeling like I'm intruding on a private moment between Armani and Quinn.

I almost choke on the nuts.

The man next to Armani is staring directly at me.

He's in his thirties, maybe forty, wearing an impeccable black suit that emphasizes the width of his shoulders and muscular thighs. He has a glass in his hand but he's holding it by the top, the drink down at his side. He has sunkissed brown hair that is neither long nor short, just sexily tousled, and chiseled facial features. The distance is too great to see the color of his eyes but I can tell one thing.

He's *smoldering*.

Chapter Three

Georgia

I've always thought the concept of smoldering is fictitious but no, it's very, very real, and my pussy is instantly very, very wet.

This must be Alex watching me.

His presence is strong, compelling, commanding.

I swallow the mess of saliva and nuts in my mouth and stretch my hand out for my champagne glass, unable to break eye contact with the sexy stranger. My heart quickens and I'm aware I should do something. Smile, bat my eyelashes, whatever the hell it is women who successfully lure billionaires to their side do. But his gaze is arresting and I stare back at him, instinctively raising my hand to my chest in a protective gesture. A shield between my bare flesh and his desire. Or more like a barrier between my vulnerability and his power.

Still, I gather myself.

This changes things.

This is a man I could force myself to go home with tonight.

He's sexy as hell and I want him to want me. He can have his pick of any of these women and I instantly want it to be me. I straighten, deciding to seductively raise my champagne to my lips and flick my tongue around the rim, gazing at this man over the top of the glass.

Instead, I knock my hand into the glass instead of wrapping my fingers around it, and it tips, spilling across the end table. “Shit, Quinn, I’m sorry,” I say, sitting up straight and righting the glass. I grab a napkin and start mopping.

“Don’t worry about it,” she assures me, looking at the small spill dismissively.

That’s the beauty of having a housekeeper and enough money to replace anything that is ruined. She’s adjusted quickly to being rich. She really doesn’t worry about it. Unlike me, who has to worry if I have enough money to take the subway home.

“I think Alex likes you,” she says, sounding excited. “He’s watching you.”

“Perfect timing,” I say sarcastically, giving up when the napkin is ineffectual. I just let the droplets of champagne rest on the wood table. “He can see what a klutz I am.”

“You don’t care anyway, remember?” she asks with a sweet, smug smile.

I make a face at her. If only she knew how much I actually care about all of this. Though she knows me well enough she probably does. She knows I’m desperate.

“He is good-looking,” I concede, even as I’m silently praying that he does find me attractive.

He’s the only man in the whole damn apartment I can imagine doing what I need to do with. *Open your mouth and shut your eyes.*

“And he’s very, very rich,” Quinn says encouragingly.

I didn’t do any research on any of these men. That would have been the smart thing to do, but I couldn’t stomach the idea. Besides, even Quinn didn’t know the final guest list. It was curated by Armani. He’s conducting business as well as offering appetizers and women.

“I’m not exactly at the top of my game right now,” I say, and it’s not me demurring. It’s true. My brain is sluggish and my hands are trembling from lack of food.

I try to muster the nerve to glance back at the bar, but my cheeks feel too hot. That stare really flustered me. And now he must think I'm clumsy or drunk. The tag I left on my dress so I can return it tomorrow is itchy on my skin between my shoulder blades and I desperately want to reach up and scratch, but I shift a little on the sofa and resist the urge.

"I'm going to go over and talk to them. Come with me," she urges, rising to her feet.

Quinn always looks graceful, her presentation impeccable. Even before Armani, she made her living doing online makeup tutorials, and she always manages to look put together. I feel queasy and both sweaty and clammy and I rub my hands down the front of my dress. The fabric feels cheap, the sequins too flashy for this party.

I feel self-conscious and I hate it. It's not a feeling I suffer through often and that it would choose to appear now pisses me off.

"I'll stay here," I say. "I need to snack a little more before I have the energy to be polite."

To smile, flirt, fuck.

"Good idea," she says with a smile. "You sound a little hangry."

If she thinks this is hangry, she has no idea what I'm capable of. I think I could be a lot bitchier and I would appreciate credit for how much I'm holding back. But Quinn is saving my ass by feeding and sheltering me short term, so I bite my tongue and just smile back, tightly.

She isn't gone even thirty seconds when a short, thick man sits down across from me with a heavy sigh. His meaty fingers descend into the nut bowl, making my stomach sour. He smells musty, and damp, like he put on wet clothes. He has prominent nose hairs jutting out beyond his nostrils. His skin is sallow, his eyes beady.

"Samuel Godin," he says, nodding at me. "What's your name, Red?"

“Whatever you want it to be,” I say, because I don’t relish revealing my true self to bloated Samuel.

He nods in approval. “Perfect answer, girl. That’s what I like to hear. Come with me.”

“Where are we going?” I say, dumbly, my brain firing too slowly to tell him I’m not going anywhere with him.

“The powder room.”

He’s straining to stand but manages it, invading my personal space in the process. His crotch is right in my face. Mere inches. Leaning back against the sofa cushions, I stare up at him, instantly alarmed, trying not to breathe through my nose. The stench of him is wafting over me in unpleasant waves.

“I don’t need to use the powder room.” My palms are starting to sweat. I know there’s no threat. I’m at Quinn’s party, surrounded by people. But it feels ominous, threatening, maybe because my head is pounding, my brain is foggy, and my stomach is hollow. I feel like I’m a sail at half mast, unable to move.

His weight shifts and he bends down to smile at me, his hand outstretched for mine. “I don’t either. I just want a private place for you to play around a little with my asshole as a teaser for what’s to come. Then we’ll eat, drink Virtue’s liquor, then head to a hotel for the night.”

As if I could eat after touching his butt. Not that I’d ever touch his anything, ever. I’d rather swim in the sewers of New York than see, or smell, him naked. “No, thank you,” I say firmly.

Samuel’s smile disintegrates. “What did you say?”

His breath is hot, too close for comfort.

He can’t seem to believe that I would turn down his offer.

My stomach is twisting and rocking and I start breathing rapidly through my mouth, growing concerned I might actually throw up. The last thing I want to do at this party is vomit in front of all these wealthy men.

“No, thank you,” I manage to repeat. Part of me wants to soften the blow to his ego to minimize any blowback by telling him I’m not feeling well, which is the truth, but part of me wants him to understand I’m rejecting him.

Mostly, I’m afraid the more I say, the more I breathe in his smell, the more likely it is that I throw up.

Fury crosses his face. He opens his mouth to speak and I know it’s going to be insulting.

But it’s not his blustery and aged voice that I hear.

“Sorry, Godin, she’s with me.”

This voice is whiskey smooth, younger than the man blocking my path, casual. Confident.

I shift my head to see around Samuel’s girth to see who is rescuing me, though I already suspect the answer.

I’m right. It is Alex, hands in his pockets, expression neutral, unconcerned.

Up closer to him, I can see his eyes. They’re an intriguing shade of green.

They also reveal nothing.

Samuel straightens up and takes a step back, shooting me a parting glare. “Is that right, Kuzmin? I swear to God, man, you’re always getting the jump on me with the good ones.”

“I saw her and had to have her.”

I should be offended. They’re discussing me both like I’m not there and some kind of prize winning horse. But Alex up close is even more arresting than Alex at a distance.

Samuel isn’t giving up that easily though. He turns back to me. “How much is he paying you? I’ll give you five hundred more.”

I may be broke and this may be an astonishing opportunity to set my own price—I doubt Alex would give me away because his interruption appears to be an intentional rescue—but I would rather die of starvation than put a finger or a tongue inside anything on Samuel Godin’s body.

Rising to my feet, I smooth down the front of my dress. I'm taller than Samuel by several inches. It feels less claustrophobic to be standing. I say the first thing that pops into my head to shut him up. "My apologies, Mr. Godin, but I'm fucking Alex for free."

It doesn't have the effect I'm expecting. He starts laughing, his chest heaving, the buttons on his dress shirt straining. "So you're looking for a permanent setup. Good luck with that, girl." He shakes his head, clearly amused. "You've got more boobs than brains, I see."

I open my mouth to inform him I've been accepted into law school and will be going as soon as I'm not drowning in bills, but Alex takes me by the elbow with a firm grip.

"Darling," he says smoothly. "Let's get you a drink since you spilled yours."

There is something in his eyes—a warning—that causes me to go silent immediately. He forcibly leads me toward the bar.

"That's it, Alex. Keep a firm grip on that one," Samuel Godin says from behind me. "Spare the rod, spoil the whore."

"What a delightful man," I murmur sarcastically, unable to resist.

Alex glances over at me. "He's definitely a cheap bastard. As if any woman in her right fucking mind would choose him over me for only five hundred bucks."

It should be an arrogant statement but it's not because it's reality. Alex is attractive, fit, sexy. Samuel Godin is disgusting. I'm desperate for money, and I wouldn't make that deal. I wouldn't even consider it for half a second.

"I can't argue with that," I say. "There is no amount even tempting. Especially considering what he wanted to do thirty seconds after meeting."

"Do I want to know?" he asks as we approach the bar.

Quinn and Armani have disappeared, probably mingling somewhere in the large room.

I'm suddenly conscious that this is the last thing in the world I want to be discussing with Alex. I want to talk about him. About me. About us.

I casually shrug. "I have no idea what you want or don't want."

"Tell me. I'm curious." Then he shakes his head. "Actually, never mind. I don't want to envision Godin doing anything to you."

The tightness in my stomach returns and I shudder. "I'd rather not think about it either." I give him a smile, a genuine one. "Thank you for rescuing me. I owe you."

"It's my pleasure to help. I'm Alex, by the way."

"Georgia. It's nice to meet you." It is. It feels like he's a white knight and I'm the damsel in distress. It's unfamiliar to me to need to be rescued. To be grateful for it. But I am.

"You don't owe me anything, Georgia. But feel free to offer whatever you'd like." He gives me a charming smile.

I wasn't sure what I was expecting but not that. I blink, not sure how to answer. Does he want me to make an actual suggestion?

Open your mouth and shut your eyes.

But he keeps talking. "Would you like another glass of champagne?"

"I would love one." My throat feels impossibly dry.

"If I leave you alone will you throw me over for another man here? One that has more money than me?" he asks, looking amused and fully confident I'll do no such thing. Nonetheless, he raises his hand for a waiter instead of going to the bar as if he doesn't want to leave me, even for a minute or two.

It pleases me, I can admit that. He's very fucking sexy.

I smile back. "Is that what it's about, how much money each of you have? Are you rich, Alex?" It's a bold question, and I know the answer. Of course he's rich. But I sense he'll

enjoy telling me that he's loaded. Men always do. "I can't really answer your question until I have all the information."

"I can afford *you*," he says.

It should be insulting. But he's smiling in a way that makes it sound like he thinks I would be expensive. It's meant to reassure and attract me, clearly.

Which it does. He's the best looking man in the room, hands down. But I need to care about his ability to protect me as much as his ability and willingness to solve my financial problems. It's a lot to ask of the situation.

"I'm sure you can," I say, and it's meant to be placating, but it sounds more condescending than I intend it to.

His eyebrows lift. He has read the tone and I don't sound like a woman seeking a mistress. "Would you like me to prove it?" he asks.

I don't want to turn him off, but I also don't want to be too eager. I decide my smartest bet is to just be myself. To not try to play this game any other way than what seems natural to me. Quinn thinks he's the man for me and if she trusts him that means Armani trusts him. That's better than any information I could gather on my own.

Being sexually attracted to him is a hell of a bonus.

I don't directly answer the question.

"What is this party for?" I ask him, because I want to hear him admit out loud it's a hookup party. I want him to make me an offer I can't refuse. "What's the purpose?"

"For me to meet you."

I laugh. "That was smooth. Absurd," I tell him lightly, flirtatiously. "But smooth."

He gives me a smile. "No, really. Armani thought I'd like you. The purpose is for me to secure you for myself. But he thought it would be polite to offer you other options."

Quinn's husband knows I'm in deep, deep shit. I can't decide if this gesture is thoughtful or disturbing. I also don't

think Alex is even telling me the truth.

“How very thoughtful. But I doubt Armani thought I’d be interested in Samuel Godin.”

The corner of his mouth turns up. “Maybe it wasn’t so much to give you options as to make me look like your best bet.”

He knows he’s my best bet. I know it. There’s no denying he is by far my best bet.

“I think that server got lost. Go get my champagne,” I tell him, amused. “I’m dying of thirst.”

His eyes narrow. I’ve pissed him off. I don’t mean to, but sometimes I have a hard time controlling my mouth. My father used to say he was tempted to shove a sock in it. Later, he suggested I’d meet my comeuppance in a man who would shove more than a sock in it to shut me up.

And yet, it hasn’t happened yet.

Which is why I still haven’t learned to control what comes out of my mouth.

It doesn’t look like it’s going to happen tonight either.

I need to remember I’m not in charge here. He is. But my independent streak doesn’t know how to sit down and shut the fuck up.

“Whatever you say, Miss Georgia. Your wish is my command.” Alex turns and retreats.

Was I supposed to stroke his ego more?

I stare at his back as he goes straight to the bar, the errant server forgotten. My heart is racing as I watch the power of his gait, see the firm curves of his tight ass, his strong thighs, and broad shoulders. This is a man I can imagine fucking. It won’t be a hardship. All I need to do is make him an offer of myself and all my problems will go away.

The staggering debt that I have, the concern that my mother’s health care is substandard. The worry that my little brother is too much for my grandmother to handle now that

my mother is too ill to raise him. And the fear that someday my father will keep his promise and kill me.

Alex can give me money, aid for my mother, and protection from my father.

All I have to do is exactly whatever he wants.

My palms are sweating.

I'm so very bad at obedience.

If there was no money exchange, no power play, I would have sex with Alex without blinking. I'd jump on him and ride that man all night and into the next day.

But I've spent my entire life surviving and you only survive when you manage to wrestle every single ounce, every bleeding morsel of control that you can and hold onto it with white knuckles and a feral snarl for anyone who tries to take it.

I don't know one damn thing about being submissive. I don't know if it's even possible for me to take on that role and act it out at all.

My instinct is to snark, to spar, to battle for power in a relationship.

Push, pull, like two boxers circling in the ring, that's how I date, that's how I do relationships.

Alex returns with my champagne, one hand tucked casually in his pocket. He sets it down without a word and keeps walking.

I realize he's leaving. He's heading straight for the doors that lead to Armani and Quinn's balcony and the amazing rooftop swimming pool they have. He wants me to follow. He expects me to follow. If I don't, he'll be done with me. I can sense all of that.

Glancing around the room, I see nothing but men that I find unappealing for various reasons. If I screw this up with Alex because I demanded champagne, I can be dead in a matter of weeks. If I live, I will be homeless and starving. That's a guarantee.

I stand up quickly, wobbling a little in my heels as I shove down the hem of my skirt. I grab the glass of champagne and take a huge swallow, which only results in me choking on it. I cough and some of it dribbles out of my mouth and down into my cleavage. Embarrassed, I swipe at my chin and chest. At least Alex didn't see my continued clumsiness.

But when I get embarrassed I talk too much, so I hang back at the bifold doors that lead out to the balcony, trying to pull myself together. This is my entire future at stake.

That reality spurs me forward.

When I get outside, the pool has been covered for the upcoming winter. Alex is leaning against the glass wall. His ankles are crossed and with his arms raised to rest on the wall, I can see the gun that is tucked into his waistband. There is something so sensual and appealing about him that I take a step forward, drawn like the fluttery moth to the burning flame.

There are two chaise lounge chairs beside him, with a plate of appetizers and two glasses. A martini glass. And a champagne glass, filled to the brim.

I pause, confused. Is he expecting me or another woman? I realize I need to eat. My brain still feels foggy.

"Come here," he commands. "Now."

I walk, mindlessly obedient, then bewildered as to why I just did what he told me to. It's the timbre of his voice, it's the casual expectation that I'll obey, the expensive shoes, the gun.

When I reach him, I set my glass down next to the others but I knock over the full champagne he has waiting for me. "Damn it, I'm sorry."

He raises his hand and miraculously a server appears. "We need this cleaned up and we need a glass of water."

"Yes, sir."

"Where did that guy come from?" I ask in amazement.

"Eat your crudités," he says, gesturing to the plate.

I stare at it, but make no effort to pick anything up to eat. I don't know what I'm doing. Everything suddenly feels grindingly slow, my movements exaggerated, my thoughts crystalline yet random.

"Where does that word come from, *crudités*?" I ask. "It's so bizarre sounding. Are we over *charcuterie*?" I ask, not because I care, but because I find the whole experience of being around Quinn's husband and his associates fascinating. I find Alex fascinating. I find the cold October air fascinating. I stare at the goosebumps rising on my forearms. My dress is three quarter sleeves and no match for fall in Manhattan. "What about caviar?"

"It's French, it specifically means raw vegetables. Much more narrow definition than *charcuterie*. What about caviar?"

"I know. It was a rhetorical question." I'm not even looking at Alex now. I'm entranced by the orangeness of the carrot. Was there ever anything as brightly orange as that carrot? "But that was a textbook mansplain," I tell him. "Well done."

His eyebrows raise. "You really do just say whatever the fuck you want, don't you?"

I nod, because now it feels like he understands me. "I do. I don't mean too. I'm a blurter. Have you ever met a blurter? It's a problem in a situation like this. *Malnourished and speaks her mind* probably aren't the most attractive qualities to men like you." I wave my hand to encompass the room behind us at large.

"Men like me? Don't presume you know what I'm thinking." Alex pushes off the wall and picks up the glass that didn't spill. He hands it to me. "You're dying of thirst, remember? Drink your champagne."

I do, again so very obediently.

I've already had enough on an empty stomach that I'm quickly getting drunk. I shouldn't have any more, but I also can't say no to him. A command to drink champagne will be the easiest one to obey of any he might give me.

“Are you going to claim you find me to be anything more than a body that could be in your bed?” I ask. It’s the question in my head, but one that shouldn’t have emerged from my mouth.

He doesn’t look angry, though.

He studies me and shrugs. “I don’t claim it at all. Claim implies there is ambiguity when in reality it’s the truth. I’m attracted to your mind as well. You’re an attractive woman in various ways. You intrigue me.”

He says it with such authority that it doesn’t read as flirting. Just as a fact.

I find myself intrigued as well, eyeing him. The lights of the city frame him and it feels like he’s in a tunnel of laser lights. Like he’s a spiritual being and we’re locked in an echo chamber together, all my thoughts and feelings capable of spilling out into our surroundings, while he gathers them like fallen fruit, and puts them in his basket.

“What is it you find attractive about me?” I ask, my tongue feeling thicker, more challenging to work.

I realize I’m definitely drunk. Yet I’ve never felt like this from alcohol. Like I’m on a journey that is going to take me to the outer edges of reality. I don’t dislike it.

The corner of his mouth lifts. “I wouldn’t have expected you to request a compliment.”

That shuts me up instantly. The server returns and sets two glasses of water down on the side table next to me. “Thank you,” I say, but I make no move to pick up the water.

Alex’s hand touches my cheek and I jump a little. His large hand encompasses all of me and his thumb strokes, following the line of my cheekbone. It feels so profound that it seems like I can hear the touch. Like the rough pad of his calloused thumb is scraping across silk, catching the fabric as rough juxtaposes against soft.

“Do you need a complement, Georgia? Is that what you need?”

I'm still holding the flute. My champagne is almost gone. I stare down into the glass, watching the remaining bubbles lift and pulse, like the urgency of my pussy. I feel intensely aroused without warning. "Yes," I say, even though I've forgotten the question. It just seems like the answer to everything is yes.

"Look at me."

I lift my chin. There it is again. I'm just obeying him.

He has dark caramel colored hair and a strong jawline. His nose is straight, his skin richly tanned, like he's recently been on vacation. His gray eyes are flecked with gold, bottomless hollows of opaque tidal pools. They reveal nothing to me.

"You're clever, Georgia," Alex says. "Obviously intelligent, with a wicked sense of humor. And you have an amazing body and a pretty face. That's what I find attractive. Are those sufficient enough descriptors or should I keep going?"

He wins points by leading with my mind over my appearance yet again. He clearly senses it's important to me. I'm mollified.

"Keep going," I murmur, because I want to hear more. "You can do better than 'pretty face.' A pretty face is nothing in New York City."

Alex gives a soft laugh and shakes his head. He picks up his glass and takes a sip of his martini. "I'm a businessman, not a poet. But for you, I'll attempt it. I look at you and your blue eyes grab at me and draw me in. Has anyone ever told you they're like the clearest water in the Caribbean? They're not a calm sea, though. They're the danger of the water during a spring storm, when the ocean churns. A hurricane. They sweep me up in their raging current and yank me out to sea, where I feel like I could drown."

I've had men tell me I had nice eyes before. Compelling eyes. But never like this. Never by a man who has probably met many beautiful women. Well-bred and elegant women. Never by a man who can *acquire* any woman he wants. He's

right. It isn't poetry but it's the way he looks at me, so intently, so lustfully, that it feels as if he's telling the truth. That my eyes draw him in.

He draws me in the same way.

He lifts his hand and draws the back of his knuckles across my bottom lip. The unexpected touch makes me shiver in the cool night air, even as my pussy heats up further, already warmed by Alex's words.

"I'm finding it increasingly difficult to look away from you. Your lips, Georgia... Do you know that your lips are mesmerizing? They were made to wrap around my cock, weren't they?"

I nod, and I have no idea why. Why does it feel like his voice is swirling around me like a whirlpool? He smiles, slowly, devilishly. He has no right to be that sexy, that mischievous. It's destroying my already scattered sense of reality.

"And this..." he moves his open palm slowly in front of my chest. "This is fucking perfection." He reaches out and touches one of my tits, squeezing it hard. I gasp and lean into the possessive touch, my nipples hardening.

"You were made for me," he said. "I knew it the minute I saw your picture. Then I learned all your little secrets and I knew it even more."

"What secrets?" That gives me pause. I do have secrets. More than one. But he can't possibly know any of them.

Does Quinn know about boarding school?

Did he send that text? That seems absurd though.

"You know what secrets." His hand releases my breast and I give a soft cry of disappointment, swaying forward on my heels. "You want honesty, clearly. So do I."

I don't know what he's talking about. I only know that something is happening to my body. I'm tingling everywhere and a heat is pooling between my thighs, an urgent crackling

fire of desire that feels extraordinary and out of place and anxious. I need him.

His fingertips glide over the ends of my hair, flipping them up. The unexpectedly gentle touch makes me shiver and another rush of heat floods my inner thighs. He's brushing over the swell of my breast now as if he hadn't just grabbed it aggressively a minute ago. In comparison, this light touch is almost nothing and yet feels like everything. He draws my hair completely out to its full length, studying the strands in the moonlight.

I'm expecting another compliment but he gives me the opposite.

"I prefer you as a natural brunette though," he says. "This color is awful." He drops my hair. "And you shouldn't lose any more weight."

My mouth falls open. I give a soft laugh of embarrassed astonishment. It feels like I've disappointed him profoundly and it hurts. I need him to want me. "Is that so? Do you want me to change it?"

He either doesn't hear my tone of disbelief at his arrogance and my odd hurt or he chooses to ignore it.

He just nods. "Yes. I saw a picture of you and Quinn at the pool a while back. Your natural hair color showcases your skin tone. This red is too harsh. It should only be seen in a bottle of wine, not on your hair."

I'm irritated, even though I know he's right. It looks like I dumped Merlot over my head, and it fades the healthy glow of my skin to a frosty white. I used a cheap box dye and it shows. It pisses me off that he has both noticed it and has the balls to say it out loud. But a man like him doesn't have to weigh his words with women. If he offends one, another will be right behind clamoring to take her place.

Right now, the thought that another woman would take my place here on this balcony with him is terrifying. I don't want him to dismiss me. I don't want him to give his attention to

anyone but me. I also feel incredibly insulted and angry with myself for asking for validation in the first place.

“And my weight?” I ask, my bottom lip trembling. Never, in my entire life, since my father walked out the door for the last time, have I allowed a man to comment on my weight and get away with it.

Yet here I am, letting this man discuss my body like the commodity he indicated he might or might not want to acquire.

“You’re about five pounds away from losing your tits.”

I shake my head, a soft cry escaping my mouth before I can prevent it. “You seem to have found your inner poet when it comes to my flaws.”

“Was I too blunt?” I notice he doesn’t apologize.

“No.” It’s better to know exactly where I stand with him, even if it feels like he’s scraping the scab off a wound with a razor blade. Memories I don’t want to remember have popped to the surface.

You didn’t exactly get your mother’s looks, did you?

That voice follows me everywhere I go, reaching out from the past to weave its insidious doubts all around me like a choking bear hug.

I realize with total shock that I am going to cry. Blinking hard, I look away. I fish a carrot off of the plate and pop it in my mouth, chewing hard. Tears sting behind my eyelids and I study the tray of vegetables. They’re shifting around and zooming in and out, like a kaleidoscope of fiber.

“I guess I’d rather hear your real opinions than a bunch of bullshit you’re spouting just to have sex with me. I appreciate the insulting honesty. That’s what I get for asking. Don’t ask the question if you don’t want the answer, right?” I feel miserable and confused.

I don’t know why I’m so emotional. I’m obviously drunk but why am I so drunk and yet my senses feel the opposite of dull? I suppose it’s the stress of the last few weeks. Few

months. Losing my job, being evicted, facing horrible choices. Fear.

“I *was* too blunt. I’ve hurt your feelings.”

I’m debating how to respond to that. Because he did hurt my feelings and it’s stupid that he did. He continues before I can trust myself to speak without my voice trembling.

“But trust me, there’s an enormous compliment behind my words. I find you incredibly sexy and I don’t think you should ever change a thing about your natural self.”

It shouldn’t be flattering and yet it is. He’s definitely smooth.

“Your natural self is what I crave, Georgia. I want you naked exactly the way you were created. Nothing fake.”

“The only thing fake is my hair color.”

“Good. I have every intention of having sex with you tonight,” he says. “And I can’t wait to see what you have to offer.”

“I’m not going to fake an orgasm,” I say and I have no idea why I say that.

Alex laughs softly. “Why would you? From this moment forward there is no faking with me. Ever. Do you understand?”

I frown. “I don’t understand.”

“What don’t you understand?” he asks, and his voice is soothing, calming. He kisses me softly, just a brief tantalizing taste of his commanding mouth and I shiver, my eyes drifting closed.

I’m trembling. My knees feel weak. “Why does my pussy feel so hot and wet?” I ask him.

“Because you want me to fuck it so hard that you lose complete control of yourself.”

“I do want that.” I do. It feels like everything I’ve ever wanted in my entire life is in that sentence.

“Are you ready to come home with me and start your new life?”

I nod, gripping the lapels of his jacket to steady me. I feel like I’m tottering, literally and figuratively. “Yes. Take me home. Make me yours.”

I was supposed to set terms, sign a contract, negotiate money, and safe words and all of those things that are logical and designed to protect me. I am supposed to secure a position that will allow me to hide behind Alex’s power and protect myself from my father.

Yet I do none of that.

Instead I unzip the front of his pants and slide my hand into them along the length of his hard cock.

“You don’t want to wait?” he asks, the corner of his mouth turning up.

“Do you want to wait?” I ask, feeling astonished by that.

And insulted.

Tears are in my eyes again.

“Shh,” he says, wiping a tear that trails down my cheek. “Don’t get upset. If you can’t wait, just go down on your knees, gorgeous, and suck my cock.”

I stare into his eyes. That does sound like something I want. I rub him. He’s hard and thick and I’m hungry for him. I want him to take off my dress and run his palms over my flesh. I want to take his thickness into my mouth and see what it tastes like, and see if I can give him pleasure.

All of that makes sense. The tears don’t.

“Why am I crying?” I ask, thoroughly confused. “I want to suck your cock. I do.”

“It’s the drug, darling. Everyone reacts differently.”

“What drug?” I ask dumbly.

“The one I put in your drink.”

I blink. That makes an incredible amount of sense. Perfect sense. That explains everything about the way I feel.

My body feels sexually supercharged. My brain feels like it's in slow motion yet at the same time like I've discovered the answer to everything in the universe.

"Why did you do that?" I shake him a little but he doesn't move. His hand is on my ass, grinding into the flesh.

"Because you're stubborn. And I don't have time for negotiating. My back is against the wall. I just need to take you."

"Where are you taking me?"

He's kneading my ass still and I moan softly, pressing myself against him. My hand is in the way, still on his cock. He's making me ache and I start to frantically pump up and down on his shaft, as if that will appease my own body.

But he stops me, gripping my wrist. "Look at me."

I do. "Yes?"

"You have three options, Georgia. Miami, Paris, or Ibiza. Pick one."

"Miami," I say, assuming he's asking me which city I like the best. I've never been to Paris or Ibiza. But Miami is close to where I was raised in South Florida. It's close to where my mother lives. It's where I spent the sweaty and humid summers of my youth.

If I close my eyes, I can smell Broward County. The moist air of a thunderstorm, the explosion of honeysuckle, the stench of the tar of the heated asphalt, and the salt of the ocean whenever on a rare occasion we made our way to the beach that stretched all around us. I can feel the poke of a palm tree leaf as I brush past it, the sudden invasion of salsa music as a car drives past, the taste of a juicy empanada on my tongue.

I miss my mother.

"That's easy enough. Come on." Alex takes my hand off of his pants and zips them.

“Where are we going?”

“Miami.”

“Right now?” I ask, astonished.

“Right now.” Alex takes my hand and pulls me forward.
“Georgia.”

His voice is commanding. A question that isn't a question.

“Yes?”

“If he touches you, he dies.”

A shiver rolls up my arms and I watch him, uneasy.
“Who?”

But Alex just slides his palm up my cheek and rubs it softly. He brushes my bottom lip. “You're mine now. How does that feel?”

I draw his finger into my mouth and suck on it gently, flicking my tongue up and down the length of it.

His eyes darken with desire. “Hold that thought, darling.”

Then he tugs me across the patio.

I have no idea what I'm walking into.

But whatever Alex has in store for me, it's better than being at the bottom of the East River. Dead.

Chapter Four

Alex

Georgia is weaving back and forth as I pull her along through the apartment. She's unsteady on her feet and she keeps reaching up behind her to scratch at the base of her shoulder blades.

I want her more than I was expecting.

She's also more complicated than I had anticipated. She's unpredictable, intriguing.

Beautiful.

And she wants to get fucked. That's clear.

The plane ride could be interesting.

Unless she's too drunk. I don't need her throwing up on my dick.

I need to feed her. As I hold her hand, I walk her toward the door, pulling my phone out of my pocket. It's bizarre to hold a woman's hand. I was never one for that public display of affection even in my youth before my marriage, but after Nicolette became my wife that was certainly the last thing that was ever going to happen. She barely tolerates my hand on the small of her back in public. In private, we don't touch at all.

It feels very much like having a girlfriend to hold Georgia's hand. I don't actually hate it, which amuses me. I'm ordering my plane to be ready to go in an hour. I tell my assistant to order food and clothes to be waiting on board for Georgia. I scowl at Richard Prescott as he eyes Georgia's tits

as we pass by him in the hallway to the foyer. I've always hated Richard.

Now I hate him even more for eyeing my woman.

He can see it's bothering me. He smirks and shifts so that his knee bumps Georgia's thigh.

In two seconds I turn, my gun out, and pointed right in his direction. "Apologize to her."

He rolls his eyes a little, staying relaxed against the wall. But I can see the sharpness of his concern from the slight flare of his nostrils and the way he immediately tips his head. "My apologies. Miss."

He adds the label a heartbeat later.

"It's okay," Georgia says.

"No, it's not," I tell her. "And don't speak to another man unless you have my permission."

The jealousy and rage I feel is shocking and irritating.

Her eyes snap, in spite of the alcohol. "Don't tell me what to do."

Just like a girlfriend. Or worse. A wife.

I prefer having a mistress.

Girlfriends and wives are a fucking pain in the ass.

Richard is smirking again.

Then Georgia seems to realize I have a gun in my hand. Now it's pointed at her. Her eyes widen.

"I'm sorry," she says, breathlessly. "Alex, I'm sorry."

But I put it back in my waistband at the small of my back. "Down on your knees."

"What?" She looks confused.

"Get down on your knees. Apologize properly to me." If we were in private, I might have let it slide this time.

But she talked back in front of Richard and I cannot allow that to go unpunished. I can't have him thinking I'm weak,

that I don't have control over the subordinates in my life.

Georgia swallows hard. Her hand tightens in mine and her eyes widen. She understands. For a second, she seems to gather herself, then she lowers her gaze briefly. "Yes, of course," she murmurs.

Then she holds onto me as she goes down on her knees in that horrible dress. Once down, she glances up at me again from under her lashes. It's not a compliant expression. She's furious with me.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Suck."

Her eyes widen even more. Yet she doesn't hesitate. She undoes my pants and pulls out my hard cock, her fingers trembling ever so slightly. The first contact of her smooth and cool fingers makes me throb, but I stand stiff, unwilling to react to her touch. Tentatively, she eases her mouth over the tip, moistening it with her saliva.

She grips the shaft with her palm and squeezes as she lowers her head and my cock disappears between those ripe red lips. The reality is better than the fantasy. Her mouth is hot, her movements skilled. The alcohol has loosened her inhibitions, and even though she's irritated with me, she seems to forget where we are, that Richard is casually watching, sipping his gin.

We're blocked from the rest of the party but anyone could stumble on us at any minute, but she doesn't seem aware of it. She takes my cock like it's a treat she's been waiting her life for.

It feels fucking amazing. Her tongue is hot and wet and she draws in her cheeks to give a firm channel of her mouth for me to fuck. She breathes through her nose and I can hear a rising excitement, feel the quickness of her tempo increase. She leans into it, resting her free palm on my thigh, the other creating a stranglehold on the base of my dick, aiding in its throbbing swelling.

She wants closer to me. She wants more. I picture the hot liquid between her thighs as it rolls out for me, her body's invitation to my cock. The way she's shifting, pulsing her hips, I know she's wet. I rest my hands on her shoulders, wishing she was naked. The fabric of the dress feels cheap beneath my fingers. I shift, so that I can entwine my fingers in her hair and yank her head back, partially off of my cock, so that she has to look up at me. "Georgia."

She pulls back to speak. "Yes?"

It's an amazing view, my cock hovering hard in front of her, her eyes big and round, her cheeks pink with arousal and alcohol. I want her with a hard possessive desire that catches me off guard. That mouth of hers... so tempting, so plump. So unpredictable. She says whatever she's thinking and I find that adorable and dangerous.

"You need to learn to shut the fuck up and take that dick," I tell her, my voice harsh, demanding.

"Like a good girl?" she asks.

Damn. That's exactly what I want to hear.

Her voice is husky, aroused.

In this moment, I don't think about the competition with my brothers. I don't think about how angry I am that Nicolette has betrayed my fucking generosity. I don't think about how much I hate the color Georgia has dyed her hair.

All I think is that I want her more than I've wanted a woman in a very long time.

"Yes. Like a good girl." I grip the back of her head by her hair so tightly her eyes are watering.

She nods, eagerly.

Then I shove in and out of her mouth, as far as I can. She gags, which only excites me. My balls are tight, my thighs tense. I grip more and more of her hair, gathering it all between my fingers so I can feel the silkiness of the strands in tandem with the silky slickness of her mouth. I give a hard thrust and empty my come into her throat.

When I ease my grip on her hair, I pull out. “Swallow,” I tell her.

Her eyes are watering and she is sniffing from choking on my dick but she obediently closes her lips and swallows down all of what I dumped in her mouth. She raises a shaking hand to swipe it across her lips, removing all the saliva and a little bit of dribbled creaminess. She doesn't look upset. She looks turned on.

I take note of Richard's back as he retreats back to the party. I was aware of him the entire time, wanting him to see my control over Georgia, but also conscious of my vulnerability in a moment like that. I take pride in my weapons work. I prefer guns, but I can use a knife very effectively as well.

No one gets the jump on me.

Not even my brothers, Luka and Maxim, though they certainly have spent a lifetime trying.

Georgia rests on her knees, breathing hard, though she doesn't say anything. She doesn't even look up at me. She looks like she's in a trance, swaying just slightly back and forth. Almost imperceptibly she reaches up and scratches between her shoulders again.

“What is itchy?” I ask, helping her to her feet. I turn her around and unzip her dress a few inches. “You've been scratching at that same spot all night.”

“I have?”

Her skin is red and irritated. There's a price tag dangling on a plastic tie, and is clearly the culprit. Pissed off that it's been chafing at her creamy skin all night, I snap the plastic and remove the tag.

She reacts with alarm. “Please, don't. I have to return this dress tomorrow. I can't afford it.”

I ease the other half of the plastic off of the label and put it in my pocket. I glance at the price tag. Fifty-nine dollars. Not exactly something that would break the bank, but more than

Georgia can afford. And worth about five dollars, in my opinion.

“I’ll pay you for the dress,” I tell her, massaging the red spot left behind by the tag. I bend and kiss the spot, flicking my tongue over it.

She shivers. “But...”

Georgia doesn’t understand what is happening. That she doesn’t need to worry about the fact that as of this morning she has only eleven dollars in her bank account. I know, because I’ve been watching all of her assets and financial transactions, or lack thereof.

“You’re cute when you’re being naive.” I press another kiss at the base of her neck and bury my lips in her soft hair. She smells like floral shampoo and champagne. I shift around so that I’m facing her, taking her lips with mine in a kiss. I can taste the saltiness of my cum on her mouth. “Think about what you’re saying.”

She just nods, studying me. Her eyes look glassy. But then she looks past me and her face lights up. “Quinn.” She goes straight to her friend.

“Are you leaving?” Quinn asks. She looks first at Georgia, then to me with curiosity.

I nod. “Goodnight, Mrs. Virtue. I had a lovely evening.” I kiss her cheek. “Thank you for your hospitality.”

“It’s always good to see you, Alex,” she says. “You’ll take care of Georgia?” she asks me. Then she hugs her friend. “You seem drunk.”

Georgia hugs her back, hard. “I am but I’m fine. You’re better than fine. You’re so happy with your rich old husband.”

That makes me snort. I can’t tell if she is being facetious or not. Virtue would despise being called old.

“Georgia!” Quinn’s cheeks turn pink.

“Oh, you know what I mean,” she says, waving her hand dismissively. “You know me, I don’t think before I speak. I

don't mean old, just *older*." She puts her hand on Quinn's stomach briefly. "And now you're having a baby together."

That gets my attention. I narrow my eyes at Quinn. She's wearing a loose dress but she's a thin woman and I see it now. I didn't notice it before because I was preoccupied with Georgia but her stomach shows a little bubble of a belly.

Virtue is having a baby.

Not what I wanted to hear right when I'm in the middle of setting up my own future and everything is a mess.

"Georgia, keep your voice down," Quinn says, glancing around nervously. "Seriously. No one knows."

Just me. I want to keep it that way.

I love Georgia's mouth even more for spilling Quinn's pregnancy.

"Say goodnight, Georgia," I command.

"Goodnight, Georgia," she says, giving me a loopy smile as she releases Quinn and turns to me.

I'm almost tempted to smile.

She's a smartass. She's not naturally submissive at all.

There are a dozen other women in this apartment tonight who would readily take the role of my mistress and obey my every command without hesitation or back talk.

But I don't want them. I want Georgia and her smart mouth.

"Can I have another glass of champagne?" she asks.

"No."

She takes a step toward me, but her ankle twists. She gives a cry of dismay and reaches out for me when she stumbles.

"Are you okay?" Quinn repeats, sounding even more alarmed. She steps forward and reaches out to help Georgia.

"She's fine," I say smoothly.

But her eyes are rolling back a little in her head, her grip on my shoulders easing. I lift her up from under her curvy ass and hitch her partially over my shoulder. Her head lolls forward and her hair obscures her face but it's obvious she's passed out.

I wave to Quinn. "Congratulations on your news. I promise your secret is mine."

Then I take my new acquisition and leave.

My driver doesn't blink when I deposit an unconscious woman in the back seat of my car. "Take us to the airport. Roberto is meeting us there with some packages. You can help him load up the plane and then you have the rest of the night free."

"Yes, sir."

Georgia is leaning against my shoulder, her breathing shallow and anxious.

Then she does something that amuses and arouses me.

She turns in her sleep and leans into me, her hand seeking, seeking. When she finds my belt, she wraps her fingers around it, like she needs to tether herself to me. Like she needs my support.

Then she opens her mouth and wraps her lips around the ball of my shoulder like it's a gag ball. Her teeth dig in and I swear, caught completely off guard. I don't know if she's dreaming. The pressure isn't hard. I can barely feel it through my jacket. But it's the idea of it, that she likes her mouth stuffed full, that has me edgy with desire.

She's not a woman I have to be delicate with and that excites me.

My ex-wife is a fragile woman, cool and smooth like glass, and as easily shattered.

Georgia is a diamond. Fiery in the light but unbreakable.

It's obvious in how she went down on her knees in compliance but then enjoyed sucking me.

It's clear in how she rubs against me in her sleep.

And how she looks Quinn straight in the eye and lies to her.

Georgia Ryan isn't even Georgia Ryan.

She's Gabriella Donatelli, the illegitimate daughter of Lorenzo Donatelli.

And my ex-wife's half-sister.

Chapter Five

Armani

I want everyone in the room to disappear.
Just fall through the floor.

Go over the balcony.

I don't give a shit how it happens, I just want it to be right fucking now so I can be alone with my wife.

Every time she moves I can see the way her dress shifts and shows the tiniest of baby bumps. My child is growing in her belly and it makes me want to strip her naked and show her my gratitude for the second chance at marriage, at being a father, that's she's giving me.

When she's not by my side, I'm constantly searching the room for her, and I do that now, barely listening to the conversation that is flowing around me. I sip my bourbon and seek my wife.

Instead, I see Alex's wife, Nicolette, being let in the front door by my right hand man and bodyguard, Sergei.

I frown. She isn't on the approved list of guests for tonight and Sergei knows better than to let her in. It doesn't matter that she's Alex's wife. No one is allowed carte blanche to my home. Every social event requires a list. It's for safety and control and in this case, for Alex to have the freedom to pursue a side piece.

His marriage is in name only and his wife is well aware that if she refuses to satisfy him, he'll go elsewhere, and she has no business being here tonight.

I start toward the door, wanting to cut her off.

I haven't seen Alex since he took Georgia out on the balcony.

"Nicolette," I say as I approach her. "What a surprise."

Nicolette is normally unemotional. She's the classic ice queen. Blonde, cool, haughty. She makes serving staff cry by one glance of disapproval in their direction.

But while she is impeccably dressed as usual in elegant wide-leg trousers and a Chanel silk shirt, her hair isn't smooth in its chignon. There are strands going in various directions, like she tried to run her fingers through her hair and forgot it was up.

"Where the hell is Alex?" she demands, without even greeting me.

That is also unlike Nicolette. Her manners are as impeccable as her wardrobe. Her eyes are red as if she's been crying.

"I don't know," I say smoothly. It's true. I have no idea where he is. "You need to go home, Nicolette."

She glances back at me, her eyes wild. "What is this? Why are there so many men here and only a few women?"

I don't answer and it takes her a second before the answer presents itself to her.

"Oh." She blinks and swallows, putting her hand to her throat, her mouth turning down in disgust. "It's a sex party, isn't it?"

I shake my head. "It's more like a showcase." She'll understand if I explain it in fashion terms. "It's like having the current collection brought out for you one by one and you decide if you want to add anything to your closet."

The disgust deepens. "I want to speak to my husband."

"Go home," I tell her, gesturing to Sergei.

She needs to be escorted out.

“Did you know he was going to do this?” she demands, and there is both an edge of fear and fury in her voice.

“Do what?” I can’t imagine why she would care that he’s interested in another woman. She’s never cared before.

“He had divorce papers served to me tonight.”

That does surprise me. In the past Alex has always chosen keeping Nicolette’s father in his inner circle over a happy marriage. I know he wants more. That he wants to set Georgia up in an apartment if he enjoys her company, and have a more established connection than he’s had in the past, but I didn’t realize he was plotting divorce.

I keep my expression neutral. “Sergei is going to take you home,” I say. “This isn’t the right place for you.”

Unfortunately, Quinn reappears at my side, looking a little confused and concerned. She’s only met Nicolette once for about three seconds. My sweet little bride isn’t ready to mingle with the experienced wives. Nicolette could eat Quinn alive if given a reason.

“Hello, Quinn,” Nicolette says, her expression shifting into that of a socialite. “You look lovely. Have you seen Alex?”

“He already left, I’m sorry.”

I give Quinn a warning glance, but she isn’t looking at me. She’s watching Nicolette with something that might be considered pity. She knows Alex left with Georgia and she feels sorry for the woman in front of her. It’s not going to go unnoticed or unpunished by Nicolette. She’s far too shrewd and experienced to let it slide. Quinn is a little baby bird, hopping unwittingly into Nicolette’s trap.

“That’s so odd,” Nicolette says, sounding like she thinks Quinn is an idiot. “Because he asked me to meet him here.”

Quinn doesn’t know what to say to that. She glances up at me, seeking an answer from me. I refuse to stand here and let Nicolette make my wife upset in our own home when she’s expecting.

“If he had divorce papers served to you, I doubt he asked you to meet him here,” I tell her, dryly.

“Are you calling me a liar, Armani?” Her chin goes up.

“Yes.”

She gasps.

Then does something I don't expect. She moves around us in an angry rush. It's so out of character for her that I'm caught off guard. I sigh. It's a minor annoyance, nothing more, but I'd prefer to be focused on ushering our guests out for the night so I can go to bed with my wife. I don't need this drama.

“Have you seen Alex?” I ask Quinn. “He can deal with her.”

“He left with Georgia ten minutes ago.”

That has me rubbing my beard, really annoyed. I don't like the subject of Quinn's best friend because I know when my wife finds out she's been lying to her, she's going to be upset and I'll do anything to prevent that from happening.

At least she's not there and we can avoid a dramatic confrontation between the soon to be mistress and soon to be ex-wife.

Unfortunately, Nicolette has approached Richard Prescott and he apparently saw Alex leave. He conveys that to her when she asks him if he's seen Alex.

“Sure, sure. He was with that redhead,” Richard adds when Nicolette thanks him for the information. “They left ten minutes ago.” He shoots a smirk in my direction, knowing he's stirring the pot.

“What redhead?”

“I don't know her name. Didn't get that good of a look at her face either since his dick was in her mouth.”

All the color drains from Nicolette's face. Her nostrils flare.

For a second, I feel sorry for her.

But then I remember that she hasn't so much as kissed her husband in five years, let alone allowed him the privilege of entering her princess pussy. I know she knows he has women on the side and always has.

"I would think that you would have the class to keep such crude details to yourself, Richard. I find your language offensive."

Ah. She just doesn't approve of the frankness of Richard's statement.

He tips his head, acknowledging she's right. "My apologies, Mrs. Kuzmin."

But the use of her married name seems to send her over the edge. Tears appear in her eyes. I take her by the elbow and steer her away and she lets me.

"Who is she?" she chokes out. "Is she why he's doing this to me?"

"No, she's not the reason." I guide her toward the door.

I turn back to Quinn. She looks pale and fatigued. "Go to bed, darling. You look tired. I'll wrap everything up here."

She nods.

I bend down and kiss her temple. "Lock the bedroom door," I murmur in her ear. "I don't want to have to murder one of my friends or associates tonight."

Her eyes widen. I always hate to have to remind my sweet little Quinn that danger lurks everywhere at all times. At least now, after having been kidnapped by my son, she knows I'm telling the truth, even if she always seems a little startled by it.

I turn to Sergei. "Make sure she goes straight to our room and that you hear her lock the door behind her."

"Yes, sir."

Nicolette is rubbing her forehead. "Nice party, Armani. You have to lock your wife away to keep her safe. Jesus. All of you are repulsive."

“You crashed my party,” I tell her. “You could be at home, spending Alex’s money.”

Her eyes flash. “Fuck you. At least I don’t have to earn the right to spend it on my back, unlike your wife.”

If she wasn’t a woman, she would be on the floor unconscious for that statement. But I restrain myself.

“I’ve never seen this jealous side of you. It’s very unattractive, Nicolette. I don’t expect Alex will be home for several days. I’m sure he’s allowing you your space to process divorce papers.” I smile at her. “Now, out of respect for you and your father, I’m going to pretend that you didn’t just insult my wife. Just like you pretend Alex doesn’t prefer almost every other woman over you.”

Nicolette is tall, slim, almost waifish. She’s the exact opposite of her husband’s personal preferences and she knows it.

It’s a cruel arrow, but she deserves it for taking a jab at my wife. No one fucking talks about my wife.

To her credit, she barely flinches. “I’m not going to let him humiliate me like this. Neither will my father.”

“I think this is a private matter between the two of you.”

She stares at me, and I see the moment she realizes there is nothing more she can do here. But then suddenly she glances to the right and her eyes flash with anger.

I look in the direction she’s now moving and I see Alex. I go after her. Nicolette has always been reliable in playing her role. That she’s gone rogue at my house after a lifetime of obedience is an annoying inconvenience. Sergei has returned from walking Quinn to our bedroom and I gesture for him to follow as well.

Once I get to them I realize what she has just discovered.

It isn’t Alex.

It’s his identical twin brother.

“Nicolette,” Luka says with a smile. “Why do you look like you want to murder me?”

She sighs, her shoulders sinking. “From behind I thought you were Alex.”

“Ah. That explains it. I want to murder him most of the time myself.”

Luka wasn't invited either. He and Alex are highly competitive with each other and I wanted to avoid the complication of their identical appearances.

“Did you know he was going to serve me with divorce papers?” she demands.

Luka pauses with his glass halfway to his mouth. “No. But we don't sit around discussing our love lives with each other.”

It's clear from his expression that he is well aware the implications go far beyond personal matters of the heart. “Luka, would you mind taking Nicolette home?” I ask.

He'll want to talk to her, pick her brain as to what is going on with Alex and vice versa. And I'll accomplish my goal of getting them out of my penthouse.

“I'd be happy to.” He offers his arm to her.

She takes it, smoothly her hair back and lifting her chin.

“Armani, I'm sorry for this,” she says. “Please apologize to Quinn for me.”

“Of course.” I air kiss her cheek. “Sometimes our emotions get the best of us.”

“I'm quite embarrassed,” she murmurs. “I just...”

“No need to explain.” It's Alex who needs to explain why the hell he didn't mention he was about to rock the family by serving Nicolette.

“I'm taking this martini with me, Virtue,” Luka says, lifting his glass. “Goodnight.”

He encourages Nicolette to exit and I watch them get on the elevator, giving a pleasant wave as the doors close.

The second they've shut, I text Alex.

I need to know what the fuck is going on. Lorenzo, Nicolette's father, is going to lose his shit.

I don't get an answer and I know exactly why.

Alex is probably balls deep in Georgia Ryan by now.

Shoving my phone in my pocket, I return to the party.

Chapter Six

Georgia

I'm vaguely aware of being settled down onto a couch, but it's not until I feel my dress being removed that I manage to pry my eyelids open to see what's happening. It feels like I'm drifting in a cloud, like I'm jumping from square to square on a life-sized Candyland board. Everything feels pink and pillowy and misty. Sweet and salty, like a white chocolate covered pretzel.

Alex is in front of me, lifting my dress off over my head.

He isn't wearing his suit jacket anymore, or his tie. His shirt sleeves have been rolled up, and I find the sight of his forearms intensely fascinating. He has several tattoos on one arm, but the other is just smooth golden and muscular skin. They're powerful arms.

I lift my arms up to aid him in removing my dress. The stupid thing has been bothering me all night and now I own it because he ripped the tag off.

"Good girl," he says.

It's then I remember that the saltiness I taste on my tongue is because he told me to get on my knees and I did and he shoved his cock in my mouth. Or maybe I shoved it in. I loved it. I loved every second of it. He has a big cock and I want it inside me, right now.

"Where are we?" I ask, glancing around. We're in a small space. I see it's a plane. A private jet. I traveled in one once, as

a child, when my father took me to DisneyWorld. “Where are we going?”

“Miami. I told you that.” He tosses the dress behind him onto the floor.

I blink. “Oh, right. But why?”

“To spend the weekend together in my house there.” He says this like it’s totally obvious.

Maybe it is. Maybe it should be. But my brain is still floating in Candyland.

I want to lick his candy cane again.

I reach out and undo his belt.

“More?” he asks, smirking.

I nod. It doesn’t seem important to pretend that I don’t want him desperately. To play hard to get. He’s already gotten me.

I’m in my bra and panties but I lift my ass and shove my panties down.

His eyes darken. He takes in the view of my exposed pussy and starts to unbutton his shirt, slowly.

“Show me more,” he says.

Leaning forward, I undo my bra, so that my breasts tumble out of the restraint. I’ve had big tits since I was twelve and I have a love/hate relationship with them. They receive both wanted and unwanted attention. They look fantastic in a cocktail dress but they make sleeping on my stomach impossible. They make my back hurt. In the summer they serve only to torture me, with sweat trapped under and between them.

But right now I want Alex to enjoy the view.

I toss the bra behind me and lounge back, raising my arm to entangle in my hair. I let my legs fall apart, lifting my knee.

He peels his shirt off. “Very lovely, Georgia.” He removes his gun and takes the clip out.

The clicking sound both scares me and turns me on. I breathe slowly, wanting to watch him undress fully.

He takes his time, next removing his watch.

That intrigues me. Why does he need his watch off?

“What are you thinking?” he asks. “You have a very expressive face, Georgia.”

“I’m wondering why you’re taking your watch off.”

“I don’t want to scratch you with it.”

“Oh.” That seems surprisingly considerate.

He smiles. “You are very adorable.”

It’s a nice enough comment, but the timing makes me bristle. I’m naked, leg up so he can have a picture frame view of my pussy, and he thinks I’m adorable? “I don’t want to be adorable. I want to be hot.”

“You’re that too. Pull your pussy apart, show me if you’re wet.”

I do what he asks, easing my lips apart with one hand straight down between my thighs. I want to touch myself, but I know the way to please him is to wait for instructions.

“Look at that,” he murmurs, staring at my pussy, his nostrils flaring. “All pink and wet and ready.”

The moment draws on and on while he slowly removes his undershirt and undoes his pants. I feel like I’m hovering, my body aching, my nipples tightening as he stares intently at my pussy, his gaze never drifting anywhere else. Goosebumps spring to life on my arms, racing over my shoulders, as a jolt of heat shoots through me.

Alex takes his pants off and the anticipation, the way he never looks away from the intimacy of my spread folds, has my breathing increasingly shallow, my chest heaving up and down.

I can feel a trickle of arousal edging down my inner thigh.

His stare coaxed that out of me. Commanded it out of me. I'm a little embarrassed. I feel sexy but vulnerable. My thoughts are still hazy and my skin feels alive.

"That's it," he says. "Look at that juicy little pussy begging for it. That's what your pussy is doing, it's begging for my dick."

I nod, swallowing hard, because there's no denying it. I'm dripping wet.

He takes his boxer briefs off and his hardness springs forward. My mouth waters. I tasted him, and now I want him inside me. I reach forward, but he holds his hand up.

"I didn't say you could move. Back exactly the way you were. Exactly. And don't move a muscle until I tell you to."

I obey, putting one hand in my hair again, the other arm down over my stomach, slipping over my clit. I moan at the contact, before I use two fingers to pull myself open wide for his viewing. I want so much more and my shoulders are rising a little as I try to hold my body in place. It feels like my tits are vibrating, like my clit is throbbing, my entire body trembling with need.

"Invite me in, Georgia. You want me in that wet pussy, don't you?"

"Yes."

"That's not an invitation." He grips his dick, squeezing the base tightly.

I'm not sure what he wants but I'm straining with the urge to move. It's painful not to touch myself, not to have his hard heat pressing over me, in me. I want to feel his power, feel his arms wrapped around me, his thickness deep in my desperate cunt. "Please. Come inside me," I say.

"Yes. I'm going to come inside you."

I'm hot and excited, anticipating how he's going to shove all that thickness deep into me and I'm going to come, all this tight need blasting apart and making me capable of staying inside my skin. Right now it feels like I'm going to crawl out

of it when he doesn't make any move. "Fuck me, Alex. Come inside me now. Please."

Whether it's the drug or the alcohol or the stress in life or him, but it feels like I have to have this, I have to have him. It feels like the answer to every problem I've ever had, and the trembling becomes more pronounced. I can't keep this position. I need him so much, I need relief. But I can't move either because he told me not to. I flick my tongue over my bottom lip and thrust my shoulders back so that my breasts will entice him.

It feels like I'm going to cry. That I have to have him so desperately that I can't survive another second without him.

"Shh," he says. "Shh." He moves in front of me, fingers trailing over my hair. He bends down, tenderly cupping my cheeks. His gray eyes are unreadable, his touch light, his tone equally so. "Don't cry, love. I'm going to give it to you. Is that what you want?"

I nod, feeling miserable. "That's *all* I want."

"That's what you're going to get."

He sits down and pulls me onto his lap. For a second, he cradles me, his hands running over my sensitive skin. He kisses my temple and I press myself against him, my ass shifting eagerly on his hard thighs. I press my bottom down onto his cock, trying to entice him.

"Come inside you, that's what you want, right?" He teases at my nipple with his thumb and index finger.

"Yes, yes, yes." I wrap my arms around his neck.

Alex shifts my body so that my legs are on either side of him. My hot slit is poised above his erection.

Then I'm seated on him and it takes my breath away. I moan, my head falling back as gravity sinks me as low as I can go, his cock embedded deep inside me.

"Oh, yeah," he says. "Fuck yes, Georgia. You feel amazing."

I do feel amazing. I feel like I've been handed the key to the universe, to a mysterious outer dimension of reality where nothing exists but pleasure. Alex grips my waist, lifts me up and down on him so that I feel the thickness of him sliding up and down against my damp inner walls. So much thickness. So much heat.

“Look at me, sweetheart,” he says. “Watch me while I fuck you.”

I tip my head back down as I rock against him, my nipples brushing against his chest. His gray eyes pierce me intently. He has such a pretty face for a man, such strong cheekbones, such a chiseled jaw. He has eyelashes that are far too delicate to sweep over eyes that hold such dominating power and potential cruelty.

He kisses the corner of my mouth and I feel it then. The rising tide of my orgasm and he strokes inside me, slowly, powerfully.

I'm vaguely aware that the plane engine has started but it doesn't really register until the pilot's voice comes on the speaker. “Mr. Kuzmin, we're ready for take off.”

The plane surges forward on the tarmac as Alex surges inside me and I'm hanging onto him, my only hold on reality as my body quivers. He's moving faster now, more urgently, and I'm more desperate, meeting him thrust for thrust. Up and down, my breasts hovering in front of him until he covers my nipple with his lips and flicks his tongue over the taut and sensitive flesh.

I come hard, shattering on him like a champagne flute tossed at a brick wall. All at once, with hard impact, and lacerating shards.

Maybe I'm crying out. Maybe I'm completely silent. I don't know. All I know is that I'm suspending in time and space until I feel the hot spurt of his own release inside me, his hands digging painfully into my flesh.

It barely registers, before he's finished and he lifts me off of him onto the cool leather. He stands up and pulls on his

pants, his shirt, but leaves both unbuttoned. The motion of the plane is disorienting, faster now, then slower as we take a full turn.

I'm too shocked to say anything. I don't know what just happened. It feels profound, momentous, but he's doing very ordinary things.

But then he comes over to me and bends down between my knees. He smiles at me. "Safety first, Georgia," he says, as he pulls a seatbelt across my lap. Then he kisses me, softly, before easing his white cotton undershirt down over my head.

It smells like him. Like expensive cologne and cigars.

I want to say something, but my lips don't seem to be able to move.

But then I realize I don't know what I want to say anyway.

He sits beside me and shifts me so that I'm lying on his lap. It's a firm, muscular lap and I sigh, fully relaxed.

As the plane lifts off the ground, I drift into sleep.

Chapter Seven

Alex

Georgia is sleeping peacefully across my lap on her side. I run my fingers through her hair, taking in her pale skin and her plump lips, slightly parted. I didn't expect to feel anything but base lust and desire for her. This is surprising to me, this odd tenderness, this appreciation for who she is. She looks good in my undershirt, the white cotton straining against the fullness of her tits, her nipples tempting little peaks I can't wait to play with.

Now that we're at cruising altitude, I've undone her seat belt, but she hasn't moved beyond curling in closer to me. The shirt has ridden up, so the full swell of her voluptuous ass is there for me to rest my hand on. At this angle, her pink pussy is mostly hidden between her thighs, though when she shifts, I can see my cum is starting to creep out.

I can't wait to go head-to-head with her tomorrow when she's furious with me about that.

I have my pants back on and I glance at my phone screen. I have fifteen missed calls from Nicolette. That might be more times than she's called me in the entirety of our marriage. I also have a missed call from my twin brother, Luka, which is much more interesting. We rarely talk. It's probably about our father. Yet not interesting enough to call him back when I have a lap full of a naked woman.

Tracing the contours of Georgia's bare shoulder, I study the dip of her waist, the curve of her ass. I want to bite that ass and slip my tongue inside her.

Swiping at my screen, I call Nicolette back. I put the phone to my ear for privacy in case Georgia wakes up.

“Alex?” she asks, answering breathlessly.

“Yes. Is something wrong? I see you’ve called me multiple times.”

“I got the papers, that’s what’s wrong. How can you do this to me?”

That angers me. “How can you deny me a child, an heir? You’re taking everything away from me just to punish me. Well, trying to anyway. You’ll never succeed..”

“I’ve never set out to punish you.” Her voice is tight, her tone cool.

“No? What would you call it? Refusing to spend time with me? Refusing to have sex with me? Refusing to let me hire a surrogate?” I shift a little in my seat, glancing over at the night sky through the window of the plane. There’s nothing I want that I don’t get, but out of respect for her father, for Nicolette herself, I let her have too much power. I won’t make that mistake again.

“It was survival, Alex. You should know that. I never meant to hurt you.”

That makes me laugh softly. “You haven’t hurt me. I would have to love you in order for you to hurt me and I’ve never been able to dredge up that kind of emotion for you. Nor you for me. That’s not what we had. We had a strategic marriage to align two families and we agreed to that. And you broke that pact, so I have to move on. It’s nothing personal. It’s never been anything personal.”

“Are you with her right now?” she demands.

I frown. Nicolette has never asked me about women before. She’s obviously actually upset about us getting divorced, which shocks me. I assumed she’d be annoyed and resentful, but she’d take her alimony package and happily go live her life solo, which is what she prefers. She’s never been jealous before. You have to care to be jealous and she doesn’t

give a shit about me. She's an ice princess, through and through.

"With who?" I want her to say it out loud. I want the satisfaction of hearing her voice tremble. I want to punish her the way she has punished me for all these years.

"The woman you left Armani's with. The redhead."

I'm surprised she knows. Also surprised she's admitting it. "Were you spying on me?"

"I wanted to talk to you. Do you love her, Alex?" she asked, and the trembling vulnerability she's displaying shocks me.

"I just met her." I won't lie to Nicolette. Not ever. Not even after everything we've shared, or rather, not shared in our cold and resentful marriage. Maybe because of that.

"Is she pretty?"

"Yes." It's a stupid question. Why would I be fucking someone I don't find attractive? "Would you like me to send you a picture? She's sleeping next to me right now."

"God, you can be such a prick," she breathes.

"You asked me about her. And let's not descend into name calling. Let's have a civilized divorce. I don't want to fight with you, truly. You can have the apartment, of course, and you can keep everything you've bought with my money."

There's a pause. "That's it, then?"

I'm done with this conversation. "What do you want me to say? No sex, no baby. No baby, no future."

"What if I say I will have your baby? Will you change your mind and withdraw the divorce papers?"

For five years, she has shut me out of her bedroom. For months she's been refusing to entertain the idea of us conceiving together or hiring a surrogate. But suddenly she wants to give it to me?

Suspicion appears out of nowhere. Is Nicolette scheming? I don't believe for one minute she'll have sex with me. She

actually has a complete aversion to the act, not just specifically me.

“I’ll believe that when I see your legs spread,” I say. “Goodnight.” I end the call.

I’m not having a child with Nicolette.

I ease my shirt up to expose Georgia’s chest. Finding the swell of her breast, I run the back of my knuckles across her nipples, envisioning a baby—*my* baby— nursing as peacefully as she’s currently sleeping.

It’s Georgia who is going to have my baby.

The newest mafia prince.

Whether she agrees to it or not.

Chapter Eight

Georgia

When I wake up I have no idea where I am. My head is pounding and the bright and airy room bears no resemblance to the dark, windowless cave that's my bedroom in my apartment. There's air conditioning running, which makes me shiver, but at the same time feels refreshingly cool as I try to turn my head to the right for a better view without tripping off a wave of nausea.

This is a large and well-decorated suite, with an attached bathroom. I catch a glimpse of terrazzo floor tiles.

Memories suddenly appear, clicking through my brain like a slideshow.

Quinn and Armani's penthouse party.

Meeting Alex.

Giving him a blowjob in front of some guy, though the memory is so hazy and startling I wonder if it actually happened or if I dreamed it.

A plane.

Climbing on his lap, the satisfaction of his cock buried inside me.

That definitely was real. That happened. I can feel a soreness between my thighs, a tingling of arousal just at the memory of getting fucked hard by him.

Me coming.

Him coming.

Inside me.

Without a condom. I never allow that. But I remember the feel of him, just smooth skin over his steel cock, stretching me. The unmistakable sensation of his orgasm rolling down out of me.

I'm not wearing panties and I frantically feel between my legs. I'm still wet from desire, and wet from him. I'm not on any birth control. The thought has me groaning in horror and turning to the nightstand. I need to get out of here as soon as possible. I don't see my phone but there is a glass of water, which I sip greedily. I fall back on my pillow, shaky, taking in my surroundings.

It doesn't look like Alex shared this bed with me. The pillow next to mine is crisp, the sheets still tucked in on the opposite side. I'm wearing a plain white T-shirt that smells like a man.

Like him.

I know his scent already. It feels locked into my nostrils and my pussy throbs at the smell of his masculinity. I hate that I want him. I hate that I have completely lost any control or power I might have if I'd stayed sober, if I had bargained better. If I had dangled myself as a prize he wanted to win, instead of just giving it all up instantly.

I have no idea what I'm even getting out of this, besides orgasms and a splitting headache. Maybe there will be no financial security, nothing beyond one night.

The door to the room opens and I freeze, bracing myself to face Alex, feeling completely unprepared. I'd prefer to be showered, to be together, so that I can regain some power. So I can plead my case.

To my complete astonishment, it's not Alex at all. It's a woman. Younger than me, but not substantially. She's blonde, tall, cheerful, dressed in peach yoga pants and a hot pink sport's bra. I instantly hate her because she looks both like her head isn't aching, and as if she's comfortable with her surroundings, like she lives here. It makes me jealous, which is

absurd. I'm sure Alex has more than one woman in his life at any given time, and I'm not anything special.

Nor do I want to be special to him.

I *need* him. That doesn't mean I want him.

"Hello," she says. "Alex sent me to fetch you for breakfast. I'm Tatiana."

I feel like shit. I'm sure I look like shit. My voice is scratchy as I croak out a "Hi."

Tatiana looks healthy and fit as she picks up a remote and sends the blinds in the room upward. I narrow my eyes as light floods the room. I envy the bounce in this stranger's step and the fresh glow of her skin. The last few weeks of stress have taken the toll on me. Last night has me feeling like I've been kicked in the head by a mule.

It's a monster of a hangover.

It's that thought that triggers a memory. Something about a drug. Fury floods me. That asshole *roofied* me.

Before I can process the thought further, Tatiana shocks me yet again by yanking the duvet off of me.

Who the hell is this girl? She doesn't look like a housekeeper, but she's sort of acting like one. Opening blinds, waking me up. But ripping the duvet off feels like something a girlfriend who wants to mess with me would do.

I scramble to cover myself as she's frowning. I'm in no state to verbally spar with a girlfriend. Suddenly, I just want to go home. To my mother's house. To get a hug and take a nap. I'm so damn tired.

"What are you sleeping in?" she asks. "Is that Alex's dirty shirt? *Gross*. My other brother, Maxim, is usually the one who is thoughtless with women. I expected better of Alex. He's generally charming. He could have offered you some actual clean sleepwear." She shakes her head. "Men."

It takes me a second, but I puzzle out the important piece of information. "Alex is your brother?"

She nods. “I have three brothers, which is three too many. I’m the youngest.” Then she leans in and studies me. Her eyes are a deep brown. Something about her expression has me fighting the urge to pull back. Those eyes are filled with a touch of crazy and she’s staring too long. She seems to realize the moment she’s made me uncomfortable. In fact, she’s waiting for it. I see a flash of smugness before she pulls back.

“You need a shower. You have dried cum all over your leg.”

My jaw drops open. I can’t believe she just said that. Not only is it weird under any circumstance to mention sex juices, it’s her *brother’s*.

Tatiana likes to shock, apparently. She’s entertaining herself. Which pisses me off and compels me into action.

I yank the shirt down over my thighs and swing my legs over the side of the bed. The motion forces her to take a step back.

“What do you want to wear?” she asks cheerfully, heading over to a stack of boxes, bags, and a rolling clothing rack. “Swimsuit or sundress? Alex is having breakfast by the pool.”

The pool. That’s right. We’re in Miami. In spite of the circumstances, a thrill trips through me. I’m in Florida. I’m home.

“Swimsuit.” I eye all the boxes and bags. “What is all that?”

“Your new clothes. Alex’s assistant has been busy all night shopping for you.” Tatiana starts digging through the bags.

I greedily eye them all with interest. If last night was it, and Alex sends me back to New York with a handshake, I can presumably keep the items. Which means I can sell them. Everything appears to be designer.

Running my hand across the shirts and jeans and cocktail dresses hanging on the clothing rack, I try not to be distracted by all the beauty of these clothes. I head straight for the ensuite bathroom and close the door.

It only gets halfway shut before Tatiana's hand stops it from completely closing. "Door stays open," she says, her voice a high singsong tone.

"What? Why?" She's smiling at me, like all of this is normal. Tatiana is pretty, with the same cheekbones and nose as Alex. But she's different from him. Wound tighter. Unpredictable. Like a jack-in-box cranking frantically until she's going to spring forth with a loud pop. I don't trust her at all and I don't want to be there when she bursts out.

"I'm not supposed to leave you alone. Boss's orders. If you behave yourself, I'll hang back." Her smile is a little too maniacal for my taste. I also realize that she has a gun tucked into her yoga pants.

Who the fuck carries a gun to yoga? It's also pink, which bothers me more than the fact that it's a gun and I'm not sure why.

"If you can't behave yourself," she continues, "I'll handcuff you to the shower door and wash you myself." She makes a scrubbing motion with her hand.

A shiver rolls through me. I get the distinct impression she'd prefer the latter. Not for sexual reasons but for domination and humiliation.

Ten minutes ago, I was nervous to face Alex. Now I can't wait to see him and plead for him to send his sister somewhere else because I'm pretty sure she's psycho.

"No need for threats," I say, striving for a calm, unruffled tone. "I was just curious."

She can watch me all she wants. The hot water is worth the infringement on my privacy and I've never been particularly modest. I strip off the T-shirt and step into the shower, immediately sticking my head under the hot stream and sighing. There are expensive products in the shower to use and I take my time, loosening the muscles in my shoulders and neck and trying not to panic as I wash the stickiness off from between my legs. I studiously ignore Tatiana, who is leaning against the doorframe watching videos on her phone. I can

hear the sounds change rapidly as she flips through one after the other.

Stepping out, I wrap myself in a towel. I'm not going to ask Tatiana again to give me privacy. I sense she'll enjoy being in control of my comfort. I also don't bother to ask if I can use the toiletries. Everything is brand new, still in packaging so I unwrap the toothbrush and use it, along with a hairbrush.

Tatiana has tossed a basic black bikini on the counter. "Here." Her sunny disposition seems to have evaporated. "Hurry up. Alex is getting pissy. He's texted me three times."

It's my turn to intimidate Tatiana back. "What does he say?" I ask, mimicking her earlier cheerful tone. I pull the bikini bottoms on under my towel, which I then drop. I put the bikini top on and do the back clasp, but I can't tie the strings around my neck. "Can you tie this for me?" I lift my hair and present my neck to her.

In the mirror, I can see her eyes narrow. She steps forward. "He wants to know, and I quote, where the fuck is she?" She ties the strings of my bikini, pulling much tighter than is necessary. "He's not usually so impatient. I find it super annoying."

Not usually?

Does that mean they do this often? He drugs women, brings them here, and she watchdogs them?

"Do you live here full-time?" I ask, dropping my wet hair back down over the too-tight strings.

I consider conversation research. Someday, when I can go to law school, I'm going to revel in digging into legal research. I'm curious about most things. I'm especially curious about women like Tatiana because her life could have been mine if my mother had been married to my father.

"I live next door. Alex surprised me with a phone call this morning." She moves out of the bathroom. "Let's go."

"Are you married?" I ask. "Or live with a boyfriend?"

“Trying to see if I have backup?” she asks, sounding amused. “Fuck off.”

I was just trying to be friendly, to gain her trust, and then hopefully information. I honestly didn't realize she would perceive it that way, but of course she would. She's suspicious of my motives, assuming I want to escape.

I should want to escape. I just haven't had time to process the fact. I need coffee more than I need to run away. “I don't even know what that means,” I say breezily as I follow her into a gorgeous open concept living room and kitchen with floor-to-ceiling windows looking out on a pool and beyond that, the Intracoastal Waterway.

This is also why I'm not plotting to jump out of a window. It feels good to be in Miami, and I want to feel the warmth of the sun on my pale New York skin. My gaze is so focused on the patio area I bump a console table as we weave our way through the living room.

A couple of picture frames rattle and I pause to make sure they haven't fallen over.

What I see makes my already dry mouth turn into sand.

It's a wedding photo.

Of Alex.

And my half-sister, Nicolette.

Holy fuck.

He's married to my half-sister.

The urge to escape appears, violent and desperate, as I realize that this isn't a coincidence.

I wanted to use Alex for money and protection and instead, he's tricked me.

But I have no idea what he actually wants with me.

I've walked into a trap.

Chapter Nine

Georgia

“She’s pretty, isn’t she?” Tatiana asks me, gesturing to the photo I’m clutching so hard the color has drained from my thumbs. “Too bad she’s such a bitch.”

Nicolette is pretty. It’s been five years since I’ve seen a photo of her, and I’ve never met her in person, but I’ve always been jealous of her classic, cool beauty. She has style and grace. *Daddy’s Little Princess*. That was his nickname for Nicolette.

His nickname for me was Bug. Oh, he’d say it like it was meant to be sweet and that he thought I was adorable, but I knew the difference. No little girl with muddy brown hair wants to be called Bug when her mythical blonde and skinny older sister is Princess.

I don’t know if she even knows I exist.

I know and now, yet again, Nicolette has gotten something before me.

“She’s beautiful,” I agree.

Alex isn’t smiling in this photo. He looks commanding, confident. Nicolette doesn’t look overflowing with love and joy either. She looks polished, nothing more. There is a hint of a smile on her face.

Even though his arm is around her waist, there is a gap between them. I can see the sea behind them between their bodies. They’re like figurines on the top of a cake, porcelain perfection, painted smiles and perfectly frozen poses.

The polish on my fingernails is chipping. It's green, the color of matcha, and I painted them weeks ago. My thumbs look inexpensive, garish, pressed on the glass of that perfect portrait. But I don't put the photo back down. I'm terrified of what it means and I'm angry. Very, very angry.

I march over to the glass doors and yank them open. They fly to the right and bounce back because I've yanked it so hard. Warm air wraps around me, the sun forcing me to squint. Tatiana stays in the house. Alex is by the pool, under the shade of an umbrella, legs sprawled out before him as he sips from a glass mug. Breakfast is laid out on the table, two place settings. The king, relaxing outside his stucco castle. He's wearing swim trunks, sandals, and a short sleeve shirt that is open, giving me a mouthwatering visual of his bare chest and abs. He's ridiculously good-looking and my body tingles with the memory of his touch.

For a second, when he turns and smiles at me, I hesitate.

He looks happy to see me.

But I glance down at the photo and my jealousy flares again. Always first dibs for Nicolette. Always hand-me-downs for me.

"You're married," I say flatly, dropping the frame with the wedding photo down on the table.

He doesn't even look at the photo. He sets his mug down and steepled his fingers together. He crosses one leg over the other knee and sits fully back in his chair, relaxed.

"Good morning, Alex," he says, his voice pleasant enough, but there's an edge to it. "Thank you for bringing me to Miami, Alex. My room is beautiful. The clothes are beautiful. This breakfast looks delicious, Alex."

He's right. Those are all the things I should be saying. I need him to like me. I need his money. His protection. I hadn't given it much thought but somewhere rattling around in the back of my brain I guess I had thought it was a high probability that he's married, but why the hell is it Nicolette?

Not only am I embarrassingly jealous of her, I'm scared of what it means.

But I realize at this particular moment, it doesn't matter. I'm fully, one-hundred-percent at his mercy. For a multitude of reasons. I try to quiet the anger, the jealousy, the fear, by breathing through my nose slowly in and out, and forcing my shoulders to relax.

My mother is depending on me. My little brother, Roca, is depending on me.

Hell, I'm depending on me. I'm out of options.

"Good morning, Alex," I force myself to say.

My voice has an approximation of demureness to it. The words are right but under the surface bubbles sarcasm. I try again. "Thank you for bringing me to Miami, Alex. My room is beautiful. The clothes are beautiful." I glance at the fresh fruit and the buttery croissants. "The breakfast looks delicious."

He smiles and it's a sexy, sinful smile. "Good morning, Georgia. How did you sleep?"

"Like I was drugged." It's out before I can even consider how he'll react to such sarcastic honesty.

Alex rises to his feet, slowly, and I brace myself for it. For the backhand that I imagine is coming. The first time my father disciplined me, I ran to my mother, wounded, certain she would take my side and comfort me. Instead, she said, "Well, what did you expect? You can't be a smart ass and expect people to be happy with you."

What do I expect?

I expect pain and so I straighten my shoulders, tip my chin up, determined not to flinch.

But Alex kisses my cheek. His lips are warm, and he brushes them across my skin, shifting up to lightly suck on my earlobe. I shiver, my eyes drifting shut. His fingers slip into my hair, his thumbs caress the pulsing of the artery in my throat.

I'm aroused and scared. He could strangle me right now and no one would ever find my body. No one knows where I am.

Instead of hurting me, Alex just murmurs in my ear. "What should I do about that mouth of yours?"

"I don't know," I whisper, resting my fingertips on his waist so I don't sway backward on my feet. I feel a little dizzy from dehydration and from his presence. "It gets ahead of my brain sometimes."

Alex is nuzzling in my neck now, giving me silken kisses while his hands seem to be everywhere, caressing, shifting, coaxing.

"I'm sorry," I add, even if I'm not. Drugging me was a dick move.

His voice is charming, hypnotic. "We should put something in that smart mouth, don't you think?" His thumb drags across my bottom lip, and his cock nudges against my pussy.

He's hard.

I need to appease him.

I nod, not trusting myself to speak. I have no idea what might come flying out of my mouth.

Without warning, he yanks my head back, hard, by my hair. Tears form in my eyes from my scalp being tugged, but it doesn't hurt so much as it turns me on. Heat swirls between my thighs. Goosebumps race across my arms.

His pale eyes stare at me intently. "Are you jealous of my wife?"

I should play it cool. I shouldn't admit to such a petty emotion, which will swell his ego. But I can't help it. I nod again.

"Can't you just nod and smile and be agreeable when your father is here?" My mother used to ask, exasperated. *"It's not that hard."*

My mother is a practical woman. I'm filled with too much pride. I resent my jealousy of Nicolette.

Alex kisses me, his lips commanding, his tongue sweeping inside my mouth. Just as I lean into the kiss, excited, he pulls back, leaving me empty.

"Turn around," he says.

"What?"

I need coffee and some food. I'm not handling any of this well. I don't understand what he wants me to do and I need to be obedient. I need to figure out what his plan is, his angle. What all of this means.

Alex doesn't bother to repeat himself. He just takes my arms and whirls me around so I'm facing the table. He shoves me forward so I'm forced to put my palms down to brace myself. He shifts in between my legs and I gasp when he pulls my hair back again. He murmurs in my ear.

"You're here. She isn't. I want *you*."

It's so much more than just that. But let him think I'm merely needy. It works to my advantage. He'll underestimate me.

Alex is yanking my bikini bottoms down. They drop to the tiles. I shouldn't be turned on, but I am. The nylon of his shorts brushes against my bare ass and I shiver with anticipation.

He pushes my head forward. "Look at that picture while I fuck you. Look at that picture of two people who could have grown together in passion and love and didn't. Now tell me what you want. Do you want *that*? Or do you want this with me?"

I don't even know what he's asking, but his hand has snaked around and he strokes across my clit with a warm, callused finger. I'm staring at Nicolette, wearing her stupid bridal tiara. Daddy's little princess.

Without warning, Alex shoves his cock inside me so hard that I'm sent sprawling across the table, knocking the frame. It

spins across the surface. The moan escapes my lips as the delicious shock of his invasion sends me into pleasure. His rhythm is hard, pounding, taking me with a ferocity that has my hips pressed tightly against the wooden table. The thrusts leave me unable to breathe, knocking the air out of my lungs. I squeeze my eyes shut.

“Do you want this?” he demands again.

That could mean anything. But I don't have a choice. Besides, when he's inside me, it's hard to resist any demand he makes. He kicks my ankles, left then right, forcing my legs apart further, allowing him to go deeper. I try to grip the table, but there's nothing to hold onto. My nipples brush across the hard surface and it feels like with each thrust inside me, an electrical jolt rushes through my body. His muscles slap against my ass, his hand mercilessly yanks my hair.

“Yes. Yes, I want this.”

As if to prove it, an orgasm rips through me, big and wet, my moan low and deep. I shudder in ecstasy.

“My wife was served with divorce papers last night,” Alex says.

Then he comes inside me with a rough growl.

He releases my hair as he slows his thrusts, finally grinding to a halt.

Shaky, I pry my eyes back open.

Still buried in me, he takes the wedding photo and throws it like a Frisbee. It hits a palm tree and the glass breaks.

The satisfaction I feel at that is enormous, sharp and tangy on my tongue, like a spicy pepper.

It almost makes me forget he's not wearing a condom.

When he pulls out he peels me off the surface of the table.

“Sit down and eat your breakfast.”

I'm out of breath, my hair drying in frizzy little ringlets. With trembling hands, I bend down and pull my bikini bottoms back up.

Alex has pulled a chair out for me, like a gentleman. I sit, thoughts moving like sand. They shift and drift and cause me to mentally stumble. I remember his sister is somewhere in the house, but when I glance over at the doors, I thankfully don't see her. Maybe she went next door. It's clear given the two plates she isn't eating with us.

"Would you like some coffee?" he asks.

I nod.

He sits on the end of the table, so we're close to each other, our knees knocking. He pours me coffee from a glass carafe.

Then he takes a grape and puts it to my lips. "Open your mouth."

I do, obediently, and he eases the fruit between my lips. I bite into it, the juice bursting in my mouth.

"Say whatever you want to me when we're at home alone," he says.

I take a generous swallow of my coffee. It tastes like perfection. I nod.

Nod and smile.

Just like Mom said.

Alex

My original plan was to kill Georgia after she gives me my heir.

I don't want to risk any complications when Georgia invariably decides she hates me, like all women do when I've lost interest in them. I had intended to kill her so that she can never try to steal my child when I get bored and want to move on from her.

Not that she can get away with stealing my child, but I don't need the distraction in my life if she decides to try. I hate drama. I consider myself a reasonable man so getting rid of her before she's a problem just seems easier.

But now?

I watch Georgia flicking her tongue across her lip to capture an errant pastry flake. She sees me staring at her and the corner of her mouth lifts in a smile as she brushes another piece of croissant off of the swell of her breast.

Instead of killing her, I want to kill *for* her.

Georgia fascinates me. She makes me feel indulgent and amused.

She's angry and jealous that I'm married. I like that. After years of being with Nicolette, who doesn't appear to have any emotions at all, watching Georgia's complicated passion is like watching the ocean waves rolling in. Some are small, contained, others crash against the shore with thundering ferocity. It turns me on and makes me want to fuck her over and over and over again.

"These are very flaky," she says.

I reach out and take her hand. I ease her finger between my lips, moistening it. She draws in a sharp breath. Even though I've just had her, it makes my cock harden to see her reaction. I take her damp fingertip and place it on a piece of the croissant still lingering on the swell of her breast. Her skin is warm, her nipple hard. She's breathing deeply. The little crumb sticks to her damp finger. I place it in my mouth and release her hand, watching her.

She breaks the gaze between us and glances around. "This is a beautiful house. Do you come here often?"

It's such an innocuous question when she clearly wants to ask so much more.

"Occasionally." It is a beautiful house, tucked away on a private island in Miami with a gated entrance. It's secure, but its biggest asset is the climate. As a result of the warm November day, I'm enjoying the view of Georgia in her bikini top. All that flesh belongs to me and I can't wait to experience every inch of her.

I want to take her every way possible this weekend.

“Your sister lives next door?”

The question is polite, but I hear something behind it I can't quite identify.

“Yes. Tatiana escapes New York frequently. It's too cold for her.”

“I don't blame her. So she seems... interesting. Did she go home?”

“She's fucking crazy,” I say flatly, because she is. It's from being the youngest and our father's only daughter. She's spoiled but always trying to prove herself, which is a terrible combination.

A startled laugh comes from Georgia.

“But she's loyal,” I say. “I trust her with my life. And I trust she'll protect you.”

Georgia doesn't say anything to acknowledge that she might need protection. She doesn't even nod. She just sips her coffee. “I need to go to the drugstore.”

I study her. She looks nervous. “For what?” I ask, suspicious. “You should have everything you need in your room.”

“I need something in the pharmacy area.”

That's absurdly evasive. “What specifically? I'll have it sent over here.”

“A pill. To make sure I don't get pregnant.”

“Ah.” Now I understand. “We're not getting that.”

Her nostrils flare. “But I'm not on birth control.”

“I know.”

“How could you possibly know that?” she asks, exasperated.

I eye her. “Do you really want to know the answer to that? Because I don't think that you do.”

That I've had a man break into her apartment and go through everything she owns. That I've had someone hack into

her medical records to make sure she's healthy and can bear children.

Her eyes widen. "What the hell is going on, Alex? Do you *want* me to get pregnant? This is insane! We're playing with fire here."

"Yes."

She pauses and just stares at me. "Yes, what?"

"I want you to get pregnant."

Chapter Ten

Alex

Georgia's jaw drops.

My phone rings on the tabletop. It's my assistant. Perfect timing. Let Georgia have time to digest what I've just said.

I answer the call on speaker. "Yes?"

"I'm sending you links to three apartments you can look at."

Most of my belongings have been moved out of my apartment over the last two days while Nicolette was in France visiting her grandmother. Everything is stuffed into the apartment I normally use for meeting up with women. It's too small though and so I plan on staying in a hotel until I can find a new apartment. I'm never setting foot again in the home I shared with Nicolette. It's as cold as our marriage.

"Set showings up for Tuesday. I'll be back on Monday."

Georgia is listening acutely. She's not even pretending not to. She's playing with a grape between her lips and staring directly at my phone screen.

"I've also found several apartment options for Miss Ryan," Tyler says.

"Never mind those. She's going to live with me." I've decided I want Georgia with me all the time. I want access to her body, and to hear the sound of her voice. I want to ensure her safety and her loyalty to me by keeping her in my sight.

“Are you sure?” Tyler sounds outraged and horrified.

“Don’t ask me that. I’m always sure of my decisions.” Georgia glances up at me and I wink at her. “She’s having my baby, Tyler. I can share an apartment with her.”

Georgia chokes on her coffee, hastily setting the mug down on the glass table with a loud clunk. She’s turning red, clutching her chest. I rise to my feet and move in behind her, calmly rubbing her back with the palm of my hand. “You okay?” I murmur into her ear, reaching out with my other hand and hitting the button to end the call with Tyler.

I can’t wait to hear what she’s going to say once she can breathe.

Even with its current color, there is something about her hair that I love. Maybe it’s the fact that she clearly tries to tame it, but underneath the outer layer of controlled hair, curls defiantly appear. I think that maybe she’s the same way. She’s controlled on the outside, but underneath the veneer she’s wild and unrestrained.

“Why the hell do you think I would be okay?” she demands, her voice reedy. “I want to go back to New York. Now.”

I kiss her temple. She pulls away. I rub her back again. She turns away from me.

I almost grin, but I control myself. This is the fun part. I remove my palm from her flesh and sit back down in my chair. “No.”

Her cheeks are still red. “What do you mean, no? Take me home.”

“No.”

Her nostrils flare, and her eyes snap. “I’m not having your baby.”

“Yes, you are.” I lift my coffee to my lips, but frown. It’s cold. I hate not having a housekeeper but I’m not at this house often enough to require one.

She seems to realize she's getting nowhere because she changes tactics. She goes from demands to trying to reason with me. Unfortunately for her, there's no reasoning with me.

"You don't even know me. I could be a horrible person and a terrible mother. I've never even babysat." She sounds desperate to convince me.

I know exactly how to get her maternal instinct to kick in. "You don't have to stick around if you don't want to," I say. "I'm not expecting you to raise the baby."

She sits up straight, her hands trembling with fury as she clutches the arms of her chair. She looks like she's going to rise and attack me. She looks gorgeous. "Fuck that! No. I'm not having a baby and just handing him over to you. *No*, Alex. No, no, and no."

"So you do want to raise our baby?" I ask. "That's perfect. I think you'll be a wonderful mother. Protective and loving. That's exactly what I want."

Georgia stares at me. Then she says, "You can't be serious."

"I am dead serious."

"Why not have a baby with your wife?"

"She refused."

That makes her angry. "She's allowed to refuse but I can't? That's not fair. That's bullshit."

I can't help it. I grin. "A woman is allowed to refuse sex, which she did, therefore no baby."

"Unless you drug her. You could just drug Nicolette like you did me."

Her voice is dripping with sarcasm. She's furious with me. So furious she doesn't realize she shouldn't know Nicolette's name. I haven't spoken it. "How do you know my wife's name? Georgia, were you stalking me online? I'm sure that wedding photo is hanging around somewhere in the bowels of the Internet."

I know she didn't do any research on me. She was genuinely surprised to see my wedding photo. She knows exactly who Nicolette is just from seeing her image and that's added to her jealousy. Sibling relationships are complicated. I fully understand that. But I don't think Nicolette knows she even exists, because she's never mentioned it to me, so that makes this dynamic even more complicated. Georgia is the secret sibling. But she doesn't know that I know who she is. This is a slip up on her part and it will fluster her, which is a great distraction from the fact that I drugged her.

"What?" She turns pale. "No. I mean, yes. I mean, what difference does it make?"

"It doesn't," I say smoothly.

Georgia stands up abruptly. "I need to get out of here. I can't do this. This is insane." She sounds panicked. She wildly looks around the property. "Where's the exit gate?"

"Where are you going?" I ask, unconcerned. "You're barefoot in a bikini. You don't have your phone or your purse. Not that you have any money, anyway."

"I don't care. I'll figure something out."

It's ridiculous and we both know it but she clearly needs to play this out to make her feel like she has some measure of control. Which she doesn't.

While she starts walking fast toward the side of the house, I stand and go into the living room to retrieve a pair of handcuffs I keep in the console drawer. I don't hurry. There's nowhere for her to go.

When I return to the back patio, she is attempting to climb a tree to presumably go over the fence.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I ask.

"I'm getting out of here."

She has a bare foot on a branch, her legs spread as she tries to heave herself up. Her ass is practically in my face and her breasts are bouncing with each effort. It's a great view and I let her struggle for another few seconds just for my own personal

entertainment. Then I reach out and wrap my arms around her middle and haul her off the tree.

She kicks and screams. “Put me down.”

“No. You’re going to hurt yourself.”

Georgia elbows me in the gut. I grunt, but it doesn’t really hurt. Her movements are wild. I set her down.

She whirls on me, breathing hard. “I never agreed to have your baby.”

“But you did agree to have sex with me, drugged or not. That’s why you were talking to me in the first place.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Don’t lie to me. Never lie to me,” I say. I slip the handcuffs around her wrists and click them shut.

“What the hell?” She gapes at the handcuffs.

“You were going to have sex with me, no matter what. Admit it. You didn’t have a choice.” I don’t want bullshit. I don’t want either of us pretending this is anything other than exactly what it is. We’re using each other and she’s going to be fucking honest with me about that.

“Is that what this is about? You want to humiliate me?” She yanks her hands apart, clanking the handcuffs. Her chest is rising up and down rapidly. “Yes, Alex. I was going to have sex with you because I had to. Because I’m drowning in medical bills for my mom and I can’t pay my rent. I’ve been literally eating crumbs in the bottom of bags the last week. I am tapped out with no money and nowhere to live.”

That’s what I want. The truth. Because she’s a terrible submissive and I can live with that if she’s being honest with me at all times. “But now you are jealous of my wife.”

Her chin goes up as she stares at me. “Just because I had to have sex with you doesn’t mean I’m not attracted to you. Because I *am* attracted to you. It also doesn’t mean that I can’t be jealous of other women you’ve loved or might have here tomorrow instead of me.”

That might be the most honest thing she's said to me yet.

"But now you don't have to be jealous of anything, sweetheart." I lift her hands and kiss the tips of her fingers one by one. "Because now you'll be the first woman to give me a child and that makes you the most important woman I ever have or ever will be with." I lean down to caress her lips with my tongue. "Now you are my queen, Georgia. And I'm your king."

Georgia shivers. She turns her head so I can't kiss her.

I use one hand to shake the handcuffs binding her and the other to grip her chin and force her to look at me. "I know how strong you are. I need to be strong, understand?"

Her lips are pressed tightly together but she meets my gaze.

She nods.

"Good. Now you need to eat more since you've been living on crumbs. Come sit down."

Tugging her by the handcuffs between her wrists, I pull her toward me. She comes to me readily. I help her sit back down and when we're both seated, I take a piece of croissant and put it to her lips.

"Eat."

She opens her mouth, obediently, but her eyes are anything but submissive. The dark depths of her blue colored eyes are filled with intelligence and calculating suspicion.

And lust.

She feels the tension between us the same way I do.

My back yard carries the scent of blooming shrubs and trees, but I swear to fucking hell and back I can smell her pussy. Just a faint hint of her tangy sweetness that I've yet to even taste. I don't want to go back to New York. I want to lock her away here forever and spend eternity with my cock deep in her slick heat.

Piece by piece, I feed her, slipping fruit and half of the croissant into her mouth, my fingers damp, her lips damp, her tongue teasing at my flesh. We watch each other, sinking into a rhythm of cooperation, of slippery sexual innuendo and dependence and power.

My cock is aching to follow the path of my fingers and deposit inside her warm wet mouth. But I can't come in her mouth again. I need my cum buried deep in her womb, ensuring my family's future.

My phone rings, interrupting our silence and drawing her attention from me to the table top.

I swear under my breath. It's my brother, Luka, again. I hit the button to ignore the call.

"Where's my phone?" Georgia asks.

"You can have it later."

"Why can't I have it now?"

I give her a look. She stares defiantly back at me.

I'm tempted to laugh when I watch Georgia attempt to stand up to me. I love the way her chin juts out at me and her eyebrows lift. I don't bother to answer her demands.

"Are you finished eating?"

"I..." She stares at her plate. "I guess."

"We'll get your hair done then we'll go see your mother. You'd like that, right? To see your mother? I understand she's been sick."

"We're going to see my mother?" Tears immediately fill her eyes and she quickly takes her napkin to them. "Yes, I would love that."

There's gratitude on her face.

Now that is more fucking like it.

"Come here and give daddy a kiss."

She stands up but something shifts in her expression. She doesn't like what I just said. That's obvious. But she wraps her

arms around the back of my neck and sits down on my lap, perching prettily.

The handcuffs are cool on the back of my neck, her fingertips are light and warm. Her soft, juicy ass feels amazing on the hardness of my thighs and cock.

Georgia gives me a sweet, submissive kiss. It's pleasant, if vanilla.

Right before she bites my bottom lip hard enough to draw blood.

It's completely unexpected, like the strike of a snake. Hiss, unfurl, teeth sinking into tender flesh.

Desire rips through me.

"Don't ever say that to me again," she says. "You're not my daddy."

Then she flicks her tongue over the trickle of my blood and eases her head back, eyes half-closed like the taste turns her on.

In that moment, I think I fucking fall in love with her.

Just like that. All the way in. She's my soulmate, my person, my pleasure and my poison and my adversary.

She's complicated and sexy and challenging and strong and full of secrets.

I'm going to peel back everything that she is and lick every single layer she has, claiming her inside and out.

I yank her forward by the hair, forcing her head to tilt back down so she has to look at me.

"No. I'm your king. And you're my queen."

"Yes." She grinds her pussy down on me, excited, aroused. "I'm your queen."

Georgia

It means more to me than it should.

Now you are my queen.

Because a queen is more powerful than a princess.

My entire life I've been jealous of Nicolette. She had everything. Our father's love. Money. Power. An education and travel and most importantly of all—respect.

I've always been my father's visual reminder of his lack of impulse control.

A bug he couldn't squash but was tempted to, but wouldn't because he's too much of a narcissist to harm or completely abandon a creature cut from his cloth. He looks at me and sees himself, which he both loves and hates. Our relationship was, and technically still is, a twisted and complex knot, hard to figure out, rough and abrasive.

He'll kill me now without hesitation if he's given just the right reason.

Our relationship untied spectacularly on my sixteenth birthday.

I was punished.

And Nicolette wore a tiara to her royal wedding.

Now I'm the queen and she's a mere princess.

Without a husband.

When Alex shifts my bikini bottoms to the side and seats me on his cock, I groan in ecstasy. He grips my hips hard while I ride him frantically, using every ounce of strength I have to pump up and down, wanting to take him, to let him take me away, from the past, from the daunting future, from fucking reality. From fucking reality to *fucking* reality. It's ironic, really.

I know what this means, this slick slide into oblivion.

I'm giving everything to him.

My body.

A baby.

It's not like I've ever had much of a choice. This may be a trap, but I've already been ensnared.

I've been destined for this since I took my first breath.

Or at least until that night.

Chapter Eleven

Georgia

Come here and give daddy a kiss.

I thought I was going to get a car for my sixteenth birthday.

Instead, my father decided to discipline my mother for my greed and insolence by raping and beating her.

“I give you everything!” he’d screamed in her face, dragging her by the hair to the bedroom. “And you raised a fucking ungrateful brat who bears my name? I don’t think so.”

“Stop!” I’d cried out, rushing across the living room. “I’m sorry. I was just kidding.” I hadn’t been. He’d been dangling a car in front of me for at least a year, so when he’d pulled out a box I’d thought it held car keys.

But then I realized, as I pulled out an ugly bracelet, that he’d just been making me want a car just so he could enjoy my disappointment when he didn’t give it to me. That was his game. I didn’t know I wanted something until he planted the seed, then he teased me until I was in a frenzy of anticipation. Then... nothing.

Character building, he said.

Or fucking cruel.

Semantics, right?

But this time, I pushed back. “You said you were giving me a car,” I’d accused.

“Gabriella, hush,” my mother had said.

Because that was my name then. Gabriella.

I knew when he turned to eye me like the bug he called me, I'd fucked up. He wouldn't take it out on me, he would take it on my mother.

Which is why I tried to stop him, but he put his palm right on my face in the doorway to her bedroom and shoved me back so I fell on my ass.

Then he slammed the door and locked it.

I laid on the floor, crying, pounding on the door begging for forgiveness, for him to hit me instead, peering under the crack. I could see his feet in his expensive leather shoes, and see her fall on the tile when he punched her, the crunch of her bones as she landed with a hard thud. The back of her skull cracked on the floor. She moaned, once, her head lolling back.

She wasn't moving.

She was dead. He'd killed her. Blunt force trauma to the back of the skull from that fall. I'd seen crime shows. I'd been raised on crime shows.

He got down on his knees and shoved her dress up. I saw his swollen purple vein-filled dick as he pulled it out with his hand and pumped up and down, pausing briefly to spit into his palm. I almost vomited when he thrust inside her vagina while she lay there dead.

But then I forced myself to get up. To stand on shaking legs and think how I could kill him.

The answer came to me like divine intervention.

It was easy, really.

Just a simple, no-fuss way to kill him. To watch his face turn as purple as his disgusting dick while his throat closed, cutting off his airway and he suffocated while I just stood and watched.

He was allergic to peanuts.

So while he raped my mother's corpse, or so I thought, I went into the kitchen and I made a peanut butter and jelly

sandwich. I cut it and licked the knife, before laying it in the sink.

Then I slid my finger through the side of the sandwich, where the contents oozed out. I got peanut butter under my fingernail, then licked my finger, scraping under the nail, but leaving some remnants. I touched the countertop. I buried two fingers in the peanut butter jar and brought a huge glob to my mouth, smearing it on my lips, my teeth, my tongue.

I swallowed all the mass of thick peanut butter and almost choked on it as I pictured my mother on the floor, silent, unmoving. I patted my lips with a napkin to remove the shine and I turned when my father entered the kitchen.

“Where’s Mom?” I asked, my words a little thick from the creamy peanut butter that was clinging to the insides of my cheeks, my molars.

“Mommy’s fine,” he said, and his voice was more unconcerned than contrite. “She hit her head so I’m calling 911 just to make sure she doesn’t need stitches.” He smiled at me. “You know Mommy and I have a healthy sex life. You’re old enough to know that. This was just an accident when things got a little too playful. We were alone in our bedroom. That’s all you tell the EMTs if they ask you. We were alone in our bedroom and it sounded to you like we were having sex.”

So that was his cover story.

I nodded.

I had my cover story too.

“Come here, Bug, it’s okay.” He opened his arms. “Come over here and give Daddy a birthday kiss. My big girl, so smart, just like me.”

I was smart. And my cover story was this: I was hugging my father while he called 911 because I was afraid my mother was seriously injured. I’d forgotten I had been eating peanut butter because he startled me when he came out and said my mother had fallen. I was upset, panicking. Who wouldn’t believe that?

I stepped into his arms while he pulled his phone out of his pocket. I kissed him on the corner of his mouth, first right, then left, like he preferred. On the left, I came in actual contact with his lip. Then I hugged him, hard, clinging to his neck, burying my head and oily lips against his flesh before pulling back a little and asking, “Are you sure she’s okay?”

I didn’t believe him. I wanted to hear him lie to me again so I could hate him even more.

I was one-hundred-percent certain my mother was dead and now he was going to be as well.

He flicked his tongue over his bottom lip. “Yeah, she’s fine.” He put his phone to his ear, but he was already starting to have trouble breathing. He pushed me off of him, clutching at his throat.

That’s when I burst into tears. Not for him. But for her. Sobbing, blubbing tears of sorrow and anger as I stood and watched him begin to realize he couldn’t breathe. He handed me his phone, gesturing frantically. He patted his pockets desperately for his epipen but he never actually carried it with him. He was too arrogant to think anything could ever bring down the great Lorenzo Donatelli.

It wasn’t much more than a minute, but all that while, I watched him and didn’t call 911, until he knew. Understanding dawned in his eyes.

That he was going to die and I was the one who killed him.

Then out of nowhere, my mother was there, eye black and blue, blood running down her face, shoving me out of the way. “Gabriella, move!” She reached into the kitchen cupboard and pulled out his medication and injected him with a quick, hard jab.

He raped her and almost killed her and she saved his life.

That was the last time he came to our house.

That was the day my brother Roca was conceived.

“Lorenzo,” my mother had pleaded. “Don’t be upset, it was an accident.”

*“It wasn’t an accident. This kid is just like me, Maribel.”
There was actually respect in his voice.*

But he took me on a plane that night to New York and kept me locked in a windowless room for three days before he dropped me off at boarding school.

Which was actually a prison for wealthy, misbehaving teens.

And there, I met Aristotle Virtue, Armani’s son, and Quinn’s first husband.

A friendship forged in hell.

Alex

Georgia’s tits are rhythmically moving up and down with her and I want to see them naked. I reach behind her and untie the string on her back. The material eases forward, exposing the lower half of her breasts, all that smooth flesh enticing me. Shoving the cups up to fully expose her, I bend down and draw her nipple into my mouth. She rewards me by crying out, coming all over my cock.

Oh, fuck yeah. She’s so damn sexy. So sexual.

I bite her nipple, firm enough to draw out a gasp of pain from her, but not hard enough to hurt her. Fingernails dig into the back of my neck as she gives back as good as she gets.

“That hurt,” she says, voice accusing.

“You love it,” I tell her, because it’s obvious she does.

I lift my head in time to see the corner of her mouth turn up in a sly smirk of agreement. It’s the real her. Not the average recent college grad with a middle class background. This is the real Georgia, who likes to flirt with danger.

This is the woman I want. This is the woman I can love.

With her still seated on my cock, I surge upward, standing. I want to be deeper, more in the power position. With one arm around her waist and ass, I use the other to sweep a spot on the

table clear of the breakfast dishes. They rattle and collide, some falling onto the patio tiles.

Georgia gasps and clings to me. Her cheeks are flushed. “What are you doing?” she asks.

“Putting a baby in you.” Pulling out of her, I set her down on the edge of the table, then ease her arms off of my neck, the cuffs up over my head.

“You’re going to put a baby in me?” she asks, sounding exciting. “Is that what you’re doing? You’re going to come inside me again and again?”

“Yes.” I shove her back down on the table and raise her handcuffed arms above her head. “You’re going to be *dripping* cum after this weekend with me.”

Her pussy is a hot tight fist gripping me when I thrust inside her. I groan from the wet squeeze on my cock.

“Yes,” she breathes, legs slack, knees fully apart, pussy entirely open to me. “Drown me in your cum.”

With her arms above her head, her breasts are enticing high peaks. I roll her nipple between my thumb and forefinger as I take her with hard, punishing thrusts. My thighs are slamming into the rim of the table and I step on a shard of broken glass, but the sting feels like a welcome grounding in the midst of losing my mind entirely to all that is Georgia.

I’m consumed, I’m enraptured, I’m captured.

I may be dominating her, but she owns me.

Chapter Twelve

Georgia

I'm sitting on Alex's lap, cuddling him, dropping kisses on his chin and jawline, seeing if I can irritate him. I feel shockingly content, my pussy still vibrating with orgasm aftershocks, a thick warm wetness between my thighs. My skin is warm everywhere and my stomach is full from him feeding me breakfast.

His arm is around me, his palm resting on my ass, as he makes a series of what sound like business calls. He's put on sunglasses but I can see through the lenses when he gives me a look of reprimand. But he makes no move to set me aside.

I giggle. I can't help it. I'm not really a giggler, but I'm sexually satisfied and I'm in the Florida sun, and all my financial worries have disappeared. Just like that.

Having children was never something I thought much about past my sixteenth birthday. After that, it became about survival. I couldn't think beyond the next step. The next month's rent. Even when I realized Quinn is pregnant, it didn't translate to me thinking about babies for me.

All I've been focused on is existing.

But now, I can do whatever I want.

I've never been able to spend much time with my little brother and that's always hurt my heart. Now I can help my mother, see Roca more often, create a relationship with him.

I can have a baby to love. I can go to law school. Pay off all my debts.

Give my father the metaphorical middle finger.

I survived, fucker. I crawled my way back.

I flick my tongue over Alex's earlobe. My hands are still handcuffed and I refuse to ask to be freed. That's what he wants. Me to ask permission to be freed.

Between calls, he turns and kisses me, hard. "Behave yourself."

"No."

He tied my bikini top again so my breasts are covered, but I still rub them against his muscular chest. He gives a low growl in the back of his throat, but his phone rings again. The screen reads "Luka" as the caller.

"What's up?" he says after he swipes the screen and puts it to his ear.

I can hear a man's voice, but I can't hear what he's saying. All I can hear is Alex's one-sided conversation.

"Miami."

"Yes, she's with me. You're going to need to congratulate me soon." He gives me a smug smile.

"What? Shit. Okay. I'll take care of it. Give me five minutes to get Tatiana's ass over here to stay with Georgia. I need to staff this house better. I plan to spend more time here." He sounds irritated now.

Alex's tone gets even more sharp. "I know. I fucking know, brother. I can handle it. Damn."

He ends the call. "I gotta go, Q."

"Q?"

"Queen." He tosses his phone on the table and cups my cheeks with both hands. He dusts kisses over my nose and lips so that I shiver.

Queen. I sigh with pleasure. "You can't stay?"

"There's some business I need to take care of. I'll be back soon. I promise. You and Tatiana can go to the salon while I'm

gone.”

He’s definitely determined to see my red hair dye job disappear. “Can I get a facial too?”

The choice of words is completely accidental. I’m just trying to see how far I can push him. The look he gives me is so hungry and turned on that I laugh.

“No. We’re trying to get you pregnant. Maybe in two weeks.”

“I meant an actual facial, Alex. At the salon.”

He makes a face and lifts my arms up and off of his neck. He pats my ass. “Up.”

I stand, obediently.

He shakes his head. “Now I’m going to spend the afternoon picturing coming all over your face. *Fuck*, Georgia. Why did you have to say that?”

He walks back and forth a couple of feet, like he’s wrestling with himself over whether to touch me or not.

“I’m sorry.” Running the back of my hand across my breasts, I say, “I didn’t mean to turn you on.”

He narrows his eyes as he bends over and picks a piece of glass out of his bleeding foot. “Don’t pretend to be innocent. I’m not buying it.”

“Was that your brother?”

He nods, his phone already back up to his ear. “Tat. Yeah. Get over here.”

A minute later, Tatiana appears via a side gate that must connect her yard to Alex’s.

“You do know sound carries over fences, right?” she asks, as she eyes the mess we’ve made of the breakfast dishes. “I need therapy now.”

“You’ve always needed therapy,” Alex says mildly, before retreating into the house.

“I can’t argue with that,” Tatiana tells me. She sits down on the opposite side of the table and relaxes back. She picks through the remaining dishes, pulling a melon off of a plate. It looks like it is sitting in a puddle of coffee but she puts it to her mouth and sucks on it. “You guys are gross, by the way.”

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

She rolls her eyes. “I would totally move if you’re going to be here all the time, but I can’t because this is sort of a family compound. My father owns the house across the street and Luka the one right there.” She points in the opposite direction she came from. “Maxim is morally opposed to home ownership. I think he lives in the gutter.”

“Where does Alex’s wife live?” I ask, because if she has her own house on this street I’m going to peek in her windows. I can’t help it. I’m curious to see how she’s been living. All while I’ve been struggling to survive.

“Don’t ask questions about his wife. It makes you look pathetic.”

That annoys me.

Before I can reply, Alex reappears. He’s wearing black pants and a black dress shirt, but he’s rolling up the sleeves, his tattoos on display. He looks gorgeous and powerful. There’s a gun in his waistband.

“Call a housekeeper,” he tells Tatiana. “To clean this house up. And take Georgia to a salon to get her hair fixed.”

“I’m not your servant,” she protests. “Call your own housekeeper, you prick. You’re the one getting freaky on the breakfast spread.”

He makes a face. “Please?” He gives her a smile that looks devious and charming and completely lacking in sincerity.

“I hate you.” But she pulls her phone out of her yoga pants.

“That’s fine,” he says.

She laughs. “Okay, asshole, but you owe me. So, what, cut and color at the salon? Anything else? Bikini wax?” She

smirks.

That makes me sit up straighter. “I’m sitting right here, you know.”

Alex tells his sister, “No wax. I want everything about her to be natural.”

“Freaks,” she murmurs.

I refuse to blush.

“Georgia, you should go through those clothes and decide what you want to keep here and what you want to take back to New York with us.”

Tatiana cups her hand next to her mouth and speaks in a stage whisper. “Leave them all here. Then he’ll just have to buy you more in New York.”

That makes me smile. It’s been a long time since I’ve had an opportunity to be greedy or to accept gifts without feeling guilty. I just might take Tatiana’s advice.

Alex bends down and kisses me, briefly lingering. I’m just starting to lean into him, demanding, wanting more, when he pulls back. “I’ll see you later. Be a good girl for my sister.”

“I’m not a dog,” I tell him, sharply.

He runs his fingers into my hair, caressing the strands. “You know exactly who and what you are. And you’re all mine.”

It pleases me at the same time I wonder if there’s more behind his words than I think. What exactly does he know about me?

My father did an effective job of erasing all ties between me and him, between my mother and him as well. But this can’t all be a coincidence that I’m here. That Alex wants me. Can it?

Then he’s gone and Tatiana is texting while giving me a running commentary on how this wasn’t in her plans for the day and how she hates being the youngest sibling and the only woman.

I shove the chair back. “I have to go to the bathroom.”

She stands up and follows me.

“What are you doing?” I ask, walking faster.

“I can’t let you out of my sight.”

“I’m wearing handcuffs.” I hold them up. “What am I going to do?”

“Nothing, because I’m coming with you.”

Sighing, I go into the powder room I spotted between the living room and the foyer. She puts her foot in the doorway to prevent it from closing. I struggle to pull my pants down.

“Can’t you take these handcuffs off?” I ask Tatiana, exasperated. “I can’t get my bottoms down like this.”

Tatiana shakes her head. “No way, Jose. I don’t even have the key.”

Then she startles me by just reaching out and yanking my bottoms down. “There.”

God, she’s weird.

I use the toilet and then spend five minutes trying to work the bottoms back up my hips. The fabric has rolled on over itself and it’s like a thick nylon tube around my thighs. “Tatiana,” I say, gritting through my teeth. “I need your help.”

Right now I want to throttle Alex for leaving me here like this, with her.

She leans in the door. I’m expecting some random comment or her manic smile, but instead she’s completely serious, her eyes wide. She lifts her finger to her lips to shush me.

“Wha—

I clamp my lips shut, my heart starting to race. Something is wrong. She has her gun out and up, not pointed at me, but at something in the hallway and she’s listening intently. She leans forward and slowly opens the vanity cabinet. She gestures for me to get inside it.

There's no time to argue or question if I'll fit or point out that my pants are still strangling my thighs because I hear it too.

Footsteps. *Step, step, pause. Step, step, pause.*

Trying to be as quiet as possible, I go low and grip the edge of the vanity. I stuff myself under the sink plumbing and try to scoot myself over. Tatiana uses her foot to push me hard. Then she bends over. Her head is inches from mine as she mouths, "Don't move."

Her head disappears and the soft-close door glides shut, plunging me into darkness. I'm folded up, breasts pushing up against my chin, hands awkwardly sticking straight up. My hip is pressing against something hard and I can hear my panicked breathing. It feels like I'm going to suffocate.

But then I hear a man's voice.

"Where is your husband?" He has a Russian accent.

"Could you be more specific?" Tatiana asks, her voice cheerful. If she feels fear, she isn't conveying it.

"Shut up, you bitch."

Skin smacks on skin and I hear a slight cry before Tatiana recovers. He clearly just hit her. "Which is it?" she asks. "Tell you where my husband is, or shut up? I'm so confused."

She sounds like a badass taunting him.

He hits her again. The hard crack makes me jump in my hiding spot. I stuff my fist into my mouth to prevent myself from making any noise.

Tatiana makes a coughing, spitting sound.

Then suddenly there's a loud thump and all hell breaks loose.

There's scrambling, and Tatiana yelling, glass breaking, furniture crashing as I cower, afraid. I'm terrified at any second the door to the cabinet will yank open and expose me to the intruders

“Get the hell off of me!” Tatiana says. “Don’t touch me with your disgusting hands.”

“Do you want to die?” the man demands.

“Try it,” she says. “Let’s see how long you live, you ugly asshole. Such a shame that you’ll die a virgin.”

Her voice is taunting, cruel.

He gives an angry roar.

Then I hear the sound of an object connecting with a skull. Tatiana’s voice cuts off in the middle of a mocking laugh. It’s a sick thwack that brings back the memory of my mother hitting that tile. Just the exact same sound... I feel like I’m sixteen all over again, spots dancing in front of my eyes, everything closing in on me. My stomach turns and I bite down on my knuckles so I don’t scream out.

I force myself to breathe through my nose, in and out slowly, and fend off the panic. I don’t want to die like this. Not in a bathroom cabinet with my pants half-off, nearly choking on my own tits, before I’ve even had a chance to see my mother.

A phone would be really fucking helpful right now but I don’t even know where my phone is. Alex refused to give it to me earlier.

I need to stay calm. Think.

What would my mother do in this situation?

She was a mafia man’s mistress. It’s not out of the question that she encountered a dangerous situation or two, though never in front of me, and it was never something she ever mentioned. She either didn’t want to scare me or she was irrelevant to the organization.

Maybe no one thought she actually meant anything to Donatelli.

Maybe no one knew she existed.

Maybe no one knows I exist.

Alex and I just met the night before. If someone is after him, for any reason, they most likely don't know I exist.

That's a huge plus for me. Maybe they won't be looking for anyone else.

There's no sound from Tatiana but I can hear two male voices. One is murmuring, the other is breathing hard, like he expended a lot of effort.

My best course of action is to remain hidden, in silence.

"You're a fucking idiot," the one voice says, seething. "You're not supposed to kill the bitch."

I bite my knuckles harder, until the pressure of my teeth reaches bones so I don't give into crying. I just met Tatiana and yet I can't stomach the thought that she's dead out there.

"Did you hear what she said to me?"

"Just pick her up! Hurry the fuck up."

There's a muffled moan.

"She's not dead," the first voice says, sounding relieved.

My grip eases up, breath exhaling in a hot rush of relief, over my breasts. Tatiana is alive.

There's rustling and swearing and then an exterior door closes.

The house is still and silent.

Afraid to move, I stay crumpled up and wait.

Chapter Thirteen

Alex

“Give me the rundown,” I ask Dmitri, my guy in charge of South Florida security, as I walk into the warehouse tucked into an industrial complex by the airport, twenty minutes from my house.

I’m annoyed that I’ve had to leave Georgia, but business is business.

“The cameras caught this guy creeping around the inventory.”

The inventory in this particular case is drugs and weapons. “He’s not DEA?” The warehouse is filled with furniture on pallets and wrapped in plastic, like a home staging distribution center. I weave through the rows.

“Definitely not. So far he’s not saying who he’s working for though.”

Enforcement is my brother Maxim’s personal specialty, but he’s gone dark since our father’s announcement the month before that one of us needs to reproduce immediately and I don’t have time to track his moody ass down.

I enjoy keeping my knife skills sharp anyway. This is a good opportunity to get in some practice. I have a balanced throwing knife, which is for fun and because it looks fucking cool when I hit a target, and a kill knife. It’s a downsized bowie intended for cutting easily through bone and tendon. Not my favorite tool by far, but it creates way less mess than a

bullet to the brain. I really fucking hate when I get sprayed with someone's blood and gray matter.

The man they caught trying to break in the back entrance to the warehouse is in the middle of an empty section of the gigantic space, tied to a chair, a black hood over his head. I crack my knuckles as I approach and loosen my shoulders. The floor is ancient concrete and there are crumbling nuggets of the surface rolling beneath my feet as I walk. I debated the practicality of work boots versus dress shoes, but I'm the boss.

I can buy new shoes if they get blood on them.

I can't buy respect.

I take gloves from Dmitri when he hands them to me, and snap them on. Getting my hands dirty is metaphorical. I don't like blood under my nails and I don't want my DNA or fingerprints on this asshole.

"What's he said so far?" I ask Dmitri.

"Nothing. Says he's homeless and was looking for a place to sleep. But he had three burner phones in his pocket. We're checking out the numbers he called."

That makes me shake my head in disbelief. "Bad liar. Good for us."

Walking right up to him, I see how his back straightens, and his thighs tense.

"Good afternoon," I say, because I'm always well-mannered before I beat the hell out of someone. It disarms them even more. Besides, I'm civilized, damn it.

It's not so much that I enjoy violence as I like what's mine to *stay* mine.

Though if I'm being honest, I don't dislike it either. How much depends on the day and my mood. Today I'm impatient and just want to get it over with so I can go home. I'm also not interested in bruising my hands or causing swelling when I fully intend the rest of the weekend to be me in bed with Georgia touching every inch of her, so I pull my gun out and bring the butt under the man's chin.

“Anything you’d like to discuss me with before I knock your teeth out?”

He remains silent.

I bring the gun up hard. It’s the kind of blow that makes you bite your tongue involuntarily, adding to the pain. He yells and starts rocking back and forth. I can hear saliva and snot being breathed out behind the hood.

“Should we try this again?” I ask, politely.

He stills, but doesn’t speak.

I smash the gun into first his right temple, then the left so the pain will vibrate in perfect trinity all around his face.

“One more time for the liar in the back,” I say. “Who. Sent. You.”

“I don’t even know what you’re talking about. I’m just a regular guy, man, I never did nothing to nobody.”

I’m definitely not in the mood for this today. I rip the hood off of his head. Let him see my face. Whoever he works for knows who I am anyway. His chin is covered in blood and his eyes are bruising but he looks like he has no intention of talking. Returning my gun to my waistband, I pull my throwing knife out and step back. I lift my arm.

He doesn’t think I’m going to throw it. It’s obvious. He doesn’t even try to shift the chair or untie his restraints or brace himself.

Which is exactly what he does the second I aim and hurl the knife. It’s a great throw. He tries to move, panicking, but he doesn’t even get the chance to shift half an inch before it’s embedded in his shoulder. He cries out.

I move forward, glancing back to make sure my men are still covering me. Then I take my time retrieving my knife, wriggling it back and forth to loosen it from the bone. I imagine it making a sucking sound from his blood even though he’s really yelling now and I can’t hear a damn thing.

“Shut the fuck up or talk,” I say, politeness gone. I rip the knife out with a hard yank and wipe the blade on the man’s

shirt. I bring the tip to his neck and press, drawing a bead of blood.

“Okay, okay!” The man practically screams, his dark eyes glistening with pain and fear. “I’ll tell you.”

The tip of my knife is pressing into the pulse of his carotid artery. One plunge and he’s dead. I ease up, ever so slightly. “Tell me what?”

“Who sent me.”

I pull back. “I’m listening.”

He spits blood onto the ground and takes a shuddering breath. “Can I have some water?”

I put my hands on his shoulders and knee him in the gut instead. “Tell me.”

“It was Donatelli.”

That gives me pause, my arms gripping his shoulders to smash his chest down into my knee a second time. “Lorenzo Donatelli?”

That’s curious. Donatelli has always been our partner, with mutual interests. We have an established connection between our families for two generations and everyone has been loyal.

Unless this little worm is lying. Which he could be.

Or Lorenzo is angry with me for serving his daughter with divorce papers. But I don’t see the connection.

“You want some water?” I ask the guy, who seems to be choking on his own blood.

He nods, coughing. I step back, not wanting to be sprayed with blood tinted spittle. Fucking disgusting. My nose wrinkles. I’m really not in the mood for this.

“I’ll give you some fucking water.”

There’s a pressure washer against the wall and I gesture to Dmitri to turn it on. I take the hose when he hands the nozzle to me. The guy starts to shake his head. But I turn it on and aim it at his mouth. Thirty-five hundred PSI. It will rip the

flesh of his gums off completely. His scream is drowned out by the water and he actually topples over, chair and all, unconscious. Possibly dead. I'm not sure.

My phone goes off in my pocket. "Grab my phone," I tell Dmitri, just in case it's my sister saying Georgia has mounted an escape attempt.

He fishes in my pocket and pulls it out, putting the screen in front of my face. It's the security system for my house. "What's going on?" I demand of Dmitri, who's swiping at my phone screen since I can't with the gloves on.

"There's a break in."

"What?" I rip the Latex gloves off, tearing one of them in the process. "Pull up the video."

He does and there are two men going into my house.

"*Fuck*. Come with me. Leave your guys here to guard this idiot if he's still alive. My sister and Georgia are in the fucking house."

We're already heading to the exit, Dmitri barking orders at my men. I have my phone now that the gloves are off and I scroll through the video. I toss my keys to Dmitri while I call Tatiana. She doesn't answer. I search the interior cameras. I can't even call Georgia because her phone is in my car. That's just fucking great.

"How the hell did someone get past security?" I ask Dmitri, swearing. We're twenty minutes out from the house.

I flip through the cameras, room by room. Tatiana is in the living room, tied to a chair, being questioned in an ironic mirror of what I just did to the guy back in the warehouse. My sister can handle herself, but I do wince when the guy punches her in the face. Calling my father, I tell him the situation and have him immediately send his men over from his house across the street. No one is at Luka's house. I'm not even sure he has furniture in that place; he's so rarely there.

At around the seven minute mark, I see the men exit with Tatiana over the one guy's shoulder. She looks unconscious because she's not moving. I refuse to even contemplate that

she's dead. There's still no sign of Georgia. I've gone room by room and looked at the cameras in the backyard. I don't see her anywhere and there is a sick pit in my stomach.

My father's men don't arrive. They must have seen Tatiana being kidnapped and are in pursuit. Which is reassuring to me. My sister will be retrieved immediately.

But Georgia... where the fuck is she?

I'm stunned at how much it matters to me that Georgia be okay.

If anyone has hurt one hair on her head, I'll burn the fucking world down.

I go back on the camera footage to see if I missed someone taking Georgia out another exit, but there's nothing.

Once we're at the house, I sprint inside, ignoring the mess of overturned furniture in the living room. "Georgia! Georgia, where are you, baby? Answer me!"

I stop and survey the room, trying to think where she might hide. The bedroom closet? I'm starting toward her room when I hear her say in a muffled voice, "I'm in here."

Hearing her voice almost has me doubling over but I won't let Dmitri see my relief. I refuse to look like a pussy in front of him. "Where is here, exactly?"

"The powder room."

When I shove open the door I don't see her. Then I spot the vanity door wobbling a little, like someone is pushing it from the inside. I yank it open and there she is, stuffed in the small space, a plumbing pipe poking her in the stomach, her tits crammed under her chin. She's still wearing the handcuffs. I forgot about the handcuffs.

But she looks unharmed. My vision momentarily goes black and then clears again. Holy fuck, I had thought she'd been kidnapped or killed.

Georgia gives a sob of relief and pitches herself forward. I catch her and haul her out from under the sink. Lifting her up, I press kiss after kiss into her hair, cradling her close to me. “You’re okay. I’m here.”

As I hold her and reassure her, I realize her ass is bare. Glancing at her in the mirror, I see her bottoms are rolled down almost to her knees. My blood runs cold.

I can only think of one explanation for what I’m seeing and it makes me furious beyond all reason. Squeezing her tighter against me, I work to contain my emotions, breathing deeply in and out of my nose. When I get angry, really intensely angry, my vision goes momentarily black and it does that now. The curve of her hip is on full display in the mirror, with a peek of her intimate folds. The thought that anyone had touched her there, that anyone other than me, has taken possession of her pussy, makes me rage.

“Did those motherfuckers put their hands on you?” I ask, trying to sound calm as I carry her out of the powder room, gesturing at Dmitri to look away from her nudity. I’m already planning the torture and death of whoever did this to her. I’m going to cut his fingers off one by one. Each finger that had the fucking nerve to touch her. Then I’ll hack his dick off and watch him scream and writhe and bleed before I stuff it into his mouth and enjoy the view of him asphyxiating on his own cock. “Did they *rape* you?”

“No.”

Relief is real and raw, cooling my anger like a bucket of ice water over my head. But I’m skeptical.

“Then why are your pants rolled down like this?” I try to tug them back up but the angle is impossible. I head for the couch so I can pull them up. It feels important to cover her, to keep her private just for me.

Dmitri is studiously standing with his back to us, clearing the main rooms of the house, but I still want her pussy tucked behind the nylon of her bikini bottoms. It’s mine, and only mine.

At my question, she peels herself off of my chest and somehow manages to hit me with both her hands. “No, you stupid asshole! I was using the toilet and I couldn’t get my pants back up because I’m handcuffed.”

I kiss the top of her head for about the tenth time. I’m so fucking happy I don’t even take exception to her slur. I wouldn’t exactly say I’m a stupid asshole, but I’m not really thrilled with myself right now either. Two guys entered my house, my fucking personal space, and touched what’s mine. They’ve stolen my sister and that is on me.

“So you hid?” I ask, ignoring that she looks furious. I set her down on the couch and unroll the bikini bottoms so I can move them back into place. “Lift your ass,” I tell her.

“How am I supposed to do that?” she snaps. “I’m still handcuffed!”

My vision briefly blackens again. She’s right. I’m a stupid asshole. My anger returns, directed at myself. The keys to the handcuffs are in the drawer so I leave her on the couch to retrieve them, her chest heaving up and down as she swallows hard.

“Your sister was taken,” she says, her voice catching. “They’re not going to hurt her, are they?”

“No. They took her for leverage. We’re on it. We’ll get her back in the next couple of hours.” I won’t even let myself entertain any other option. “Tatiana is tough.” I yank open the drawer, rooting around for the key. “Tell me what you saw and heard.”

“I didn’t see anything. Tatiana went out there to confront them. They asked her where her husband was.”

I frown, grabbing the key and walking back to her. “Her husband? Interesting.” That means they were talking about me. They thought she was my wife. Was it me they wanted, or actually Nicolette? Paired with the guy at the warehouse saying he was hired by Donatelli, I don’t know what the fuck is going on.

That makes me angry all over again.

I undo the cuffs and absently rub the red skin on Georgia's wrists. I tug her bottoms back up and squeeze the side of her hip and thigh, wanting to feel her.

My phone rings and I see it's Luka. I put it to my ear. "Yeah? Any word?"

"Dad's bodyguards followed them to an empty office building in South Miami. They're securing the facility now. Should have Tat in just a few minutes."

"Let's hope a stray bullet doesn't catch our sister in the process."

Tatiana is actually our stepsister but when her mother married our father and brought her little girl along with her, it was like our family was finally complete. They brought the final two pieces to our puzzle, adding love and laughter to a group of four guys with raging testosterone. She came around when I was about twenty and her little towheaded toddler self made me fall in love and think someday I'd like to be a father. She is truly my sister.

Nothing can happen to Tatiana. I fucking refuse.

I tell Luka what Georgia told me.

"If Donatelli is out for you in retaliation for the divorce, why would they take who they think is Nicolette? It doesn't make sense, bro. Something is off."

"I know and I don't like it. I'll be back in New York tomorrow then and we can have a meeting with Dad. Do you know where Maxim is?"

"No. Let's just hope he's not off spreading his seed." Luka sounds amused at the prospect.

"I seriously doubt it. Maxim doesn't care about his position within the company. It's just you and me."

Georgia is sitting on the couch with her arms crossed over her chest. Dmitri is outside, investigating the yard. Speaking of spreading seed... I can't wait to be inside Georgia again, even if she looks like she wants to strangle me with her bare hands.

“Yep. I’ll let you know as soon as they have Tat.”

“Talk to you later.”

I end the call and look at the mess in my living room. “Go change and we’ll go see your mother.”

Her eyebrows lift. “That’s it? Your sister was punched in the face and abducted and we’re just going to go on an afternoon visit?”

“What do you want to do? Sit around and cry about it? It’s under control.” I reach down and untie my shoes. I scuffed them somehow when I was questioning the intruder. I throw them at the wall, exasperated.

“Where were you, by the way?” she asks, still sitting there, fuming.

“Taking care of business.”

“What does that mean?”

She’s acting like she’s the only one who’s got an issue with what is happening. I have concerns. I have to stop and think and figure out what is at play here, but overreacting never solves a damn thing.

“Just stop,” I say, growing frustrated. “You know what you need to know.” I’m about two seconds away from an explosion and I refuse to do that. I will never take my anger out on Georgia, ever.

“I don’t know anything.”

“That’s exactly what you need to know. Nothing.” I move between her legs and bend down, gently touching each of her knees. I kiss her, closing my eyes briefly to take in her scent while my mouth melds with hers. The moment I breathe her in, I feel calmer. This woman. This fucking woman.

She’s everything.

I pull back, just enough to hover with my lips so close to her our breath still mingles. “It’s safer the less you know. Trust me, baby.”

Easing my hand into her hair, I rest my forehead on hers.

Nothing can happen to her. She's too important to me already.

She turns away from me, like I'm crowding her.

Which I am. I'm going to crowd her over and over until she's carrying my baby and she can't imagine her life without me in it.

I'm going to crowd her until she exists just for me.

"We'll go to a hotel tonight," I tell her, standing back up. "I want to fuck you while I look at the ocean."

Chapter Fourteen

Georgia

I stare up at Alex, amazed by his nonchalance.

He either doesn't care about his sister or he's been trained to show no fear. Maybe it's both. But I can't help my emotions. I'm still upset and scared. I don't like the loss of control that being with him forces me into.

I've spent the last eight years handling my own shit. Fighting for survival. Making my own choices, good or bad. Not being able to at least fight for myself was a terrifying experience.

"You can fuck yourself," I tell him, knowing the words are dangerous. I need Alex. Now more than ever. But I'm furious and he just wants to kiss my forehead and take me to a hotel? I don't like being dismissed.

His eyes narrow. "What did you say?" His voice is like steel.

"You left me handcuffed with no phone and no way to protect myself. I was completely helpless. I could have died because of that. I'm so upset with you right now."

He doesn't want to hear this. Clearly. Because he knows I'm right. He kicks one of the pieces of the vase that was knocked on the floor, sending it hurtling into the couch. His hands are in fists, and the tendons in his neck are pulsating.

"Put some fucking clothes on," he says and leaves the room.

The man who arrived with Alex comes into the living room. He eyes me cautiously.

I see an opportunity. “Was Alex with another woman?” I ask, because the idea makes me insane with jealousy. Maybe that was his idea of taking care of business. Maybe he’s stacking the odds of having a child by having sex with multiple women.

It seems irrational and implausible. I know that. But I can’t help myself. If I was stuffed under a sink while he was plowing some random woman, I am going to melt down.

The guy looks at me like I’m crazy. “What? No. He was interrogating an intruder at one of our warehouses.”

“Oh.” Now I feel stupid. “Did those guys who came here think Tatiana was Nicolette?”

But he instantly clams up. “You need to talk to Alex, not me.”

“Who are you, by the way?”

“Dmitri. I’m Alex’s boxing coach.”

He’s probably mid-thirties, broad but not super tall. He’s had his nose broken, more than once I would guess.

“Boxing coach?” It would explain how Alex’s body is finely honed and chiseled, right down to his washboard abs. But obviously, Dmitri is more than that. He’s easily handling a gun right now.

Yet, when I stand up, Dmitri takes a step back, like he’s afraid I’ll get too close to him. “Give me your phone,” I demand, holding out my hand.

He looks appalled. “Why?”

“I want to call my mother.”

He doesn’t say anything. He’s clearly assessing how this could be a trick on my part. Finally, he relents. “Tell me the number.”

I give him the number and he dials it. He keeps his phone in his hand and puts it on speaker.

My mother's neighbor answers and then puts my mother on. "Maribel, it's Georgia!" she says excitedly.

There's rustling, then my mother's voice comes on, breathless but happy. "Baby?"

"Hi, Mommy," I say, throat tight. She sounds so weak. "I have good news. I'm in Miami right now and I'm coming to see you in a few hours."

"What? You're in town?" She starts to cry.

Tears flood my own eyes. My relationship with my mother is complicated, but she has always loved me and tried to do her best. Every decision she has made was with my best interest in mind as she saw it.

"Yes, I'll see you soon."

"That's amazing, baby. How? Did your father fly you down?"

That makes me crinkle my nose and glance warily at Dmitri, who can't help but hear everything since he's holding the phone. My mother has a fantasy that my father and I will mend fences, conveniently forgetting how he abused her repeatedly and how I tried to kill him.

"No," I say quickly. "You know I don't speak to him. No, I met a man and he has a house here. We're down for the weekend."

"Oh, that's wonderful, just fantastic."

Her sentiment is genuine. I knew she would approve of this. My mother thinks having a man solves every problem.

But then she says, "Is he in the bad company?"

It's code, sort of. When I was a child, she would refer to my father's work as "the bad company." That I had to know that the bad company was full of bad men who might want to hurt me and that was why I always had to listen to daddy.

My mother knows about my friendship with Quinn, about her marriage to Armani Virtue.

My heart starts to race, mindful of Dmitri listening. “We’ll speak when I get there. Love you, bye!” I end the call immediately by reaching out and pressing the red button on Dmitri’s phone myself.

He eyes me. But all he says is, “You’d better get dressed so you’re ready when Alex is ready.”

I nod. He’s right.

I head to my bedroom to pick out an outfit. Not one for my mother’s benefit, but one I think Alex would like me to wear while he fucks me with a view of the ocean.

In spite of my earlier words of anger, I know damn well I’ll be greedily on all fours for him, ass up, legs spread as he drills into me.

I am my mother’s daughter after all.

Chapter Fifteen

Georgia

Alex has been sitting silently beside me in the slick chauffeured car on our way north, mostly looking at his phone and texting. I'm grateful he isn't interested in conversation. I'm too on edge. I keep replaying in my head the sound of Tatiana's head cracking on the floor, an echo of that earlier memory of my mother dropping like a stone on tile.

There is no reason to assume Tatiana is still alive. She might have been merely unconscious at the time the men removed her from the house, but that doesn't mean she survived that injury. Or whatever else they might have done to her later. Or right now, as we casually ride in the car. It's frustrating that Alex is being so dismissive she isn't in mortal danger. I don't really know Tatiana and what I've seen of her has left me scratching my head, but her abduction has really affected me.

It reminds me that the bad company is for real. They play for keeps.

And I've allowed myself to be in such a position that I needed to be at that party at Quinn's, served up like dessert for men to crave and consume. I let my guard down. I got drugged and now I might already be pregnant and with this comes a lifetime of danger for me and my baby.

At least my mother was in love with my father and he seemed to be in love with her. Eighteen years they were together. If she was just a fun diversion or even the world's greatest sex partner, I still don't think he would have stuck

around that long. There was commitment there, dysfunctional or not, until I ruined everything.

I glance at Alex's profile. He has a strong nose and jaw. But his most compelling feature is his piercing pale eyes. They're focused on his phone right now, not me.

Could he ever love me?

Could I love him?

I struggle to trust people and I struggle with envy, jealousy. I push people away and rely on shallow relationships. Quinn is my only true, deep friendship and even that is a lie because she doesn't know who I am or what I've been through. I've kept my past a secret from her.

My security seems uncertain in all of this. Not just physical, but my place in Alex's life, and my emotional needs. I don't know how to rely on someone else.

Yet I have to.

Alex senses me continually glancing his way. He turns and meets my gaze. "You'll be happy with me," he says.

It sounds like a command more than a reassurance.

"What happens if I don't get pregnant?" I've never tried. Maybe it's not possible. Or maybe he has a time limit on how long he's willing to wait before he moves on to the next woman.

He doesn't even blink. "You will."

That means if I don't, he's done. I can read the subtext. I glance away again, angry with myself as we speed down the highway. Billboards and scrubby foliage line either side. What the hell do I want? Him to profess his undying love to me? He's not going to do that. He barely knows me and men like Alex don't walk around laying out their emotions for people to pick over. Look at his response to his sister being kidnapped.

His hand is unexpectedly on my chin, his firm grip forcing me to return my gaze to him.

"Georgia."

“Yes?” I murmur. I feel open and aching and vulnerable.

“Tell me what’s going on in your head.”

“I don’t know if I can do this,” I say, letting the sentiment escape before I can assess whether it’s a good idea to let him know that or not. “Be what you need me to be.”

His hand shifts onto my cheek, his thumb caressing. It’s a gentle but possessive touch and I turn into it, kissing his hand with trembling lips. He’s watching me, those icy cool eyes studying my mouth.

“God, you’re so beautiful,” he says.

He tightens the grip on me, squeezing my jaw with a commanding and powerful hold. He draws my face to his.

We’re eye to eye, mouths mere inches apart. He shakes my head a little. “What is it you think I need you to be?”

“Obedient. A perfect little submissive breeding girlfriend,” I whisper.

“If I wanted that, you wouldn’t be here.” Alex flicks his tongue across my lip like a snake before pulling back, his eyes never leaving mine. “I want a *fighter*. A partner who fights with everything in her for her own survival, for her own successes. Who fights to protect and care for those she loves. Who won’t hesitate to plunge the knife into the back of anyone who would hurt them. That’s you, my beautiful queen. You’re a *warrior*.”

It may be the most flattering description of me I’ve ever heard.

Maybe he understands me more than I realize.

“I’ll fight for you, Alex,” I say, and I mean it. The very idea excites me, arouses me.

He’s right. I fight for those I care about.

“That’s what I want. Fight for me. Fight with me. Call me out when you need to. Meet me battle for battle. Together, we can claim everything.” He tilts my chin up, studying me. “Do you want everything?”

“Yes. I want it all.” Anger turns into a frantic need to be fucked by him. “When we get to the hotel I want you to handcuff me again if that turns you on.” My pussy is instantly wet at the thought. It’s a gift from me to him. A gift of trust.

“I want you to get on me right now and ride my hard cock.”

When he kisses me I moan into his mouth. I give in. I give up. I give all I have.

He’s hauling me onto his lap, shoving up the dress I’m wearing that he bought for me.

We’re frantic, clawing at each other, me trying to take down his zipper. Him gripping my ass tightly, ripping my panties to the side. The fabric digs into my flesh, as do his fingers. He sinks his teeth into my lip, encouraging me to open my mouth for the sweep of his tongue, sending a jolt of desire through me.

I don’t know if the windows of the car are tinted or if the driver can see or hear us. I don’t care. My head is thrown back, hips grinding, expensive dress crumpled between us, the leather seat squeaking from our frantic movements. Alex rips down the neckline and sucks on the swell of my breast as he joins our bodies, slamming me down onto his hard cock.

“Yes,” I breathe. “Like that.” Gravity drives him deep and I have the overwhelming realization that this is where I belong. He’s taking my mouth, taking my body, and I piston my hips urgently to help, to meet him halfway, to get as close to him as possible.

The friction on my clit is overwhelming, the bounce of my breasts teasing my nipples over his chest. It only takes three hard thrusts into my soaking wet pussy before I’m coming on him and he’s doing the same.

“I can’t get enough of you,” he murmurs, running his hand down my spine, nipping at my neck like a vampire.

We’re still breathing hard, me collapsed against his chest, when I realize we’ve pulled into my mother’s driveway.

“We’re here,” I say, the mood instantly shifting. This modest apartment complex is nothing like the luxury home I grew up in. It kills the endorphin high I’m flying on. I feel guilt, a thick blanket of regret. It’s my fault my mother lives like this.

I peel myself off of Alex’s lap, adjusting the neck of my dress and reaching between my legs to shift my panties back into place. My touch slips through a trail of moisture. My fingers are slick when I pull them back.

Seeing it, Alex reaches out and immediately draws my thighs closed, as if he can trap his seed in there, and eases me back on the carseat. “Just raise your hips for a minute. I want a baby in Georgia. Now.”

I blink up at him for a second, wondering what it must be like to want something and the world lies down to give it to you. A man like Alex always gets what he wants and he wants a baby from me. He’s decided and most likely the universe will agree.

“My mother is going to wonder why I’m not going inside,” I murmur. It’s not exactly comfortable lying on the car seat like this, with his hand under my ass, lifting it up to reverse gravity.

If I wasn’t impatient to see my mother, I wouldn’t care. I think the way he assumes he can somehow bully conception into occurring is amusing and strangely satisfying.

But then he puts his finger between my lips and I suck on it. My inner walls tremble, clamping down as if he’s still inside me. I moan.

“Text your mother that we’ll be in in a minute.”

He pulls my phone out of his pocket and hands it to me. I’m still sucking on his finger like it’s a hard candy stick. Or a cock. It serves to keep my thighs clamped together in urgent need.

I text my mother, phone up in front of my face as he crosses my ankles and squeezes my thighs together tighter. I force myself to concentrate, not get distracted by the warm

roughness of his touch or the way his thumb is now swirling over my clit.

Here! Be inside in a minute.

Remember to call me Georgia.

I quickly delete the second text then hand my phone back to Alex, who has to pull his finger out of my mouth to accept it. I cry out, disappointed at the loss, hips arching to meet the press of his thumb against my tight aching clit.

But he vacates my inner thighs and eases my dress back down. He offers me a hand.

“Later, love,” he murmurs. “I’ll give you everything you need.”

In a minute, we’re stepping out of the car and I’m bouncing on my heels, thrilled to see my mother. Desperate to wrap my arms around her. Overwhelmed by emotion.

Alex puts his hand on the small of my back.

“Let’s go meet your mother.”

He murmurs something else, but I don’t hear what it is and I don’t ask him to repeat it.

I’m excited but nervous.

Remember to call me Georgia.

I don’t know if my mother will slip up or not. Or what Alex will do.

But it can’t be any worse than what I’ve already been through.

Darkness is alive. It has a heartbeat. It breathes. Boom, boom. In, out.

The only thing that keeps me from madness in the thick suffocation of nightfall in my cell is Aristotle, on the other side of the cool and damp concrete wall.

I can hear him jerking off. It happens often enough that I'm familiar with the sounds he makes, the change in his breathing, the creak of his old cot. He used to try to hide it more. Now, we've been here so long, everything we've seen and done and been through is so fucked up, that it doesn't matter anymore. I've told him straight out not to hold back on my account. If it keeps him sane, he can do it all night for all I care. In fact, I wanted to reassure him so much I told him I like it, that it turns me on.

And now, because he does so frequently, and his voice is the only soothing one in a world of harsh criticism, I actually tend to fall asleep to his muffled moans, rocked into oblivion by the rhythmic increase in his breathing before he crescendos. A lullaby of male lust. Tonight though I can't sleep and I hear him cry out through gritted teeth, swearing at the end.

"Gab?" he murmurs. "You awake?"

"Yes." I'm staring at what should be the ceiling but it is too dark to actually see. I have only a sense of approximation of where it might be. The wall and the bed are the only things that feel real at night. I place my palm on the cool surface of the wall separating us, wishing we were sharing one cot, that I am curled into his arms.

Aristotle's almost nightly masturbating doesn't actually turn me on. He's my best friend, nothing more. I used to touch myself, at home, and make myself wet with thoughts of a cock between my legs instead of just my fingers. I used to lay on a fuzzy pillow naked in my bed at night and grind on it until I came. But here, I'm frozen solid. A block of ice that can't be thawed. I haven't touched my pussy or been wet or even felt an ache of arousal in a year.

"I can't wait until I can fuck you," he murmurs.

"I know, me too, Ari," I lie. I don't want Aristotle to fuck me. It doesn't feel right. But I will let him, because I owe it to him for saving me. If that is what he wants, I'll give it to him. I'll give him anything for standing up to our prison guard on my behalf.

He took a brutal beating, for me.

Ari is older than me. I think he's twenty, though he's never actually said. He is a prisoner, no matter how much they want to call this a school, because there's no way to leave. We don't learn anything here but pain. I'm probably the youngest and only one of three females. The reason I haven't been raped is solely because of Ari. He's protected me. He can be vicious and scary when he wants to be. When he unleashes his crazy I'm glad I'm on his side. And he's unleashed it for my benefit and protection more than once. The least I can do is let him have me when we're finally out of here.

"I hate my name," he says. "Even when you say it."

"I hate my name too. It reminds me of my father, and how he never used my name, just a horrible nickname."

"Mine reminds me my father is a pretentious prick," Ari says. "If you could name yourself, what would you pick?"

"I don't know. I've never thought about it."

"You always say you want to move to Georgia. You should call yourself Georgia."

That makes me smile. "You're right." I do want to move to Georgia. It's where my most perfect vacation memory is from. "And you should be Nash, since you want to move to Nashville."

"Isn't that too obvious?" he asks. "Maybe we should be Dakota and Dallas."

That makes me laugh. "I don't care about being obvious. Fuck what everyone thinks."

"Right. Fuck what everyone thinks." He gives a hearty but relaxed sigh. "Goodnight then, Georgia."

I like the sound of it.

"Goodnight, Nash."

Chapter Sixteen

Alex

“Let’s go meet your mother,” I say. Then add, “Gabiella,” a heartbeat later, but Georgia doesn’t react when I use her birth name. I don’t think she even realizes I have. She’s too focused on tearing across the parking lot to get to her mother’s apartment.

It will sink in. If not, I’ll repeat it until she hears it.

I don’t want secrets between us. Not now.

Everything is different. She’s no longer a concept, a photo. She’s a full picture, flesh and bone, three dimensional, complex.

She’s intelligent and she’s brave and she will be the mother of my child.

It’s already happening right now, as we move onto the sidewalk. A child of me and her is forming in her womb, knitting together two great families into an unbreakable fabric of power. I can feel it.

And I always get what I want.

This apartment complex is a dump. I eye it with distaste. Crumbling stucco, ancient cars dotting the parking lot, the landscaping sparse, hard-packed dirt with tired bushes that can’t compete with the crushing Florida sun. Even from behind my sunglasses, I can see the building trim hasn’t been painted in two plus decades and the wooden railings to the second floor apartments look like they could give way with a firm shake.

I immediately call Tyler, even before we're at the front door. I don't need to see inside to know I'm going to hate it. "I need an accessible home near my house in Miami. Coconut Grove, preferably. At least two bedrooms, single level, nice finishes. A pool."

"For when? Rent or buy?"

"I might as well buy it. And for now. I want Georgia's mother in by next weekend."

Tyler makes a sound. "That might not be possible."

"I don't accept that," I tell him. "Everything is possible."

Georgia has tears in her eyes when I end the call and she stares up at me. We're outside her mother's apartment door.

"You're moving my mother?"

I nod, adjusting my tie. I want to make a decent impression. "Yes. I hate this apartment complex. It feels more than tired. It feels exhausted. I don't want your mother living here and I certainly don't want you visiting her here. And I'm never setting foot here ever again, just so you know, *and* I'm throwing these shoes away the second we get home."

"That's all a little dramatic." Her lips press together in amusement. "There's really nothing truly wrong with this apartment building even if it isn't exactly high rolling."

"There's a dirty diaper in the stairwell," I say, pointing. "Just no."

Georgia raises up on her tiptoes and gives me a sweet kiss. "Thank you."

It means everything to me, her gratitude. I want it to grow into love.

"You're welcome," I say gruffly.

She knocks on the door. "Are you going to change dirty diapers, Alex?" she asks, turning back to me with a smile.

She obviously thinks I'm going to say no.

Instead, I shrug. "Sure, why not?"

I can change a diaper. In theory. I've never actually done it, but how hard can it be?

Her jaw drops. "I'll believe it when I see it."

I wrap my hand around her throat and squeeze, bending down to kiss her. "You need to learn to trust me."

Her breath quickens, her eyes going dark with desire.

The door swings open.

I turn with a charming smile to greet whoever is standing there. It's a woman in her fifties, who is frowning at me. I don't think it's her mother. She doesn't look like the photo I was shown by my research team.

"What the hell are you doing?" this woman asks.

"It's okay, Martha," Georgia rushes to speak. "This is Alex, my..." She looks up at me for guidance.

"Her boyfriend," I say, wishing there was a better phrase. I'm neither a boy nor her friend. I'm her lover, her partner, her future. "Or if you prefer, baby daddy."

Georgia gasps. "Alex! Stop. You can't just say things like that."

She smacks my arm, which is a bold move, but it seems to slightly appease Martha, the door monitor.

"Say what?" I ask her mildly, as Martha pulls open the door for us. I hold my hand out to Martha. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Martha."

Martha isn't having it. She just nods and then turns to Georgia. "Your mother is on the back patio getting some air. She's thrilled she gets to see you."

"Thank you for being here for her," Georgia says. "I appreciate so much everything you've done for her." She looks at me. "Martha lives next door." Her face falls. "Maybe we shouldn't move Mom after all."

"What are you talking about?" Martha asks, skirting around furniture that is way too large for the small box of a living room.

Martha sits down on the sofa and starts scrolling through her phone, either not expecting a response or not caring about it.

The ceilings of the apartment are low, the carpet old, the surfaces all filled with pill bottles, plastic tubs, tissue boxes, and plastic tumblers with straws. It's a sick room. The smell makes me uncomfortable. It's the smell of decay, a palpable scent that hovers in the still air. Of the human body slowly rotting from the inside out, until the bad cells outnumber the good and the inevitable occurs. An invading army overwhelming the defenders, attacking the wall until the line finally crumbles and the enemy spills over and consumes every inch of territory, victorious, leaving death in its wake.

All of that is confirmed when I see Maribel, Georgia's mother, wrapped up in sweaters and blankets on a lounge chair on a small, crumbling patio. She has a scarf on her head and a cup of tea in her hands, but she can't hold the mug for long. Her hands are shaking. Her skin is sallow, her eyes sunken into the hollows of thin cheeks. Her skin is as translucent as an onion. She sighs from the effort of setting the mug back carefully on a little table without spilling it.

This isn't good. None of this good. I reach out and encase Georgia's hand with my own as I hear her suck in a sharp breath and abruptly pause on the threshold. Removing my sunglasses and tucking them in my jacket pocket, I wonder if it's even necessary to move Maribel. It doesn't look like she's going to bounce back from this latest round of treatments. Maybe it's just better to make sure she's comfortable.

I lean down and kiss Georgia's head. "What matters is you're here," I murmur into her ear.

She snuffles. She's fighting hard not to cry. She's frozen in place.

But then her mother spots her. When she smiles and reaches out her hand, Georgia goes right to her. She kneels down on the patio and wraps her mother in a sweeping hug.

Maribel runs her thin fingers up and down Georgia's back, whispering to her.

I feel like an intruder at the same time I appreciate their love and devotion. Georgia knows a mother's love and will be able to give a mother's love.

She's crying now, unable to contain herself, and her mother is reassuring her, making shushing sounds. When Georgia finally peels herself off of her mother's chest, Maribel looks up at me and smiles.

"Hello," she says, holding her hand out to me. "I'm Maribel."

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Alex." Stepping forward, I take her hand and gently squeeze it. "Your daughter is making me very happy," I tell her. "She's amazing."

"She is, isn't she? Smart. Tough." Maribel gives Georgia a smile. "And so pretty."

Something about that last remark makes Georgia's nose wrinkle. She's perched herself on the little round bistro table, having moved the tea to the ground, and she fusses with the pleats of her dress. "At least you think so, Mom."

That surprises me. Does Georgia actually question her beauty? I need to tell her often and in great detail why I think she's stunning.

I regret pointing out my distaste for her hair color.

"He's very handsome," Maribel says in a stage whisper, a twinkle in her eye. "Those eyes. I'm almost jealous."

That makes Georgia give a watery laugh as she wipes her eyes. "Mom. He can hear you."

"I know." Maribel gives me a wink.

That amuses me. I decide to give Georgia's mom the gift of hope. I don't think she has much longer on this earth, so I feel compelled to make her last few months as pleasant as possible. "Tell your mother our news," I say to Georgia, resting my hands casually in my pockets.

"What news?" Maribel asks, eagerly.

"What news?" Georgia asks, warily.

“We’re pregnant,” I say, because that’s how couples say it now. With a “we.” And if we aren’t now, we will be by the end of the week.

Georgia gasps.

Maribel puts trembling hands to her mouth. Tears fill her eyes. “Oh, my goodness, that’s wonderful news. My baby is having a baby.”

That earns me a glare from Georgia, but I give her a mild smile.

“Mom...” Georgia hesitates.

“How far along?”

“It’s very early,” I say. “But we wanted you to know.”

“We planned to wait to tell you,” Georgia says, eyes snapping at me. “Until we know everything is fine.” She glances back at her mother. “Alex doesn’t listen very well.”

Maribel laughs softly. She reaches out and pats her daughter’s arm. “Georgia, go get my phone. And give me a minute alone with Alex.”

This should be interesting.

Reluctantly, Georgia goes inside, giving me an urgent look of warning.

“Come sit,” Maribel says, gesturing to the chair next to her.

It’s a lounge chair, so I give a quick tug of my pants at the thighs and sit down on it sideways, so I’m facing her, my feet solidly on the ground. “Your daughter loves you very much,” I tell her. “That’s obvious.”

“I know. And I love her.” She glances to make sure Georgia is gone, then straightens up a little. Her brown eyes are instantly more shrewd than they are in front of her daughter. “You know, don’t you?”

I don’t bother to ask what she’s referencing. She means what Georgia’s true identity is. That she’s Donatelli’s daughter.

“Yes. I know.”

She nods. “Will you promise me you’ll take care of her? After I’m gone?”

I take her hands into mine and gently massage her frail fingers. “You have my word.”

Maribel sighs, her eyes briefly closing. “Thank you. Now I can leave this world easier knowing you’ll protect her.”

“What is the biggest threat to her?” I ask, quietly. I sense there are secrets to be told. It’s obvious Maribel understands much better than Georgia that her time is limited. Very limited. “Him?”

She’s clearly debating how much to say. Or maybe she doesn’t really know the answer. Finally she says, “Do you know why we were cut off? Did she tell you?”

“No.” She hasn’t told me a damn thing.

“She tried to kill him on her sixteenth birthday. He has a nut allergy and she kissed him with peanut butter on her lips. On purpose. To avenge me because he’d knocked me unconscious.”

“I love her even more than I did before,” I say, and realize it’s true. I’ve fallen in love with Georgia, literally overnight. And now, I have proof that she is everything I thought her to be.

A sixteen-year-old taking on a mafia boss? In a way so clever and simple and diabolical that no one would think it’s anything other than an accident? Perfection.

She’s my equal. My match. My queen.

“I stopped her, because I was scared. But also because I’m loyal. I don’t think she ever understood that. To her, I betrayed her and myself when I put the epipen into his thigh and saved his life.”

“Then he’s a bastard for doing this to you,” I say, gesturing around the rundown patio. “He abandoned you after you saved his life and I don’t respect that.” I don’t. It makes me look at Lorenzo in a different light, a dim and unflattering one.

Loyalty makes or breaks families, and saves or destroys lives. I'm intensely loyal and like a boa constrictor, I will squeeze the life out of anything that tries to harm what's mine.

I was loyal in my loveless marriage. I had sex with other women, but it was with Nicolette's permission. I treated her with respect, I shut down anyone who would say anything negative about her, I ensured her personal safety at all times because that's what a fucking husband does, and I made a vow. Hell, I would still be with Nicolette right now if she was loyal to me in return. But refusing to allow me to hire a surrogate proved she's not loyal to me at all, but only to herself. Like father, like daughter, apparently.

Clearly Georgia is cut from a different mold. She was willing to kill to remain loyal to her mother. She's doing all of this right now—trying to bend herself to my will—for her mother.

She shrugs. "His ego was bruised. He took it out on her much worse than he did me. But I miss him. Every day, I miss him."

"Does he know about your treatment?"

"Probably not. I don't think he pays attention to me at all. I'm certain he keeps an eye on Gabriella. It bothers him that she's more like him than his legitimate daughter."

That doesn't surprise me. "Nicolette is nothing like him."

Her eyebrows raise. "You know her?"

"I married her."

"Jesus." Maribel makes the sign of the cross and fishes a rosary out from under her sweater. She kisses it. Then she flashes me a sharp look. "This better not blow up in my daughter's face or I promise you I'll haunt your sexy ass when I'm dead."

I see traces of the woman she was. Why Donatelli fell for her. And I see how her daughter inherited her strength.

"I have a plan to secure a spot at the top of the organization for me and for her. Don't worry. Your daughter

will have *everything*.”

I take my knife out of my pocket and flick it open. I slice into my palm to draw a quick, thin line of bright red blood and hold it out to her.

“I swear it in blood.”

Chapter Seventeen

Georgia

“**W**hat are you doing? Mom, why is there blood on your hand?” I ask in alarm, finally giving in to the urge to interrupt her conversation with Alex and stepping out onto the patio.

They were talking way too long for my personal comfort. My mother is on tons of pain killers. God only knows what came out of her mouth.

But now I see blood on her trembling hand and I rush over to her. She’s wiping her palm with a tissue and I don’t see any source for the blood.

“Are you okay?” I ask her, searching her whole frame for any source of bleeding.

“What happened?” I turn and ask Alex. Only to realize it’s him who is bleeding, not her. Blood is chugging down his wrist, threatening to collide with the crisp white of his cuff. I reach out and grab his fingers, flipping his arm over. He has a slice across his palm.

I feel a jolt of desire. Blood on my mother is terrifying. Blood on my lover is titillating, given that he’s not reacting at all to it. If he’s in pain, he’s not revealing it. That display of masculine pride and strength turns me on, and I have a secret obsession with blood since my days at boarding school. I fight the urge to slide my tongue across his opened flesh and lap the warm liquid up.

“It’s nothing,” he says with a smile. “Your mother and I had a great little chat.” He pulls his phone out. “I’m going to make a call and let you two lovely ladies catch up a little.” He exits the patio, stepping out onto the sidewalk that traverses the back of the apartment building. He puts his phone to his ear and starts walking away from us, doing nothing to stop the bleeding.

“What did he cut himself on?” I ask my mother, sitting down next to her and swinging my legs over and out straight in front of me. I sigh back into the chaise, tired. Anticipation, excitement, arousal, relief, have all been coursing through me for twenty-four hours and sinking into the chair feels amazing. I’m grateful Alex has the decency to give me some privacy with my mother.

“His knife. He promised me in blood he’ll take care of you.”

I whip my head around to stare at her. “That seems dramatic.”

“It’s binding. That’s what it is.” She reaches out her hand for me.

I take it, trying not to show her how worried I am that her grip is weak, her hand mere flesh and bone, her skin soft and slack.

“Have you told him about boarding school?” she asks.

It’s an unexpected question and I don’t like it. “Told him what?” I ask cautiously.

Boarding school is a Pandora’s box. Does she mean to tell him about the punishments? The isolation? About Ari? Why I was there in the first place? It could be anything.

Most of which she knows nothing about.

I shielded her from the really tough stuff. She doesn’t know I had my jaw broken by an overzealous guard or that I was forced to eat maggots for an instructor’s personal amusement. Or about the blood.

She seems to forget what she asked me though. She just smiles softly at me. “You’re so pretty. Your father was just trying to toughen you up, you know. He always loved you.”

I want to say a million things, but I can’t. I won’t ruin my time with her over that bastard Lorenzo Donatelli. She is delusional about him, ascribing much better qualities to him than he actually possesses. He never loved me. He wanted a replica of himself, took pride in that. But that wasn’t love.

“Tell me about the time Grandpa thought you were being stalked by a shark in the Keys and it was just a manatee,” I tell her.

She laughs.

Her thoughts are a bit scattered but she manages to tell the familiar family story about her own father with lots of chuckles. I laugh with her and put on a brave face. She doesn’t need to see my fear. I don’t want her spending this little time we have together comforting *me*. And I don’t think she needs comforting. She’s resigned to her fate.

Alex

“What the fuck is going on?” I ask my brother on the phone as I walk down the sidewalk. I tug at my tie to loosen it in the heat, only to remember my palm is bleeding sluggishly.

I rip the tie off entirely and stuff it in my pocket. “Where is Tatiana?”

“She’s Tatiana, which is to say she’s out there but she’s totally fine and back at home. She personally took out a guard on her way out of the house she was being held in. She was also incredibly belligerent to her rescuers and one is threatening to quit if she doesn’t stop calling him a little bitch.”

That makes me chuckle softly. “Only a little bitch would hate being called a little bitch. I’m glad she’s okay. I love that little weirdo.”

“Yeah, me too. But none of this reads right, bro. You need to call Donatelli and see what he has to say about all of this.”

That annoys me. “He can’t be upset that I’m divorcing Nicolette. She won’t give me a child. What other choice do I have?”

“Be childless, I guess.” Luka doesn’t sound concerned about my problems.

Probably because he’s in direct competition with me. “I bet you’d love that, asshole. With me out of the ring, you win the match. Maxim won’t fight you for any piece of dad’s business.”

“You fucking know it. I saw Nicolette last night, by the way. She seems to be taking this hard. She was embarrassing herself in public. Like bad, bro.”

“Doing what?” I ask, frowning.

“Crying. Which for her is basically the equivalent of taking a shit on a sidewalk drunk. She must hate herself for showing any sort of emotion in public.”

“Jesus. She was crying?” I have to admit I’m surprised. Frankly, a little touched. “I had no idea she was capable of crying for me in any capacity other than at my funeral. And even then I figured tears or laughter might be a toss up.”

“Maybe she just doesn’t like to be thrown over for a hot redhead of dubious birth.”

My brother already knows about Georgia. News traveled fast. “You sound like Dad. Jealous.”

That will rub him wrong.

“Fuck you. I can get my own redhead if I want one. Or a wife for that matter.”

“You haven’t yet. Now let me call Lorenzo and see what I can find out.”

I barely hear Luka’s goodbye because my attention is drawn to an adult man clearly harassing a young girl between two apartment buildings. She’s trying to move past him in the

narrow area, but he keeps blocking her and then laughing when she can't get by him.

Walking over, I pause to observe better what is happening.

"You won't give me a kiss?" He grabs her arm to retain her when she tries to move past him again. "Suck my dick and then we'll go get high together."

"Let me go," she says in a soft voice. Her eyes are cast downward, like she can't stand to look at this disgusting cretin who is harassing her. "I don't do drugs."

"You're a stuck up little bitch," he says to the girl, shaking her hard. "Think you're too good for me, don't you? I'll get some of your tight pussy, just you wait and see you little cunt."

She's probably all of twelve years old and his threats make me furious. He's around thirty and has horrific body odor. "That's because she is too good for you," I say, casually, removing my hands from my pockets.

I have a lot of pent up rage today. It takes a cool fucking head to not lose it when my sister got stolen from my own goddamn house. This is a perfect outlet.

The girl whirls around at the sound of my voice.

I continue. "She doesn't look stuck up to me. She looks like she wants to be left alone and that's exactly what you're going to let her do, you fucking lowlife."

"Who the fuck are you?" he asks, eyeing me from head to toe in astonishment.

The man must be drunk or stupid or both. He should be more scared than he is.

The girl is already taking advantage of the distraction to skirt around her tormentor.

"Who am I?" I ask, taking a step closer to him. "Who are *you*, you worthless piece of shit?"

His eyes narrow. "Are you looking to get your ass handed to you?" he asks.

That makes me laugh. He's thin from drug use, jittery, with cagey eyes. His type likes to think they're tougher than they are when all it takes is one punch and they're out cold. "I'll kill you if you touch me."

"You can't hurt me, pretty boy." He takes a wild swing at me.

I have to admit, I wasn't expecting him to even bother. But he's more delusional than I realized. I don't even have to duck or dodge. He misses by two whole feet. I reach out and plunge my knife into his arm, dragging the blade through his skin like a tattoo needle, only much deeper. Just to make a statement. Just to let him feel fear like that little girl did."

He howls and stumbles backward. "Why did you do that? Fuck that hurts."

Removing my knife, I tuck it into my inside pocket. "Don't be an asshole to little girls," I say. "Or I'll put my blade in your rotten heart."

"That girl wants me to fuck her," he says. "Or else she wouldn't wear them shorts. You saw them. So tight I can see her little cunt and her ass all outlined."

The man doesn't know when to shut the fuck up obviously.

I take my knife back out again and twirl it in my hand.

"Wrong. She's wearing shorts because it's Miami and it's hot outside. She's a child and she should be able to walk down the sidewalk without threat of rape. No. Means. No." I stab his other arm just to punctuate my point.

He screams again.

"You don't like that?" I ask, ripping it down his forearm through thin flesh while a bright red trail of blood springs up. "Girls don't like to be harassed either. You don't seem to be getting the message."

"Suck my dick," he manages to say as he stumbles backwards, trying to escape me.

I withdraw the knife from his arm. I plunge it into his gut and draw the blade down like I'm filleting a fish.

“No one wants to suck your dick. Now no one will ever have to.”

My knife has a serrated blade. The damage is substantial. When I remove it, blood and internal organs spill forth in a torrential death vomit. The man’s eyes are wide and he’s no longer making any sound.

I don’t bother to wait to watch him sink to the ground. I don’t care.

He’ll be dead in sixty seconds.

He’ll rot in the alley until he stinks and someone finds him and then the police will do exactly nothing to solve his murder because odds are they already know he’s a total fucking dirtbag. One less problem to deal with.

Did I take some of my frustration out on him? Sure. But I also prevented a disgusting prick from putting his filthy hands on an innocent girl. I’ll never apologize for that.

Leaving the guy gurgling out his final death rattle, I debate where to go for dinner tonight. I love the eclectic food scene in Miami.

But I decide that I want room service.

I want to be alone with Georgia. I don’t want to share her with total strangers in a restaurant. She’s mine. All mine. I want every moment to be in private, in my jet, in my lush Miami backyard, in our future apartment in New York, in the crisp cool air of a hotel suite.

After tearing her clothes off, I want to explore every single inch of her body and breathe in her sweet tangy pussy, licking her soft folds until she shatters beneath me. I want to run my fingers across her, and flick my tongue over her nipples until she is lost to desire. Until she doesn’t understand where she ends and I begin. Until she is indebted to me fully, dependent, unable to breathe without me.

Until her heartbeat is in time with mine.

I own her.

And fuck it, she owns me too.

She'll be my sun rising each morning and setting every single night.

She's the moonlight on water, the breeze swirling through the trees.

The stars in the sky.

The queen to her devoted and ruthless king.

Chapter Eighteen

Georgia

My mother is asleep, still holding my hand, when Alex returns via the apartment, drying his hands like he's just washed them.

"Was that your brother on the phone?" I ask. "How's your sister?"

"Tatiana is fine," he tells me, eyeing my mother and assessing the situation. "She's back at home."

Relief makes my shoulders sag. "Who the hell were those guys?" I ask in a low voice.

"Unclear as of now." He runs his hand down my cheek. It smells like soap. "Should we leave?" he asks. "Let your mother rest?"

I nod, throat too tight to speak.

We take our leave, me thanking Martha, who is still watching videos on her phone. I suspect she uses my mother's apartment as an escape from her own crowded home. She has a husband, two adult children, and three grandkids living with her. The arrangement works for me. I'd prefer my mother not be alone.

I hold my emotions together until we're in the car. Then I sink back into the seat and exhale deeply.

"She's going to die, isn't she?" I ask Alex, pressing my fingers to my eyes to prevent tears from falling. "She looks different this time from the last two times she had treatment."

He doesn't do me the courtesy of lying to me. Instead, he wraps his arm around me and pulls me close, against the width of his muscular chest. "Come here."

His unexpected compassion undoes me. The tears escape, along with great big sobs.

I've already lost a parent once, when my father threw me in a prison school and abandoned my family. Now I'm going to lose my mother. My anchor. My lifeline. I'll be an orphan, completely and utterly alone.

"I'm sorry," he says, pressing a kiss onto the top of my head. "I'm not a doctor, and anything can happen, but it doesn't look good, you're right."

"I feel like a selfish child," I tell him. "I keep thinking about my mother and how she feels and yet I'm also just terrified at the thought of being alone."

It's an admission that normally I would never make. You would have to rip my vulnerability from its dark hiding place before I'd show you it of my own accord.

But this is different. My mother is dying. I can't stop myself from saying the words because I can't imagine a life where she doesn't walk this earth. Where someone who is the constant in my own existence becomes just a memory. That there is no way to see her, hear her, speak to her, unless it's in the confines of my own mind or when I'm asleep and dreaming. That knowledge presses on my chest and makes it hard to breathe.

"That's not selfish. It's human. But you're not alone. You have Quinn. Most importantly, you have me."

I'm indebted to Alex.

I do have him, or I will once I'm pregnant. He'll owe me the courtesy of burying my mother with dignity and his wealth will be like a magic wand that makes all of her medical bills disappear. *Poof*. I can focus on giving her the best end-of-life care and not worry about the petty endless grind of bullshit day-to-day reality that robs the average human of precious time, energy, and joy.

“Do I?” I ask, not entirely trusting him.

Or maybe I’m seeking control in a world and reality where I have none.

I can’t control Mom’s cancer. I can’t control my father. The past. I can’t even control the fact that I lost my job.

I want to control something, anything with Alex. I want to control the way he feels about me, views me, the way he wants me. I want him to want me with an obsession that he doesn’t understand and cannot bend to his will. I want him to do things he wouldn’t normally do because he *has* to be with me, has to please, has to have me every single second of every day.

Alex takes my chin and pulls me away from his chest. “Look at me,” he commands.

It’s an easy command to obey, even when I feel vulnerable. He’s gorgeous, with those pale eyes that never fail to draw me in. They’re boring into me right now.

“You have me. You have *all* of me, Georgia. I’ll take care of your mother and I’ll take care of you. I’ll never fucking stop taking care of you, do you understand?”

He shakes my chin a little.

I nod, swallowing hard.

“We’ll come back next weekend to see her again. You can stay longer. As long as you want.”

His words are sincere, a promise, not a put off. I hold onto him tightly, having dampened his shirt with my tears. I’m curling my fingers into the fabric.

“Your mother needs full-time care. We’ll move her into my house here. There’s plenty of room for staff. Then once you’re pregnant, you can stay here with her as long as you need to.”

There are multiple things I hate about what he’s saying. The unspoken ending of the final sentence. *You can stay with her... as long as you need to.* That means *until she’s dead.*

I also don’t like that once I’m knocked up, he doesn’t care if I’m around or not. I want him to crave me by his side.

And I don't want to stay in that house. "You want me and my mother to stay in the house your sister just got kidnapped from?" I ask him, genuinely annoyed. "How is that safe at all?"

His jaw twitches a little. "You'll be safe."

"As long as I'm not handcuffed, I will be," I snap at him. "I can hold my own if my hands aren't tied."

The corner of his mouth turns up. "Badass, huh? I like it."

"On occasion. Are you close to your mother?" I ask him.

"My mother died when I was fourteen."

I don't know why, but I'm not expecting that. I'm instantly less irritated with him. "Oh, Alex. I'm so sorry."

"Thank you," he says. "She was a good woman." His eyes reveal nothing about his genuine emotions.

"Tatiana must have just been a baby. How horrible for all of you."

"Tatiana is my stepsister. My father married her mother when I was twenty and she was two or three."

I digest that. "I'm glad she's okay."

"Me too."

I may think she's a little odd, but she did protect me by shoving me under the cabinet. "Is she upset?"

"No. Pissed off."

I understand that feeling completely. I've been there. When fear gives way to outrage that someone could do this to you.

"She has three older stepbrothers and a stepfather who taught her how to protect herself."

Nodding, I sense that's all Alex will say about it. At least right now. I change the subject.

"You shouldn't have told my mother I was pregnant. What if it doesn't happen? She'll be so disappointed." I don't want to take that joy away from her.

Though maybe it doesn't matter. Will she be alive in nine months? Hell, even three months?

"I'm not worried about it. It will happen."

His confidence is enviable.

I don't know specifically when I shifted from trying to climb over a fence to escape him to wanting to have Alex's baby, but I do. I want to share a life with him. I want to be special. To be the first woman to give him a child. I want to pass on the legacy of love my mother gave me, even though she wasn't perfect.

I won't be perfect either. No parent is.

But I do know that I will love a child with all my heart and soul.

And I know that if I allow myself to, I will love Alex the same way.

Part of me wants to tumble straight forward into love.

Part of me knows that there are far too many secrets between us.

Part of me thinks I can't give everything inside me because it's too broken, too covered in the blood of the past.

It doesn't matter. Because I give everything I can.

The hotel in South Beach that Alex has booked is breathtaking.

When he said he wanted to fuck me with a view of the ocean, my mind went to a bed in front of windows that overlook the beach and the water beyond. That is the limit of my imagination when it comes to luxury and wealth. That's not Alex's style, of course. This isn't a standard hotel room with an ocean view.

It's a two-story suite with multiple balconies and an outdoor plunge pool and shower. The decor is modern, minimalist, but with plush soft furniture in muted pastels, a nod to the art deco history of South Beach. There is a dining

area inside, but one outside as well. There's a full dinner awaiting us. Champagne is chilling. No sign of who delivered it and laid it out on a set table. It's as if lunch fairies waved a wand and made it appear.

My packages with all the clothes from Alex's house are waiting in the primary bedroom, along with additional packages and a new set of luggage. There is a second bedroom that has massage tables in it.

The view is breathtaking. Just a sweeping panorama of the bright blue water of the ocean, colorful lifeguard stations dotting the beach. As a kid, we never went to the beach. My father hated the traffic. When he wasn't in town, my mother wasn't allowed to go to the beach. Bikinis were for home only, not in public where other men could see her.

Which seemed normal to me as a child. Ironic now, given my father met my mother when she was a topless cocktail waitress in a club. Either he had men following her (and me) twenty-four seven or she was just willing to obey his jealous rules.

Alex has poured himself a drink and is sipping it while he stands next to me. I'm leaning on the railing, letting the warm breeze wash over me and take all the tension away with it.

"This suite is amazing," I say, giving a grateful and tired sigh. "But it seems so big for just the two of us."

His voice is low. He shifts my hair back off of my neck and kisses my skin. "I want privacy for the things I'm going to do to you."

I shiver. "And what might that be?"

"Everything."

I don't know what to say, but my body responds by shifting closer to him, my nipples beading. My pussy aching. I don't even understand how I can want more of his touch today, but I do. I suspect I'll always crave his touch.

"Are you tired?" he asks.

He's still watching me watch the water. I nod, because I've been exhausted for weeks and last night and today have been stressful. I feel drained.

"Take a nap, love. Then we'll eat some dinner. And then I'll eat you until you come. And whatever else you'd like me to do."

I suck in a breath at the thought of finally feeling his tongue delivering a long French kiss to my pussy.

Alex draws me back from the balcony with a tug on my hand.

I'm torn between all of my needs. Hunger, fatigue, arousal. The need to be held, to feel alive, to cement my place in his life. Too many choices, too many needs to fulfill.

So, I let him choose for me, and he takes me into the bedroom and lifts my dress off over my head. He undoes my bra, slides it down my arms and removes it. I'm just in my underwear. Then he sends me into the shower, where I take a quick shower. When I reemerge, he's waiting for me by the windows but comes right to me.

"Get in," He orders as he peels the fluffy duvet back and encourages me under the cover. He takes my wet towel as I slide between the cool sheets and the duvet fully naked, sighing. He's chosen wisely. My shoulders sink to the mattress with immense relief.

I understand Quinn more now. How it's a relief to be taken care of than to fight alone for survival every second of every day.

Alex tucks me in, like I'm precious. "So fucking beautiful, Georgia. I could stare at you all day and all night."

I give a little snort. I don't want him to lie to me. I'm average looking at best. *Bug*.

His eyes narrow at the sound I make, but his touch stays gentle. He smooths back my hair, wipes the tears that have squeezed from my eyes against my will with a tenderness that makes me want to cry.

“Go to sleep, Georgia.”

His fingers drift over my eyebrows, down over my lids and lashes, and I close my eyes automatically in a protective instinct. But it’s as if I’ve died with my eyes wide open and he’s shuttering them.

See no more.

Hide the blank stare.

Close your eyes and open your mouth.

I drift immediately and I dream of the ocean. Big salty waves of foamy white and blue water that I float on, buoyant, no problems in the world. The ocean is Alex. It surrounds me, warms me up and cools me down. It lifts and holds me, so that I don’t need to do anything but lie back, close my eyes, and float.

The sun beats down on my face but the water is cool.

Sensing movement, I open my eyes.

Alex emerges from the clear water below, like a shark, biting my inner thigh. I cry out, but I’m confused if it’s pleasure or it’s pain... because now he’s rolling his tongue over my slit, up and down, dragging it through the aching channel, teasing over folds, and dipping inside. He fucks me with his tongue in deep plunges. Then he repeats his actions over and over until I come, a relaxed, uninhibited orgasm.

It’s only a second or two later as my body quivers and my eyes pop open, that I realize Alex is actually stroking his tongue over my clit and I just came in my sleep. It’s disorienting, and I feel like I can’t breathe, like I can’t think. I focus on what is real, and that is he hasn’t eased up his strokes at all. My pussy is trickling on to him as he’s fully under the bedding, just the shape of him visible. My shoulders and breasts are above the covers, as if he inadvertently is pulling the duvet down as he moves between my legs.

A moan escapes me. “Alex, yes. Oh God.”

The room is dark, the balcony lit up with soft evening mood lighting for dining. The ocean and sky inky blackness

beyond.

He drags some of that moisture up and deposits it on my clit, swirling it around in circles before sucking on my swollen bud. I moan again deeply as his finger slips inside me, driving deep.

I shove at the duvet, exposing the top of his head.

“Good, you’re awake,” he murmurs, easing off my clit to look up at me in the dim light of a lone corner lamp. His face looks harsher in the night shadows, rougher. Dangerous.

“I was dreaming a shark was biting me.”

That makes him laugh softly against my thigh. “Being bit by a shark makes you come?”

“No. Being bit by *you* makes me come. Hard.” I’m in a foggy haze of lingering sleep and pleasure. I don’t question whether I should be honest with him or not. I just am.

He’s going to see the scars on me anyway. I’m surprised he hasn’t already. But he’s never been face down in my pussy before now and the room is dark.

His nostrils flare. His grip on my thighs tighten. “You like to be bit?”

I nod. “I like to be bit and I like to bleed. I like pain.”

Alex gives a dirty laugh as he pinches my inner thighs while simultaneously biting my clit. My back arches. I hiss with excitement.

“Then we really are a perfect match. I’ll give you all the pain and pleasure you can handle.”

I bury my hands in his hair and tug on, forcing him to look at me. “I can handle a lot.”

His fingers dig into my flesh, harder. “I’ll find your breaking point.”

I raise my hips, forcing my clit onto his tongue. “Prove it,” I tell him.

He jerks his head back, breaking my hold on him, and delivers a stinging slap to my slit. “Careful what you wish for, dirty girl.”

That’s the problem.

I’m never careful.

Chapter Nineteen

Alex

Georgia tastes like a peach. Juicy and sweet.

And just like a peach, when I bite, juice rushes over my tongue, dripping over my lips so that when I pull back my mouth is covered in her sweet tangy wetness. She likes some pain with her pleasure. It makes her gush. I find that fucking hot. I alternate between eating at her cunt, long deep strokes with my tongue, and biting, squeezing her ass hard enough to lift her off the bed so I can feast on her.

Georgia is making soft keening sounds of passion, her arms raised above her head.

I want more.

“You taste so fucking good, love. Do you like when I tease your clit or do you like when I fuck you with my tongue?”

“Both,” she breathes.

Pausing, I brush my damp lips over her inner thigh. Unexpectedly, the flesh is slightly raised there, as if she has a scar. I take note of it, but I can't see in the dark. “You have to pick one,” I tell her. “You can't be a greedy slut.”

She gives a cry of frustration.

Her hands drop to my head, fingers curling in my hair to urge me to continue. “Please, Alex. I want both.”

“Pick one.” I flick my tongue over her clit. “A.” Then I slide it inside her pussy. “Or B. And since you didn't listen the first time, now you have two more options to choose from. C.”

My finger eases into her, her pussy instantly clamping down on it. “Or D.” I remove my finger and nip on the soft folds of her pussy. “Which is it?”

“I only get one?” she asks in dismay.

“Pick now or I’ll pick for you.”

“Can you repeat the options?” she asks.

That makes me laugh softly against her pussy. “Very clever, love. But I’m not falling for that.”

“You can’t blame a girl for trying.”

“Until the count of three. One—

“D,” she says quickly. “I choose D.”

“That’s my girl,” I say thickly, satisfied with her choice. She chose the tease, the torturous tease instead of instant gratification. I’m impressed.

It makes my cock throb even harder for her.

I give her what she wants. Soft nips, hard bites, shifting and moving around so she never knows where they’ll land or with how much pressure. I pry her pussy wide open for me, but never touch the inner sanctum, letting her frustration build to an agonizing peak. Her gasps and cries of pleasure have turned into one long continuous moan, her legs starting to tremble.

And still I just scrape and pinch and sink my teeth into the tender pillowy flesh.

She comes wildly, bucking her hips against me, just from me using my mouth on the folds of her cunt. Hot moisture surges, trickling down over my thumbs where I’m bracing her and she cries out.

“Alex! Please!”

Since she’s been so obedient, a struggle for her, I give her the first three options all at once. I put a finger deep inside, sawing in and out of her juicy cunt, while I flick my tongue over her taut bud and down over the swollen folds and finally

into her, alongside my finger. In mere seconds, she's bursting again, grip ripping at my hair, her cries jagged and erratic.

When I pull back and wipe my mouth, covered in her essence, her hands fall slack. I lean over and flick on the lamp.

She's heaving and shaking, dew all over her soft skin, her chest pink with exertion.

She looks like a goddess, all lush hips and tits, her hair starting to curl at her forehead and the nape of her neck in little waves. She's sensual and irresistible.

"More?" I ask her, rolling her nipple between my thumb and forefinger. "Do you want more, Georgia?"

She nods eagerly. "Yes, I want so much more."

"Ask me for what you want. Ask nicely. I know that's hard for you but I want to see you beg."

Her eyes flare, like I've both aroused and offended her.

"Please, may I have your cock inside me?" she asks.

It doesn't sound submissive. It sounds like she's gritting her teeth through the request.

"No." In spite of how much I want to just stab my cock into her repeatedly, we've already done more than one quick fuck today. I want to draw it out. Tease us both.

I want to break her, to where she doesn't know her own name. Where the only name she knows is mine.

Georgia huffs in dismay.

Gripping her thighs, I start to tug her down the bed, when I feel the raised flesh again. On both of her legs. When I shift my hands to get a better look, she's already trying to cover herself. I wrap my fingers around both of her wrists and yank her hands away.

"Let me see." There are slash marks on the creamy flesh. Scars from superficial wounds, but multiple lines on both legs. "Who did this to you?" I demand.

She doesn't say anything.

When I pry my gaze away from the clear evidence of someone hurting her, of someone destroying her beautiful flesh, my nostrils are flaring and I'm gripping her wrists so hard she winces.

"You're squeezing me."

I let go of her instinctively. "Tell me how you got these scars so I can kill him."

For a brief second, she looks away, her throat visibly catching. But then she turns back and sighs. "I did it to myself."

I don't understand. "You did this to yourself? *Why?*"

"I was raped when I was sixteen when I was a virgin. After, it felt like I could still feel his fingers touching me, so I wanted to slice out the feeling. It doesn't make sense to other people, but to me it did. I was a cutter for about a year."

Rage rolls over me, like an inferno. A hot red cloud of toxic fury, blinding my vision and making it impossible for me to breathe. "Who raped you?" I ask, voice low and rough and trembling with anger.

"A security guard at the school I went to." She rushes to add, "It's okay, though, really. I'm okay. I'm fine now."

I shift so that my knees are on either side of her, and I can look into her eyes. "Sweetheart, it's definitely not okay," I say softly. "And you don't have to be fine for me. You can be whatever you need to be."

Tears fill her eyes. "You don't think, I don't know, less of me?"

That makes me angry. I hate that she can even think that. "For having some disgusting prick violate you like that? Of course not. I admire your strength. And your honesty. I'm glad you told me." I mean that. It's yet another brutal display of her ability to survive.

She nods, sniffing a little as I brush her hair back off of her forehead, tugging on the little curl there to watch it spring back. I move to kiss her, but she turns her head.

“I don’t want you to look at me differently. Alex, please, please, please don’t think that I can’t handle whatever you can give me. I don’t want you to pull back. I want dirty, rough sex with you. I trust you. Promise me.”

She’s pleading with me. Fear is written all over her face.

I take a deep breath, because her concern is justified. I was already prepared to tone down my intensity. I was shifting my expectations, and that’s not fair to her. To prove I understand, I yank on her hair, tugging her head back so I can kiss her neck.

“I promise, my dirty little slut.” She needs to hear I won’t treat her any differently. I slap the curve of her ass for good measure.

She sighs.

But then I pull back, so she can see my rage-filled conviction. “I will kill him though,” I tell her, already anticipating the moment. “He’s not going to go unpunished for this. I’m going to track him down and I’m going to rape him in the ass with my favorite hunting knife to show me what it’s like. I’m going to make him suffer for hours begging for mercy before I put him out of his disgusting misery.”

Georgia just nods. “I’d like that,” she says.

That makes me smile.

She’s just fucking perfect.

Gabriella

His nickname is Sadist. He comes by it honestly because he loves to torture everyone at Sunset Grove Correctional Facility. But especially the girls.

I’m his favorite target.

He’s found the most unique way imaginable to torment me.

He’s turned every other student prisoner against me.

Ari was released on his twenty-first birthday and I’ve heard nothing from him since. My sweet Ari, talking me down

off the ledge during the endless dark nights with promises of a romance, where he takes his place beside his father and we best mine together.

But in the wake of Ari's departure and protection, Sadist has singled me out. When we line up morning, noon, and night, he goes down the line, punching, slapping, kicking and spitting on each student. Except me. As there are cries of pain and moans that he revels in, he skips right over me, like I don't exist.

But by ignoring me, everyone else assumes that I'm fucking him or at least sucking him off in order to be spared the pain and they hate me for it. They take their frustration out on me, and for every slap I don't receive from Sadist, I get ten from my fellow students.

I try to plead my case, but they don't believe me and why would they? I would think the same thing in their position.

It's so fucking obvious.

Which is why Sadist loves it.

He is around thirty, muscular, with acne scars and crooked teeth. He isn't ugly but in no way is he attractive either. Just a mix of assets and flaws. Like most of us.

I go to him, to beg him to stop ignoring me.

"You want me to hit you?" he asks, amused, chewing on a toothpick in the hallway, arms crossed casually. He isn't even afraid I could escape or attack him. He's ignoring the gun at his waistband.

"Yes."

"Gabriella, that's stupid. You should be thanking me."

"But the other kids hate me because of it."

"The other kids know you're better than them."

I lick my dry lips. I don't understand his game.

His thumb shoots out and follows the path of my tongue across the cracked flesh of my lip. Then he kisses me. It's a

terrible wet and sloppy kiss, right in the hallway where anyone can see.

I jerk back, horrified.

He sees my reaction and before I can school my expression understanding dawns. "You think you're better than everyone too, don't you? You're a stuck up bitch."

He's making it sound like this is my fault. Like I did this, pissed off the other kids, pissed off him. I haven't done anything.

But he takes me by my arm and yanks me into a storage closet. I try to fight. I kick and scratch and claw but he has me face down against a metal rack and unzips his pants. I feel the thick press of him between my legs and reach out behind me, trying to knock him away.

I'm a virgin and there's no lubrication so he's struggling to shove his dick inside me.

No penetration happens and as he struggles, there's chafing and friction between us. His dick eventually goes limp.

He lets me go, smashing my head against the rack for emphasis, swearing as I fall to the floor, head bleeding.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" he demands. "Ungrateful cunt."

He enters my room that night with ropes to restrain me and a bottle of lube and he finishes what he started. He pulls out and comes on my stomach and then spits in my face.

As I'm bleeding, insides shredded, trembling on my bed and wiping saliva off my cheek, I ask him, "Can I have a razor blade?"

It's all I can think about, slicing myself and releasing all my internal agony and fire.

"What?"

"A razor blade. I want to cut myself."

He stares at me like I'm a lunatic.

But later, he shoves a razor blade under my door. I don't know what he thinks I'm planning and I don't care.

That's when I start to cut myself and touch myself at the same time, reclaiming my body, my pleasure, for myself.

Chapter Twenty

Georgia

Alex feeds me dinner out on the patio. He likes to feed me. It seems to give him pleasure to take a morsel here and there and slip it between my lips. I refuse to read anything into it. He did this before. It's not because he feels sorry for me since I told him a part of my past.

It makes me squirm to talk about Sadist. I never do. I never have. The only one who knew was Ari and he rejected me when he found out. He had a thing for virgins and I wasn't one anymore. Ironic that Ari loved Gabriella but Nash had nothing for Georgia.

"You can tell me anything, you know," Alex says, deceptively casual.

Those pale eyes that fascinate me burn into my soul.

"Sure. Likewise."

"I have nothing to tell."

"Neither do I." He puts his arms out. "I'm an open book."

We're both lying.

I don't want to talk about anything.

Alex had me dress for dinner in sexy lingerie and a cocktail dress with a plunging neckline. The bra under the dress has no cups, just an elaborate system of straps designed to emphasize and draw attention to my bare tits. The panties are the same, a series of vertical and horizontal lines with a slit open over my pussy so he can put anything he wants inside it.

He already has.

Before I sat down he stopped me.

“What?”

“Spread your legs,” he’d said. He held up a vibrator with a remote control, making me shiver. “This goes in your cunt for dinner to keep you nice and wet for me.”

God, the way he talks. I’d obediently lifted my dress, spread my thighs and leaned against the wall of the patio so he could tease it inside me inch by aching inch.

“How is that? Snug?”

“Very,” I breathed, closing my eyes briefly as the midsize vibe still managed to fill me completely. My core clenched and I shuddered. “Alex, I can’t sit like this.”

“Yes, you can. Cross your legs if you need to.”

“Are you turning it on?” I asked as I gingerly lowered myself into the chair, putting a leg over the opposite knee and pressing my thighs tightly together. My mouth had felt thick and hot with desire.

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

Now it’s torture to sit here trussed up in my lingerie with all my aching bits bare, rubbing against fabric while the vibrator shifts and hugs along the walls of my pussy.

But we settle into a pleasant meal, with light conversation and repeated encouragement from Alex to try this or that as he raises a forkful of something to my lips. He’s somehow both intense and casual, his focus always solely on me. I feel pampered, cared for. I’m also getting full quickly though considering how little I’ve been eating recently.

After Alex eases his fork full of pesto covered pasta into my mouth, I carefully sit back into my chair, waving my hand at him. “Stop,” I say, hand in front of my lips, laughing softly. “I can’t eat anymore.”

There were six courses to this meal, including the pasta course, and it’s all spread out before us. Alex is making me

take a bite from each one and then repeat.

“You have to keep your strength up.”

“For what, climbing Mount Everest? Because I have no intention of doing that.”

“For sex all night long. And for growing a baby.” He leans back in his own chair, looking incredibly pleased with himself. “God, I can’t wait to see you pregnant. Huge tits getting bigger every day, your pussy extra plump and sensitive. You’re going to want me to suck and pluck every inch of you all day long.”

“Even my pussy is going to get fat? Gee, I can’t wait,” I say, rolling my eyes.

“Not fat. *Delicious*,” he insists.

It’s then that an electric jolt goes shooting through my pussy without warning and I jump with a startled moan. “Oh fuck, Alex!”

He’s turned the vibrator on from the remote in his pocket. Not low, but full blast. Even my ass is feeling the tingle of all that rapid motion. I grip the chair tightly as I go sopping wet, clamping down around the vibrator to hold it inside me. I’ll cry in agony if it slips out from my panicked movement because it feels so fucking good. My tits get heavy, nipples sensitive and straining against the silk dress, caged and held pert by the straps of the bra.

I moan in pleasure, letting it throb inside me for long seconds before I get restless. It’s massaging my inner walls, but it’s not enough. It’s too still. I want it to fuck my pussy.

My legs instinctively fly apart and I grind my ass down onto the chair. That’s not right either. I whimper as it shifts, the tip sliding out. My dress has bunched up.

“Look at your cunt,” Alex says. “And tell me what you need to do.”

I glance down at myself, seeing the source of my frustration. The purple tip is peeking out between my folds and the straps of the thong. My chest is heaving, my inner walls on fire. I need to come so bad.

“I need it deeper,” I say.

“That’s exactly right. Hold it in,” he orders roughly. “Don’t you dare let that vibrator slip out. Use your fingers and push it all the way deep into your pussy, baby. Just don’t let it out.”

“I won’t, I definitely won’t,” I say and my voice sounds unnaturally husky, fierce. I bear down, using the flat portion of the chair cushion to hold the vibe in, my knees spread wide. I lean forward and shift one hand to the table edge, the other on the tip of the toy, securing its position buried to the hilt in my dripping pussy. I lift up and down, grinding on it, wanting more.

“That’s it. Fuck that vibrator. Make it work for you.”

“Yes, yes!”

I’m so wet we can hear the slickness sluicing on the silicone and the creak of the chair as I bounce up and down on it.

“You like that?”

“Yes!”

The speed immediately lowers. I cry out in agony. “No, don’t stop! Please.”

“Shh, don’t whine, I’m just changing the rhythm.”

It’s a staccato now. A pounding, then a surge. Pound, surge. “*Oh, God.*”

I focus on Alex. He’s watching me with a smugness that both turns me on and makes me want to resist him, prove myself as a worthy adversary.

He holds the controller for the vibrator up in the air, waving it. “What should I do now, Georgia? Should I stop?”

“Please, don’t,” I breathe.

“Or maybe…” he cranks up the speed. “You’d like more.”

It’s everything I need. As the increase in speed causes the ribbed edges to massage my inner walls, it hits a perfect spot.

An orgasm rolls through me like a clap of thunder. Hard, fast, loud.

“Oh, *fuck.*”

My hips are pistoning and I’m grinding down as I ride out the wet wave of ecstasy.

Hot vibrations spiral out from my core and zing throughout my body, causing me to shudder and rock, crying out when it finally ebbs.

But Alex changes the pulsing again as I’m petering out and it shoots me right into a second explosion. My legs are trembling, my pussy clenching onto the vibe as I reach up and pinch one of my nipples to sharpen and draw out the pleasure.

I’m still squeezing and breathing hard, eyes wide in pleasure as the last shivers quiet.

“That’s it. So good, Georgia, yank on that nipple. Nice and dirty, I love it. Now rip that dress off for me.”

Dinner is clearly over.

Struggling and panting, coming down off the two quick bursts of pleasure, I manage to drag my dress off over my head. I toss it behind me. The night air is still warm, an ocean breeze dancing over us, bringing the smell of the ocean. I love this combination. Salty air and orgasms.

“Stand up,” he orders.

I do, on shaky legs, feeling sexy and on display for him. My ass is up in the air so I can keep the vibe inside. My tits are tumbling forward over the plates. He seems to love me over a table. This is twice in one day.

Alex stands up and moves behind me, his hands tracing the curves of my ass cheeks.

Then he cracks his palm on my ass with a sharp sting. I jump, sucking in my breath.

“How hard do you like it?” he murmurs, bending down to lean closer to my ear.

I don't answer, distracted by the steady pulsing of the vibe still inside me. Intensity is building up again in my pussy as Alex nudges his hard cock into the divot of my ass.

He yanks my hair so hard tears pool in my eyes. "Are you listening?"

"Yes. Turn the vibe off and give me that hard cock."

"Oh, who is calling the shots here?"

"Both of us," I say boldly, over my shoulder.

He laughs. "So you want some cock instead of the chance to keep fucking this?" He reaches a hand around the front of me and slides over my clit in a teasing circle before coming to rest on the tip of the vibrator.

Before I can even answer, he turns the vibrator off. In spite of my request to do just that, I give a cry of dismay.

His thumb rubs over my clit, massaging the ache to even greater heights. "What kind of pain do you like? Tell me."

When he eases the vibe out, I shudder, legs relaxing. I was clenching harder than I realized.

"I like spanking. Hair pulling, light flogging, being tied up." I almost hesitate but I actually mentioned it to him earlier, so there's no point in demurring. Besides, I am who I am now. "Blood play."

Most men I've been with I haven't even brought that up. It seems to be a niche kink that you either love or you think is disturbing and messy. But maybe I'm disturbing and messy. I can't and I won't apologize for that anymore. Besides, if any man can handle it, it must be Alex.

As if to prove me right, Alex gives a growl of pleasure. "A charcuterie of kinks. I love it."

That makes me laugh softly. He remembers my charcuterie comment. "I think they're actually pretty ordinary. Well. Most of them."

He has straightened me up, off of the table so that I'm tucked in against him. I relax my muscles, letting him hold me

with his arms. I feel shaky. But he's strong and he's supporting my weight effortlessly, nuzzling his lips along my jawline. I wrap my arms over his, sighing with pleasure.

"Blood play probably isn't the most common kink, but lucky us, we both share it."

Alex barely moves and yet suddenly there is a knife on the table. It falls with a clatter on the glass and spins.

Lust rips through me like a tornado.

I have no idea where he has been keeping that. Though I can't say I'm surprised.

"I have a fascination with knives," he murmurs into my ear. "They're my thing."

"Your thing?"

"Yes. My talent. Some people are good at numbers, some are endurance runners. Me? I can use any knife."

"And here I thought you were fond of guns."

"Those too. Weapons in general. But God I do love a sharp blade." He reaches out and draws the knife to the edge of the table. He hits the handle once it's dangling over the edge and the knife springs up. It does a full flip before he deftly catches it.

"Bravo," I say. "Do you juggle as well?"

He laughs softly, his breath tickling my neck. "Just women. But that was then." He flips the knife again. "This is now."

It's hypnotic. He flips the knife again and again. Flip. Catch. Flip. Catch. His accuracy is impressive, the knife in his palm familiarly, as if he's done this thousands of times.

"There won't be other women, correct?" I ask. "Because I don't want there to be." I say it more fiercely than I intend to. But the idea that Alex would share his passion, his cock, *himself*, with another woman makes me burn with jealousy.

"You're more than enough for me to handle." His knife disappears.

I turn back, pleased by his answer but wanting more. Wanting him. “Manhandle me, Alex.”

“I fucking intend to. Get over here.” He steps back, yanking me hard by the hand and the back of my hair away from the table. “Come to the edge with me, queen.”

Goosebumps race down my arms as his eyes sweep over me from head to toe in the sexy bra and panties. “You’re taking me to the edge?”

He gives me a slow, sexy smile. “Always, sweetheart.” The knife reappears out of nowhere. “And taking you over the edge.” He eases the tip over his finger. A bead of blood springs forth.

Desire coils in my belly like a snake.

My back is suddenly against the concrete wall. He shoves me so hard all the air whooshes out of my lungs. He stands in front of me, still fully dressed, me in heels and nothing but bindings masquerading as lingerie. My skin scrapes against the wall but I don’t care.

All I care about is being fucked by him.

And by that tempting drop of blood trudging down his fingertip when he holds it up. “Open your mouth.”

When I do, he eases his finger between my lips and we both moan softly at the thrust into my hot wet mouth. His blood is sharp and tangy, and I close my eyes in the agony of my pleasure. My moan is low and deep around his flesh.

“Suck it, you little slut. Suck it like it’s my cock and you can’t get enough.” With his free hand he tears his shirt open and rips it off of his chest and arm.

His finger is sawing in and out of my mouth, but at his words, I reach up and grab his wrist with both my hands and squeeze like I would his dick. “Yes, let me suck it.” I’m desperate, drawing him in harder. The more I pull in my cheeks, the more I’m rewarded with a fresh burst of his blood from his fingertip.

My pussy is heavy, throbbing.

Alex yanks my leg up by the soft flesh of my thigh, forcing me wide open. “That’s it,” he says. “Press into me, baby. Show me how much you want it. You want it, don’t it? To suck and to fuck.”

I nod eagerly. “Yes, yes,” I murmur around his finger. I’m rolling my hips out of instinct, trying to get closer to him, trying to grind against his cock.

“Stop moving,” Alex commands.

“I can’t help it.” I’m rocking without control, whimpering as I flick my tongue up and down the length of his finger.

But then I see the blade of his knife between us, a flash in the dusky patio lighting. I go still, heart racing. Fear mingles with pleasure, a combination that makes my head spin.

“That’s it,” he murmurs, his eyes dark with lust and desire. “Do as I say, Georgia.”

My chest is heaving, my legs trembling. Slick moisture trickles down my inner thigh. I watch the knife, fascinated. I realize I’m not afraid. I’m turned on.

He puts it to my throat, a barely there touch. It’s a whisper of pain, the briefest tiniest prick of the tip making contact with my flesh. The skin breaks, proving the knife is razor sharp. Then the knife disappears and his lips descend to my throat, to suck gently at the bead of blood.

“Fuck, yes,” he murmurs. “You taste like my forever.”

Oh my God. His words make me breathless. Frantic.

I need to come. I need to seal this moment between us forever

I shift his finger out of my mouth and down over my breasts. I shove it, hard, into my wet pussy. I use him to fuck myself.

He lets me, but he also steps back and gives me a slow, dirty smile. “You’re fucking filthy, Georgia. I love it. But I can do a hell of a lot better than that.”

The belt on his pants rips off, he strips entirely, and kicks my feet apart.

Chapter Twenty-One

Alex

Having Georgia suck on my finger has my dick as hard as steel. She lapped at the drops of blood like she can't enough.

I can't get enough either.

The faintest taste of her blood is swirling around on my tongue like the richest wine. Life pulses between us. We're creating life.

"Yes," she breathes. "I'm fucking filthy."

My cock throbs. "You love being filthy, I can tell."

She nods. "Yes, yes, I do."

She's still using my finger to get herself off, frantically, and it's so fucking hot. She's careening out of control in her desperate need, and I want to push her further, as far as she can go.

The edge.

"Bite down on this," I tell her, bringing the blade of my knife between us.

It's a small knife, designed to be concealed easily. It goes everywhere with me, like my nine millimeter.

Her rough finger fucking pauses. "What?" she asks.

My finger, slick from her juicy arousal, rests inside her. I flick it, swiping at the spongy spot that gets her off. She moans softly.

“Bite down on the blade while I fuck you. I want to see you hold it in place. If you can’t hold it, it will fall and cut us.”

“I don’t know if I can,” she says. “I’ll have to be quiet.”

“That’s the point. You can do it. I know you can because you’re strong, Georgia. You’re powerful. You’re amazing.”

I ease the knife between her lips, the tip facing the ocean. “Bite.”

She obeys, tentative at first, then harder when she realizes how much pressure she needs to keep the blade from sliding. The handle makes it imbalanced. Her eyes widen with fear and lust.

The perfect combination.

“I’m going to fuck you now,” I warn her, so she can prepare herself.

Then I shove my cock inside her so hard I lift her off of the floor, way up onto her tiptoes. Her instinct is to gasp and her teeth part slightly, but then she realizes the knife is teetering and she clamps down. Simultaneously, her pussy clamps down on my cock.

“Fuck, yes,” I murmur as it hot wet pulsing heat between us.

The tighter the grip on the knife, the tighter her grip on me. I palm her hip, holding her steady. I drive into her, over and over.

She breathes through her nose, quick frantic bursts, but she holds onto the knife, her eyes rolling back in her head.

It’s nothing but me shoving into her tight channel.

Her back scrapes on the wall, our flesh slaps together, she whimpers around the knife.

I never break eye contact. I want to own every inch of her. I want to absorb every sound she makes, every shift of her body, every scent. I want to breathe her in and invade her until she doesn’t exist without me.

“You’re mine,” I tell her roughly.

She nods without hesitation.

“I own every inch of this body.”

She nods again.

“You love getting fucked by me.” It’s not a question.

But she nods, even more emphatically now.

That makes me smile. I pound her against the wall, burying myself to the hilt in her. It knocks the breath out of her. The knife rattles between her teeth, but she squeezes. Again, when she grinds her teeth together, she squeezes her pussy reflexively around me.

It takes us both to the edge.

I need to pound my way through my release, but ladies first.

“Come for me, queen. Soak my cock,” I demand.

Her nails dig into my forearms as she obeys and an orgasm rips through her.

It’s fucking beautiful to watch her come on my command, my knife wobbling as she tries to scream but can’t. She rolls her hips, her head falling to the side, her nails scratching through my flesh as she finds her pleasure.

It’s enough to send me into my own explosion. I bury myself in her, and let loose my hot burst of cum deep inside her pussy. We both shudder and claw our way through it together.

I realize as I rest inside her, dick still pulsating, and I reach up to take the knife back, that I may own her, but she owns me right in return.

Georgia takes a deep shuddering breath once the knife is gone and licks her bottom lip. “Alex,” she says, and it’s a plaintive cry of wonderment.

“I know,” I tell her, easing out so she can rest her feet back flat on the floor. I shift her hair back off her face and take in every inch of her face, wanting to preserve this moment. “I

never believed in soulmates before, but you were made just for me.”

“Just you,” she whispers, her fingers trembling as they trail up my arms. “I want to be your wife, Alex.”

“You will be.”

As if I was never married to her half-sister.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Alex

“Do you want to explain to me what the fuck you’re doing?” my father asks the next night, casually, seated at the end of his pretentious dining room table in his Miami house the following evening.

My father’s taste lies squarely in gilded opulence. It’s like a mini Versailles with painted murals, velvet draperies, and ceiling medallions. Everywhere I look there’s a fucking cherub pointing an arrow at me or one of my father’s mistresses thinly disguised as a Grecian goddess. Over the years they were added one by one whenever he had a new love interest, ending with my stepmother, Katrina.

I’ve always wondered why she doesn’t make him repaint the room, but maybe she doesn’t realize what each semi-nude female figure represents. Or more likely, because her goddess portrait now dominates the entire south facing wall and she married my father, she can smugly look at all those before her who failed to secure the ring.

“If I had known this was a family dinner, I would have brought Georgia.” Instead, she’s napping at the hotel and looking through the apartment options back in New York my assistant sent me online to preview.

I’d rather she was here.

Even though we spent the entire day lounging by the pool at the hotel and having sex on and off. I can’t keep my hands off of her.

I've also been asking her questions about her boarding school as well as looking into it myself. I want to know who the piece of shit is who raped her when she was a unprotected teenager. I'm looking forward to torturing him as payback for hurting Georgia.

But I'm neglecting business. I need to focus on what is next.

I take my seat to the right of my father.

Luka is on his left.

Maxim is next to me, Tatiana beside Luka. Katrina is still in New York.

"Why would you bring that girl? I don't want mistresses in this house."

I shoot a pointed look at his mural. "Is that so?"

Tatiana snorts.

My father blusters. "She's not family. She's not your wife, Alex."

"She's going to be." Amazing what can change in a matter of a day or two.

"You're going to marry some plain-faced NYU grad who can't hold a job?" he asks, sounding genuinely bewildered.

I love this game of "I know something you don't know." It never gets old.

But I take exception to him calling Georgia plain. "She's gorgeous, Dad. Just not your type. And she is more than an NYU grad with no job. Much more."

That's an understatement. She's brilliant, daring, savvy.

The servant pours wine for me. I lift the glass. The red body reminds me of my Georgia. Of her complexity, her intelligence, her fighting spirit. Of her flicking her tongue over beads of my blood.

Luka is watching me. He knows me better than anyone else in the family because we're identical twins. We shared a

fucking uterus for nine months. He can read me almost one-hundred-percent of the time.

“What is it?” he asks, his own glass halfway to his mouth. “You’re smirking.”

I am. I can’t help it. But I’m not showing my hand yet, not even to my family.

“Maybe I’m in love,” I tell him, allowing the smirk to widen. That’s the truth, though such a fluffy word for the obsessive need for Georgia that I have.

My father swears. “Fucking idiot.”

Luka cracks a laugh.

Maxim grunts and shakes his head.

Tatiana says, “Oh, sweetie, do we need to talk about the difference between love and lust? Just because she lets you play hide the salami doesn’t make it love, I promise. Other girls will touch your penis without expecting a ring.”

Her saccharine tone actually draws a laugh from Maxim, who has zero sense of humor.

“You’re hilarious,” I tell her. Though I’m not angry. My step sister almost always entertains me. She’s vicious with her truths.

“No, I’m disgusted is what I am. I have excellent hearing and a house next to yours. You railed her at least twice on the patio.” She puts her hands to her chest and imitates Georgia in a breathless voice. “Alex, oh God, yes!”

I’m actually amused by her impression. It’s not inaccurate.

“Don’t be so crude, Tat,” our father reprimands her. “This is a fucking family dinner.”

He doesn’t even see the irony of his words.

“Sorry,” Tatiana says. “But honestly, Dad, Alex is gross. My virgin ears are scarred for life.”

Maxim, who has been slouching his big and brawny frame down in his chair, suddenly frowns. “You’re a virgin?” he asks

Tatiana.

“I think she’s being sarcastic, idiot,” Luka tells him.

“No, I’m not being sarcastic. Why wouldn’t I be a virgin?” She blinks at Maxim with a sweet smile.

I can’t read my brother’s reaction. But then that’s not unusual. I never know what he’s thinking. But he looks unsettled by the conversation.

“Of course she’s a virgin!” Our father has a vein popping in his temple. “She’s just a kid and she’s not married!”

Ah. So she’s playing the game with Dad.

She’s twenty-one, hardly a kid. But fathers and their daughters have a complex relationship. With his sons my father just barks orders and demands, and spent most of our childhood either goofing around with us or toughening us up. With Tatiana, he was completely different. She had him wrapped around her finger. Still does.

He always seems determined to think of her as sixteen.

Which makes me wonder about Lorenzo and his two daughters. He couldn’t have treated them any differently. Nicolette was his perfect princess, Georgia his mini-me. Ironic that he preferred the daughter who is nothing like him.

He respects Nicolette’s passivity over Georgia’s strength.

That’s absolutely mind boggling to me.

“She has her own house,” I point out. “She’s not a kid.”

“Thank you, Alex.” Tatiana gives me a smile. “At least someone realizes that.” Her glare swings between our father and Maxim.

“Enough of that,” my father states, clearly annoyed that he can’t control his adult children. “What are you going to do about Lorenzo?”

I smile and raise my glass. “Trust me. I have a plan.”

He’ll never see it coming.

I love this game.

And I love winning.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Georgia

A little over a week later, Alex and I are strolling down our new block in the Upper West Side.

“Are you hungry?” he asks me, a cup of coffee in his hand.

I’m drinking tea because he won’t let me have caffeine in case I’m pregnant. I’m tempted to point, say “Look over there,” and steal a sip of his drink because I love coffee.

But if this is the price I have to pay to be with Alex, then I will. I can sacrifice my hot bean water.

“No, not really.” He’s been overfeeding me like a goldfish.

He puts his hand on the small of my back and steers me away from the trash piled up on the curb for pickup. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure,” I say, amused. “I’m twenty-four years old. I know when I’m hungry or not.”

Alex frowns at me. “You’re grumpy. I think you’re hungry.”

If he didn’t look so genuinely concerned I would be really annoyed with him at this point. “I think you’re being ridiculous. Sweet, but ridiculous.”

I’m not sure where we’re walking to. Alex just said he needed to grab something from the store. We chose a building here because the neighborhood is family friendly. It’s a dream apartment, a dream block, a dream life. I have to pinch myself to believe that it’s real. Just two weeks ago I was being evicted

from my dingy apartment by my roommate and had no idea where I was going to live.

Now I have a luxury apartment with a closetful of designer clothes, just like Quinn. No pool like she and Armani have, but it's a million times nicer than anything I've expected to live in since my sixteenth birthday. Today I'm wearing designer jeans with designer boots with a cashmere sweater that makes me want to take a nap in it. I have insanely expensive sunglasses perched on my nose and a Chanel bag over my arm that was more than six months of my rent in Brooklyn. My hair has been transformed back to my natural color and given a stylish cut and blowout.

We've just gotten back on a private jet from another weekend in Miami and Alex had my mother brought to his house permanently. Then he disappeared to do business that he never discusses with me, and my mother and I lounged by the pool and talked. I let the sun bake my skin and lull me into feeling as if there are no problems whatsoever left in my world.

It's a fun fantasy.

Not based on reality, but a fun fantasy.

Every day that we spend in New York I'm hyper-aware of my father and his many connections. He'll find out I'm dating Alex, if he hasn't already. He'll think this is about revenge.

Which maybe it is.

But mostly it's about survival.

I also know I need to go and see Quinn, but I feel guilty. I gave her a hard time about marrying Armani and using his credit cards and now I'm doing the same. I also know that sooner or later I have to tell her about Aristotle and how he spotted her in the park with me. About my father as well. She's going to hate me though for lying, for keeping secrets.

I'm trying to think of how I can explain it all to her. Boarding school. The beatings, the blood. Sadist.

How I didn't want any of that to be a part of my new life at NYU. My normal life.

Maybe she'll understand. Mostly I think she's going to be angry.

"You know what's ridiculous?" Alex asks, pausing outside a drugstore to take my hand to his lips and kiss my knuckles. "How much I adore you."

"Why is that ridiculous?" I ask with a smile. "Maybe I'm just very adorable."

"It's ridiculous because I'm a coldhearted bastard. Unless I'm with you. Then I want to just sit and stare at you and enjoy being in love."

That makes my breath catch. "You're in love?"

He nods, slowly, the corner of his mouth turning up in a sly smile. "Oh, yeah. Fucking deep, queen. I'm in love with you so damn much."

The wind whips my hair across my face and I swipe it back impatiently. It seems so unlike Alex to tell me something that important standing on the sidewalk with people brushing past us, but I don't even care. I'm just happy.

"I love you too," I murmur.

Alex throws his coffee into a trash can next to us. He takes my cardboard cup filled with tea out of my hand and does the same.

"I wasn't finished with that," I protest. Not because I care. I know he's going to kiss me and that's why he's pitched it. But Alex needs to be reminded he's not in total control all the time.

"I'll buy you another one. It was cold anyway."

That makes me laugh softly as he draws me into his embrace. "How do you know?"

"I know things."

"Yeah? What do you know?"

"That I'm the happiest man alive because I found my perfect fit."

“Do I know her?” I’m giddy from knowing Alex loves me. It’s making me bold.

Alex chuckles. “Fucking smart ass.” He cups my cheeks and kisses me, hard. “Now wait here. I’ll be right back.”

“Where are you going?”

“The store. Just wait here.”

I cross my arms over my chest but I don’t protest. I know better than to argue with Alex. It’s wasted breath. Maybe the store is some kind of cover for business dealings. Maybe he has a meeting in the backroom. Maybe he wants a bottle of water. There’s no telling.

I lean against the brick wall and look around me, sighing deeply in contentment. I really landed on my feet this time. There are two well-dressed moms pushing their babies in posh strollers side-by-side and it brings a smile to my lips. That might be me in a year.

Then my gaze lands on a man across the street and my entire body goes numb. My face goes hot and I’m lightheaded, feeling like I’m about to go down in a faint. It feels like there’s no blood left in my body yet I’m on fire.

That man looks just like my father.

He’s wearing a well-tailored suit and sunglasses as he comes out of a cafe.

It can’t be him.

This man doesn’t seem aware of me.

He looks too old.

Then again, my father is older now. Close to seventy.

My ears are ringing and I’m breathing heavy, rasping air in and out, struggling to stay conscious and not throw up.

Then the man is gone. He gets into a black car and drives off in the opposite direction from me. Without ever looking at me.

Yet I can’t shake the feeling it’s him.

“Georgia,” Alex says.

I jump and turn to him, reaching out with a trembling hand, needing support. “I feel like I’m going to faint.”

“*Fuck*. I knew you were hungry,” he accuses. He raises his hand for a taxi. “You’re eating when we get home.”

I don’t even argue. I let him bustle me into the cab and straight back to our new apartment. He pulls me against him and massages my thigh. I let him, burying my face in his shirt.

Why does that man, my father, still scare me so much?

Confrontation is brewing. I can feel it, creeping in like winter, one cool breeze at a time.

“Let go,” I plead, as my father drags me by the hair. It’s stinging my scalp, causing tears to form. I hate when I cry in front of him.

He sees it as weakness and it makes me angry when I do.

“You’re going to learn some fucking respect,” he says, tossing me onto the floor.

I’ve never been in this room. I didn’t know it existed. Then again, I’ve only been at my father’s apartment in New York for two days. Before that, I’d never been here even once. This is where his wife and his legitimate daughter live. I’ve never been allowed to exist in New York, let alone step foot in this princess palace.

But his wife and Nicolette are in Italy shopping and for whatever reason, he brought me here after I tried to kill him with peanut butter.

I’ve been sleeping in a guest room, but sneaking out to disappear into Nicolette’s room at night, to run my hands over her bedding, her clothes, her expensive makeup brushes. I stared at all her pictures displayed on shelves. Her in Paris. Her in London. Her in a ballgown. Her on the beach. On a camel in front of the pyramids of Giza. They’re all of her.

Every fucking one. No one else is ever in the photos with her. She looks exactly as I imagined she would. Smug. Bitchy. I hate her at the same time I want to be her and I want her to love me, to be a sister to me. I want to be a family. I want my father to love me the way he loves her.

I crawled into her bed and pretended I'm her, blonde and thin and poised.

How many times did she stare at that same ceiling and touch herself, pleased with her life, how fucking perfect she and everything in it is?

My father found me the second night because I stupidly left my door open. He'd been locking me into the guest room but I picked the lock.

"What the fuck are you doing in here?" he roared, yanking me by the arm away from Nicolette's dresser.

I've been going through the drawers.

I don't bother to answer. It's obvious I'm snooping.

"You're never to touch anything that's hers," he said as dragged me down the hall and tossed me into this new room.

"God, you're a fucking menace," he fumes as I rub my elbow, half-lying on the floor. "Stupid little cunt. You don't appreciate a damn thing I've done for you."

"You haven't done shit for me," I say defiantly.

It's a bad move.

He backhands me so hard my teeth rattle.

Then he leaves, locking the door behind me.

I realize there are no windows in this room. There's nothing but a bed and a powder room in the corner. The floor is bare cement. There's no doorknob to exit. It's some kind of safe room and I'm trapped in it.

He's dropped a shoebox on his bug.

The question is, will he relocate me or squash me beneath his heel?

Chapter Twenty-Four

Alex watches me eat at our apartment, sitting across from me at our breakfast table. When I push the bowl of soup away and say, “I can’t eat anymore,” he looks agitated but doesn’t force the issue.

Instead he gives my breasts a lingering gaze.

“Did you just look at my tits?” I ask him, rolling my eyes. Clearly his caregiver role can only last so long.

“They’re bigger,” he says, and shoves his chair back rapidly. “I’m absolutely certain of it.” He retrieves the bag from the drugstore and hands it to me. “Here. Take this.”

“What’s this?” I ask, opening the bag. I look inside and see the white box. “A pregnancy test? Alex, it’s too soon.”

“It’s not too soon,” he says confidently.

Because the world always bends to Alex’s will.

“You’re going to be disappointed.”

“I read that these tests can tell as soon as five days after conception.” He takes the bag back and pulls out the pregnancy test. “Your tits are bigger. You’re feeling dizzy and nauseous. Go take the test.”

I was dizzy because I thought I saw my father. I can’t say that, so I obey, taking the box from him and going to the powder room near our foyer.

I do what I need to do then go back and set the timer on my phone. I put it on the table and sit back down to sip my fresh tea, heart thumping painfully in my chest. I don’t even

know what I want the test to say but I'm sure it will be negative. I don't physically feel any different.

Alex kisses my forehead, but he doesn't sit back down, nor does he try to engage me in conversation. He just stands and scrolls through his phone until the timer goes off. I hit the button to make the sound stop and look up at Alex. "Do you want to look?" I ask him.

He gives a curt nod. "Yes."

A minute later he comes back into the room, the test in his hand. He's holding it up and smirking.

My stomach drops.

So does my jaw.

"Alex?"

"I knew it," he says and throws the test down on the kitchen table. "Pregnant. Fuck, *yes*." His expression is smug, satisfied.

The tests spins around and around, making my dizziness return. When it slows, like a board game wheel, it's pointing straight at Alex. The word is clearly visible. PREGNANT.

The world does lay down at Alex's feet and obey his every command.

We're having a baby.

"More flowers, Zeke?" I ask, laughing as I pull the door open to our apartment, expecting to see the doorman yet again.

What I see is Nicolette, dressed in a hot pink pants suit, her hair pulled back off of her face into an elegant high ponytail. Billionaire Barbie.

The smile I'm displaying disappears. My cheeks get instantly hot.

What the hell is she doing here?

“Hello,” she says, coolly, strolling into my apartment, clutch purse under her arm. She pauses a few feet in and looks around the room, assessing.

What she’s seeing is an apartment bursting with flowers. Alex has been sending them so they arrive almost every hour for the last two days. Ever since the pregnancy test came up positive he’s been showering me with attention, gifts, and orgasms. He can’t stop kissing on me and touching me and expressing how thrilled he is we’re having a baby.

Every table surface and countertop in the apartment is filled with floral arrangements, each more gorgeous than the one before. It’s been over-the-top and ridiculous and frankly, a little claustrophobic, but I love every single thing about it. It makes me fucking giddy to stand in my living room and see this visual display of extravagant love. Or obsession. Or gratitude. Whatever you want to call it, I haven’t stopped grinning. I do happy dances every time one arrives. I smell the roses. I kiss the cards he encloses. I run my hand over my stomach and try to envision a life growing inside me, a life that Alex and I created together, maybe the first night we were together.

Seeing the flowers feels like being handed everything I’ve ever wanted all in one fell swoop.

That’s how seeing the flowers makes me feel.

I can’t even imagine how it makes Nicolette feel.

“How did you get up here?” I manage to ask her, even as my throat feels tight. I want to know who allowed her to enter my private space, to destroy my sense of security.

“I’m Alex’s wife,” Nicolette says. “I’m entitled to access to anything that’s his. Plus, I bribed the doorman.”

I hate that she is still technically his wife. “What do you want? Alex isn’t here right now.”

She doesn’t answer my question. Instead, she plucks the card out of the nearest bouquet of flowers like she has the right to do whatever she wants. In my house.

“You are my everything,” she reads, her voice chilly. “A little generic, but it gets the point across.” She moves to the next bouquet without looking at me. “Let’s see what this one says.”

I’m fuming. Those are mine. Alex’s private thoughts to me. I want to yank her back by the ponytail and hurl her into the hallway, but I need to stay calm. As icy cool as she is. I want to know if she realizes who I am. I need to know what she wants.

I’ve never been this physically close to my sister. It’s a bizarre feeling. For years, I fantasized about this moment, this reunion. I both craved a sisterly love and I resented her. I’ve wanted to meet her, see if we connect, if we click.

I wonder if she knew I was in her bedroom all those years ago. I doubt it. I doubt she has any clue who I am. She doesn’t seem interested in me as anything other than a rival for Alex’s affection.

But all I can think about is that she’s touching my notes from Alex, sullyng them.

“You taste like forever,” she reads from the card. Her nose wrinkles. “That’s actually unpleasant sounding.”

It’s what Alex said to me on the patio of the hotel in Miami. It doesn’t sound unpleasant to me. It sounds like the moment I captured his heart. The moment my future changed radically for the better.

I’m contemplating how to get her the hell out of my apartment when she grabs another card, this one from a traditional bouquet of red roses. It’s a massive bouquet, meant to make a statement.

“Two hundred and twelve roses for each hour that you’ve had my whole heart.” Her face drains of color. She clears her throat and clenches the card so tightly she’s crumpling it. “That one is impressive, I have to admit.”

Irritated beyond reason, I reach out and snatch it from her hands before she ruins it. I don’t want the edges bent or the writing smudged. “These are none of your business.”

Her chin goes up. “He’s still my husband.”

That makes me burn with jealousy. But I know it’s on paper and nothing more. That she’s trying to claim ownership over him now infuriates me. “He’s legally your husband, nothing more.”

She crosses her arms over her chest. She’s still wearing her wedding ring. It flashes in the light from the west facing windows. “And you’re his whore, nothing more.”

Just like my mother. It makes me furious. I want to throw it in her face that our father loved my mother. That she was his choice, whereas Nicolette’s mother was duty. Just like Alex loves me. And she’s his duty. I would choose love over duty any day of the damn week.

“Why do you care?” I demand. “Why the *fuck* do you care what Alex does?”

“Classy,” she says, wrinkling her nose. “And I don’t care what Alex does with his time. I care about me and my position, my future.”

“Of course you do,” I say, wanting to needle her a little. “Daddy’s little princess can’t stand the idea that someone else is getting what’s hers.”

Her eyes narrow. “Excuse me?”

Shit. I’ve said too much. “Get out of my house,” I tell her, pointing toward the door. “Before I call security.”

The last thing I want is her to pull out a card that says “*Thank you for making me a father.*”

“What do you know about my life?” she says, her voice trembling. “You don’t know *shit*. Daddy’s little princess? Please. I wish.”

That astonishes me. Of course she’s his princess. She was always his princess.

She looks rattled and she drops her arms and clutches her bag as she heads to the door.

“Nicolette,” I say, suddenly confused. “What do you know?”

And what don’t I know?

She pauses at the door and eyes me, expression troubled. “What do I know? I know that we’re both just pawns in one big chess game. That’s what I know.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell her that I’m her sister, but I fight the urge. Alex doesn’t know. I can’t tell Nicolette before I tell him. He’d never forgive me.

She yanks open the door. “Tell Alex I’ll sign the papers. But he’s going to pay for it.”

“I’m sure he can afford to give you a settlement. I think you’ll be just fine financially.”

“There is more to life than money.”

“Says the woman who has always had it,” I say, and my voice is sharp and bitter. I can’t help it. She hasn’t wanted for anything a day in her life.

I remember the pictures in her old bedroom. Her in Paris, London. Her expensive furniture, makeup, clothes.

Her eyes narrow. “And I’d give all of that up just to have a man write me a card that says two hundred and twelve roses for each hour that you’ve had my whole heart.”

With that, she’s gone, and I don’t even know what to think anymore.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Alex

“Nicolette was here today,” Georgia says as we’re relaxing in bed.

“I know. Security informed me.” It pisses me off that Nicolette thinks she has the right to enter my private space that I share with Georgia. “It won’t happen again. It shouldn’t have happened in the first place.”

“Why didn’t you say something when you got home?” she asks, her lips pouty and full from my kisses, her cheeks still flushed from her orgasm.

“Why didn’t *you* say something?” I ask, amused. She looks so pretty naked, hair restored to her natural rich brown, her skin dewy and flushed from sex. She has the sheet up to her clavicle and I reach out and tease it back down so I can see her tits.

I don’t like her covered from me. I want none of her covered.

The pout deepens. “I was waiting for you to say something.”

This is a problem between us that I’ve been avoiding. She needs to tell me about her father. She needs to trust me. But so far, she seems to be waiting for me to make the first moves.

I shrug. “Like I said, it won’t happen again. Nicolette will be denied access from here on out to any and everything that belongs to me.”

Georgia pulls the sheet up again, whether it's intentional or absentminded, I'm not sure. "Tell me about your marriage to her. Did you love her in the beginning?"

Insecurity isn't attractive to me, but she seems merely curious. I'm happy enough right now that I want to give her what she needs. If it's reassurance or information about my marriage, I can. Just knowing that Georgia is carrying my baby makes me feel indulgent. I'm very content, and willing to accommodate all her requests. And avoid any and all unpleasanties. I don't want to ever fight with Georgia. I just want to fuck her and pet her and love her.

"You really want to know?" I ask. "Don't ask the question if you can't handle the answer."

"Yes. I want to understand. I want to know who I'm replacing, what I have to work toward."

That's her concern? I give a scoff. "It wasn't love. It was duty. I knew from thirteen years old that I had to marry Nicolette. That it was required as the first son to blend two great families." I'm reclining against the pillows and I shake my head a little as I remember what it was like to have my wife already chosen for me. "Imagine, being a teenage boy and being told that when this baby you've never met grows up you are required to marry her. When I was eighteen I was taken to Nicolette's fifth birthday party and met her for the first time."

"And you knew you were going to marry her?" Georgia sounds horrified.

I nod. "The whole thing really messed with my head. She was just a little kid. At the time I was already fucking women in their twenties and thirties, using the boxing ring to expend all this excess energy I had. I was cocky and violent and horny and resented everything about going to a kid's pony party and having to act like this was somehow normal. She was polite and solemn and had attractive, classic features. She was obedient, properly trained. I thought to myself if she grows up and is exactly like she is now, she's not going to be any fun. And I was right. I met Nicolette only once before our

engagement party and here I was, a grown man, and she was now a teenager, and yet she still wasn't any fun. She was polite and perfectly mannered and asked and said all the right things, but that was it. Nothing. A blank wall. I chalked it up to fear that she was being thrust into a total stranger's arms, and unlike me, had very little life experience. It didn't change anything though—having that empathy for her. It still didn't make her fun.”

It's been a long time since I thought about any of this, the origins of my doomed marriage. I'd been sympathetic and patient at first, because she'd been a sheltered girl with no say over her future. But for all her polite appearance of obedience, Nicolette had never fucking tried. Now she's showing up at my new apartment. Inserting herself into my new life. That makes me furious with her.

“She was a virgin?” Georgia asks.

I glance over at her. All the color is gone from her cheeks.

“Yes. On our wedding night, I tried to tease her, charm her, make her comfortable, but she didn't relax and she rejected all my attempts at foreplay. She wouldn't kiss me back, she didn't react to being touched, she physically recoiled when I ate her pussy.”

“I'm sure she was scared. It's not easy to relax when you're scared.” Georgia actually sounds sympathetic to Nicolette. “It must have felt so invasive to her, going from meeting you once to losing her virginity to you on her wedding night. Had she even made out, gotten off with a guy before you?”

“I have no idea for sure. But I doubt it. There was no evidence of any sexual experience at all.”

“So zero to ninety. That sounds awful.”

That annoys me. I'm not the villain of this story.

“She was a consenting adult. I didn't force her to do anything. In fact, I would have passed on sex with her that first night, but she insisted. She demanded I get it over with as fast as possible and I did, thinking we just needed time to get to

know each other. I asked what I could do to make her happy, to make sex more pleasurable for her. She said she wanted me to treat her like a whore.”

Georgia’s jaw drops. “What the hell does that mean?”

“That was my reaction too. I don’t know. Nothing about her behavior suggested she had hidden kinks because she was reserved and impatient. I thought maybe she meant she just wanted to treat it like a job. Like it was all going to be acting on her part anyway and I shouldn’t expect much more. Like she said, just get it over with. I asked what she meant, but she just repeated she wanted to be treated like a whore.”

“I guess that doesn’t sound like someone who was scared.”

“Exactly. I told her a paid sex worker wouldn’t lie there like a corpse and she needed to participate and at least pretend to enjoy herself. She got offended. I said something about her being my wife and I respected her and she needed to respect me in return and at least try. She said she didn’t have to do anything. That she was Donatelli’s only daughter and my only wife and if I didn’t like her performance we didn’t have to repeat it. That I could satisfy myself with other women.”

“And then?”

“That’s exactly what I did. What she did. What we did. One and done. Two total strangers, equally stubborn, and we lived entirely separate lives.” I tug down the sheet to bare Georgia’s tits again. I’m not enjoying this conversation. It’s making me feel uneasy, like somehow I’m wrong, and I’m never wrong. At least not that I’ll ever admit to.

Nicolette ruined our marriage. I stuck around way longer than any other man would have.

“That’s kind of sad, really. Do you ever wish it hadn’t turned out like that?”

I thought she was asking because she was jealous. Because like she said, she wanted to know what she has to live up to. Yet she is much more concerned with Nicolette’s feelings than mine. Or that if I had stayed with my ex, she wouldn’t be in my bed right now.

“Why the hell would you ask that?” I narrow my eyes at her. “Would you rather I be with her than you?”

“What? No.” She lifts the sheet again. The way she keeps covering herself is driving me to distraction.

She’s pulling away. Covering herself. Over and over. I yank it down again, hard. “Stop doing that.”

Now Georgia has the fucking nerve to frown at me. “Don’t be a brute. We’re having a conversation. You don’t need to look at my chest.”

“I do if I say I do.” This time I take the sheet down to her waist and knot it around my fist so she can’t lift it again.

Georgia needs to learn my warning signs. She needs to understand she’s poking a wasp’s nest right now.

“It’s just sad, really because it could have gone a completely different way,” she continues, as if I’m not seconds from an explosion. “Maybe you’re *supposed* to be with her. You said it yourself. It was your destiny. Your duty. Combining two great families.”

Make that one second away from an explosion.

She’s nicked my pride. Worse, my fucking heart.

I don’t share my feelings with anyone. I just handed her a giant chunk of my emotional past with outstretched hands and she’s betrayed that information. Questioned my choices, my judgment.

Questioned *us*.

Love makes you vulnerable. And I hate it.

“This is how you feel just weeks after we found each other?” I demand. “After I told you that I love you? After we found out we’re having a child? That I should be with Nicolette, not you?”

Her face pales. She’s stopped her musings long enough to realize that I’m furious.

“I’m just thinking out loud, Alex, because I’m comfortable with you. My mouth is getting ahead of my brain.” Now she’s

scrambling, backpedaling.

That annoys me even more. Because she's lying. She means it. She finds my story fascinating and she thinks Nicolette was my destiny. Not her.

"Don't take it back," I say, harshly. "That's beneath you."

"Of course I don't want you to be with anyone but me."

Her hand rests on my forearm, gently stroking. It feels irritating, like sand in the eye. I want to rub away where she's touched me. "But?" I ask. I can hear it. There's a but.

"But that doesn't mean I don't find it interesting to consider the strange twists of fate that led you to me." She leans even closer, pushing the sheet down so that her pussy is bared now as well. "And I'm fishing, Alex, I admit it. I want you to say you're meant for me, no one else. That *I'm* your destiny."

I don't believe her. It's a cover. This is Gabriella, the cunning counterpart to Georgia. I'd admire her if she wasn't using it against me, to try and appease me.

I'd already told her in a hundred ways that I want to be with her. She knows I do. The truth lies in what she said. *Maybe you're supposed to be with her.*

It slices with the precision of a filleting knife.

Right to the heart of me.

I sit up in bed and put my forearms on my knees, feigning casualness. If she wants to be nonchalant about my ex, I can do the same. Even if internally I'm bleeding from her betrayal. "You've already told me how you feel. That Nicolette is my destiny. Do you want me to call Nicolette and ask her for another chance? Do you think she and I are an epic love story?" I ask, voice mocking.

Her eyes widen. "No. Of course not. Alex, that's not what I meant."

"What the fuck did you mean then? Because it sounds like you have no skin in this game at all, Georgia." I grab my phone off of the nightstand and command, "Call Nicolette."

All the blood rushes out of her face. “Alex. Don’t.”

She tries to grab at my phone, but I put my arm up and block her, turning away. I end the call immediately before Nicolette can answer. But I don’t let Georgia see that. Instead, I speak as if she has said hello.

“Hi. How are you? I heard you stopped by today and I’ve been thinking. If I want to try again to make our marriage work, would you be interested?”

Georgia tries to grab me again but I stand up, rising out of bed, and she’s left grabbing at empty air.

“You would? Great, let’s talk about it. Are you free now? I’ll come over.”

She’s crying now. I pretend to end the call and then I pull my pants on.

“Alex, I was just...”

“Just what?” I ask. “Playing cupid? Cheering on destiny, Georgia?” I pull a T-shirt on and then get my gun out of my nightstand drawer.

“No, of course not. I want to be with you. I’m just jealous of her.”

This would be an amazing opportunity for her to tell me exactly why that is. Because Nicolette is her half-sister. She doesn’t say anything else at all. She just watches me shove my feet into my shoes.

“I’ll let you know how this goes,” I say. “Wish me luck. You may have just saved me a fortune in divorce lawyers’ fees.”

Which is a lie, of course. I’ve already divorced Nicolette. But I’ll fill Georgia in on that when she tells me who her father is.

Those words seem to penetrate her shock. She shoves away the sheet and climbs out of bed. I’m halfway across the living room when she catches up with me and puts herself between me and the front door hands out to stop me. Her hair

is tumbling over her shoulders, two pink stains of color on each cheek.

“Don’t do this,” she pleads. “Let’s talk. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“Why would I be upset? I have everything. A wife. A mistress. A baby on the way.” I shift around her and give her a mocking smile. “Unless I’m missing the truth. Is that it, Georgia? Is that what I’m missing?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she whispers. “I’m so confused.”

“I’m not.” I yank open the front door. My bodyguard is standing there.

His greedy eyes rake their way down Georgia’s naked body.

I’m so angry I don’t react quickly enough.

She makes a sound of distress and disappears from view.

My possessiveness blooms, red hot and dangerous. I pull my gun on my bodyguard. “Forget everything you just saw.”

He freezes. He knows what I’m capable of. “Yes, sir.”

“Lock the door behind me,” I growl at Georgia, assuming she’ll hear me before I yank the door shut with a hard slam. It locks automatically but I want her to put the second deadbolt on.

I make a phone call. “It’s time,” I order.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Georgia

I'm pacing back and forth, biting my bottom lip, calling Alex for the fifth time. His phone goes right to voicemail.

Again. I hastily pulled on red lingerie and a matching robe that I know Alex really loves, assuming he'd be back in five minutes. I thought he was blowing off steam. Or maybe that he wanted me to follow him. I decided to do just that, but when I tried to leave the apartment with my winter coat over the lingerie, the bodyguard stopped me.

"Boss's orders," he'd said. "You stay here."

The boss's orders.

I almost call my mother. I could use her advice on what to do when you've pissed off a mafia man. But I don't want her to worry about me. Or worse, the baby. I want her content, in a bubble of bliss that all is right in my world.

Nothing has been right since Nicolette invaded my private space, sullyng our apartment, tainting it with her princess presence.

Hell, nothing has been right since my sixteenth birthday.

Alex was seeking something from me but I honestly don't know what it was and I'm in a panic, terrified he'll be done with me. That I've fucked it up already and I'll have nothing all over again.

This time with a baby.

Actually, that's naive of me. Alex wants the baby even if he won't want me. He'll take him. I'll be left with nothing.

Just a woman he fucked and left. A baby vessel.

I cannot let that happen.

The door to our apartment opens.

I rush across the living room, stubbing my toe on the coffee table in my urgency. Alex hasn't been gone long enough to have gotten to Nicolette's and had a conversation. He's only been gone thirty minutes. He must have changed his mind about seeing her.

Maybe he was just trying to make a point. To scare me. To remind me who is in control.

Relief surges through me when I see him entering the apartment.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," I say. "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean... I don't know what I was doing. It was stupid. Please, Alex. Don't be angry with me."

He stands there for a second, hands in his pockets, studying me. He glances around the living room, taking in the dozen or so remaining bouquets that haven't died out yet, as if he's seeing them for the first time.

Wondering why he's with me.

My throat is tight. I'm screaming internally. I don't know what I'll do if he withdraws his love from me.

But then he gives a nod. "I forgive you."

My feet eat up the distance between us and I throw my arms around him. One of his hands slips around the small of my back, but the other remains in his pocket. I kiss him, wanting to feel his love. Desperate to feel his love.

His kiss is reserved, cautious. Lacking in passion. My heart sinks like an anchor to the depths of the dark ocean.

He sets me aside. "I need a drink."

"Do you want me to make it?" I'm a shit bartender, but I want to make him happy. "What do you want?"

“I’ll take a martini.” He starts to whistle, which is unnerving.

I’ve never heard him whistle.

He doesn’t look angry, but he’s not being affectionate either. He seems neutral, not emotionally charged.

I’m afraid to ask him where he went. I don’t want to make him angry all over again. He’s being cool toward me, but at least he’s not furious anymore.

My hands are trembling but I make the drink the way he loves. A splash of vermouth and lots of olive juice. I hand it to him, praying I don’t spill it. “Here, love. This would be nice with some charcuterie, wouldn’t it?”

It’s a joke, meant to remind him of the night we met.

He doesn’t acknowledge that. Instead, he just makes a face after he takes a sip. “This is really dirty.”

Normally, he complains it’s never dirty enough. But I know my bartending skills are tragic, so I just apologize. “I’m sorry. Do you want me to make you another one?”

“No.” He shakes his head. “Just come here.”

He sets the drink down on the coffee table and holds his hand out for me.

As I cross the few feet to him, he’s already taking his zipper down. Sex won’t solve whatever the hell just happened, but it will make us both feel better.

Desperate with relief, I help him, undoing the button of his pants. I look up when I’ve gotten the button loose and instantly freeze. He’s watching me. Something about his expression is wrong. Just... wrong.

“What?” I ask, fingers trembling as I slip my robe down off of my shoulders. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” The corner of his mouth turns up in a sly smile as he traces the curve of my shoulders with his palms. He flicks the strap of my lingerie down off of one shoulder. “You’re beautiful.”

“Mm, thank you,” I say, tilting my neck to give him access to my flesh.

He presses kisses along my jaw, then skims down to the peak of my breasts. His hands roughly grip both in his hands and he squeezes hard. I gasp, tears pooling in the corner of my eyes. It's rougher than he's been since we found out about the baby. When he yanks the front of the lingerie down, the silk tears at the neckline.

The sound is loud in the quiet apartment and I stand there, confused. I don't even feel aroused at all by his touch. Am I too worried about him being angry? Is it the pregnancy?

Something is off. I don't really know what it is though. Trying to squash the feeling, I reach out and run my hand over the front of his pants. They're jeans. It enters my brain that he's wearing jeans. That's not what he left the apartment in. He was wearing black dress pants.

My head snaps up and I take him in, all of him. His mild smile, his casual, loose stance. The way his hand feels, his unfamiliar and remote kiss.

And I know.

Instantly.

“Oh my God, you're not Alex.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Georgia

This is Alex's twin brother.

I stumble backward, reaching down to grab my robe off of the floor, almost falling in my haste to get about from this total stranger.

"What the hell are you talking about?" he asks, sounding unconcerned. "Georgia, you've been acting crazy all night."

I'm so distraught that I kissed him, that he touched my breasts, that I ran my hand over his cock, I can't even remember Alex's brother's name. I never imagined Alex and his twin were this identical. Truthfully, I'm not sure I even knew they were identical. We've never discussed it.

"You need to leave my apartment." I'm pulling my robe on frantically, putting the coffee table between us, trying to remember where I left my phone. I need to call Alex.

"Are you kicking me out of my own apartment?" he asks, casually stepping toward me. He holds out the martini. "Fix me a better drink, please."

Going on pure instinct, I accept the outstretched glass.

And toss the drink in his face.

Then I run.

I'm halfway to the door when he catches up with me. He yanks me back by my arm so hard I fall to the right, stumbling, dangling from his hold.

“Where are you going?” he asks. “This is all really dramatic.”

“What the fuck do you want?” I ask, trying to pull myself from his grip.

He releases my wrist and I tumble down onto the floor, hurting my shoulder. He’s wiping his face with the tail of his shirt. He has a tattoo on his left flank of a snake. Alex also has a snake tattoo. But it’s higher, on his chest.

Scrambling to my feet, I wonder where the fuck the bodyguard is. I scream loudly. “Help me! Help me!”

But Luka—my brain finally coughs up his name—just looks at me like I’m insane or an idiot or both. “Why are you screaming?”

“The guard outside will help me or tell Alex that you’re here.”

He runs his hand through his hair. A few droplets from the cocktail shake out. “The guard thinks I’m Alex. If you scream he’ll think my brother is doing whatever he wants to you and that it’s his right to do that. The guard won’t interfere.”

My stomach drops. He’s right. “You admit you’re not Alex?”

“I’m Luka,” he says, giving me a charming smile, his hand outstretched. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Georgia.”

It’s my turn to eye him with disbelief. I’m not shaking his hand. “Why are you here?”

“Alex asked me to watch you. He has some business to attend to.”

My first instinct is that he’s lying. “I don’t need to be watched. There’s already a guard outside the door. And if he did ask you to come over why wouldn’t he tell me that?”

“How the hell would I know? But from the way you reacted when I got here, I’m going to assume you two had a little lover’s spat. If he’s angry with you and I know my brother, which trust me, I do, he won’t tell you a damn thing.”

He's right. That is how Alex behaves.

"Why did you kiss me?" I rub my lips at the memory, wanting to scrub away his touch.

It's a mind fuck to look at this man, who shares every feature in harmony with Alex, and feel absolutely no emotion toward him. Other than disgust. He took advantage of my ignorance to fuck with me.

"You looked like you needed a kiss."

I'm tightly holding the edges of my robe together over my chest. I shift to the left, wanting to make my way to the bedroom, where I can slam the door shut and lock it. I feel vulnerable with so little clothing on and I'm not responsible for what I might do if he tries anything.

I'll never be raped ever again. I don't care if he's Alex's twin. I'll kill him or die trying before I suffer through that humiliation.

"That's disgusting," I tell him. "You're a fucking disgusting excuse for a man."

He doesn't look offended. "I see why Alex is so hot for you. You're fiery. After five years with his ice princess, I'm sure he enjoys your fight."

The mention of Nicolette doesn't ease my irritation and anger. This is all her fault. Alex and I fought because of her. He might be over there right now reconciling with her. I still want her life. Because I've gotten her life and it's just a little bit tainted because it was hers first. Hell, it might be hers again if she says the right things to him tonight. Alex would do it just to spite me.

I want to throw up at the thought.

Luka goes over and starts making himself a new drink. Like this isn't a big deal.

My fear has receded and now I'm growing more curious by the minute. I don't understand his behavior. Something deeper is going on here. Alex wouldn't tell him to come over

and watch me when he already has a guard outside the apartment door and this is a secure building.

“Are you married?” I ask, knotting my robe tightly.

“Me? God, no. Though now that an heir is required by our father to inherit, I may be forced to take a bride.”

An heir is required to inherit.

Ah.

Now that makes sense.

Alex’s eagerness to put a baby in me.

It makes me feel a little lightheaded though I’m not sure why. Of course he had a reason. No one is so determined to get a woman they’ve just met pregnant unless they have a reason. A powerful, profit-driven reason.

Luka turns with the cocktail shaker in his hand and shakes it slowly. “Got any single friends you can set me up with?”

“None that I hate enough to subject them to you.”

That makes him laugh. He laughs more readily than Alex. It’s fascinating to watch the subtle differences in their mirrored appearances.

“I think I deserved that. My apologies for kissing you and for touching your tits. But you can’t blame a guy for trying.”

“Oh, I blame you,” I say, finding my equilibrium with Luka. He likes the dance, that’s what this is. Step, step, turn. It’s just entertainment to him. He wanted to see if I would know he wasn’t Alex. “How far would you have gone?”

Alex, who is still angry with me, and somewhere “taking care of business,” wouldn’t appreciate coming home to me having sex with Luka. I don’t think so anyway.

Luka avoids the direct question. He waves his hand. “It didn’t take you long to figure it out. I think you had an idea the very minute I walked in, didn’t you?” he asks, pouring his martini into his glass. “I’d forgotten how much I loved to twin swap back in the day. We used to fuck with people and do it all the time. Actually, we used to just fuck people that way. If any

of the women we hooked up with ever noticed, they never said anything.”

That furthers my fear and insecurity. Maybe Alex wouldn't have even cared if he'd walked in to his brother fucking me.

“I knew something was off but I didn't know what it was. Until I touched your dick. It's smaller than Alex's.”

He laughs again and raises his glass in a salute. “There's that fiery attitude again. I find you quite charming.”

The front door opens then and Alex actually walks through it this time.

He pauses, looking from his brother and to me. He takes in Luka's laughter, and me clutching my robe closed with an iron grip.

Then without warning his gun is out and up.

It takes Luka twenty seconds longer to get his own out. He's not as quick as Alex, but he does manage to raise it without spilling the martini in his hand.

I jerk then force myself to stay still. If I make a sudden movement I might get shot.

“What's going on here?” Alex asks, his eyes trained on Luka. “Why is my wife in lingerie?”

“Your wife is in a penthouse on Fifth Avenue with her father,” Luka says.

That makes me wince. I can't escape Nicolette.

Yet I still get a thrill that he's referring to me as his wife. He hasn't returned home to end our relationship.

“Hilarious as always,” he tells Luka. “Why is *Georgia half-naked* looking guilty as hell?”

I probably do look guilty. I kissed Luka not knowing he wasn't Alex and it feels like I was unfaithful, even if it wasn't intentional.

“I might have forgotten to introduce myself.”

The safety on Alex's gun clicks. "Did you fuck my girlfriend? Think carefully before you answer."

"He didn't," I said quickly. I can't have him killing his own twin brother in our apartment. "I knew he wasn't you."

"It's true," Luka says. He sips his martini with his free hand. "Ah, this is better. Georgia made the first one too dirty."

"Georgia, go get dressed," Alex tells me, finally glancing over at me.

I obey without hesitation, running into our bedroom and slamming the door shut and locking it behind me.

A second later I hear them talking in low voices. I can't make out the words. But it doesn't sound like they're fighting. I only catch a few words, enough to realize they're not even discussing me. They're talking about a business meeting.

I'm not even important enough to discuss once I'm out of the room and Luka's eyes aren't on me, provoking his brother to jealousy. Like stealing a toy when they were children. The anger only lasted a moment.

Then after a few minutes they're completely silent.

I quickly pull on a pair of panties, lounge pants, a bra, and a T-shirt. The shirt is over my head when I hear the pounding on the door.

"Let me in."

It's Alex. I know his voice. I'll never make that mistake again.

"Coming," I say.

But before I can get my shirt down and head over to the door to unlock, Alex kicks the door in. It splinters like matchsticks, and the knob slams into the wall, denting the drywall. It's so unexpected I jump and quickly yank my shirt into place.

I turned to him, annoyed but well aware that he left this apartment furious with me. "You scared me to death. I was coming."

“Aren’t you curious why Luka was here?” Alex strides into the room, setting his gun on the chest of drawers.

“He told me it was to protect me.” I stand in the middle of the room, arms over my chest.

“While I was talking to Nicolette,” he says, studying me. His gray eyes are unreadable, cool as quartz. “Getting back together with her.”

The bottom drops out of my world. “Alex, no,” I whisper. “I just wanted you to reassure me that you love me. That you’re meant to be with me. I know, it was stupid. But I’ve just been jealous of her my whole life and to hear you talking about touching her, it... did things to me.”

I hate that they had sex, even once. I hate that I’m so vulnerable and obvious and petty that he can dangle his defection to Nicolette in front of me at any time.

But he can.

“There’s the whole truth finally. You’ve been jealous of her your *whole life*, Gabriella.”

Gabriella.

The name is like the hard back of my father’s hand colliding with my cheek.

I see stars, the room goes black for a brief second.

My blood runs cold. I fucked up. Not that it matters.

He knows who I am.

Of course, he knows who I am.

He wouldn’t have been so eager to put a baby in plain old Georgia Ryan of unknown origin.

“Oh, God...” I murmur. “You... this was all planned, wasn’t it?”

“Of course it was.” Alex looks at me like he expects better of me. “When Armani suggested I could fuck Quinn’s friend, I saw your picture and I was intrigued. So I did some research and I found out your mother dated a man named Curtis Ryan

when you were sixteen and you took his name. Stole it, technically, given how brief their relationship was.”

It’s true. Once I left the detention center masquerading as a boarding school, I came to New York and I needed a new identity. It’s not surprising he would figure that out. It’s hard to scrub your past entirely.

“I got you fired from your job. I told them that you gave them a fake identity. Which you did.”

That makes me gasp. “You did what? I spent two months wondering why, bleeding through every penny in my bank account.”

Alex shrugs, like it’s no big deal. “I wanted you to break. It would make you more agreeable.”

My jaw drops. “Do you know how stressed out I was? How horrible it was to feel like I’d done a great job and to just be fired with no explanation?” Tears prick at my eyes.

“Losing your job makes you cry but not me going back to Nicolette?” he asks, blocking my ability to leave the room by his stance right in front of it.

How dare he?

“I’m crying about the job because it was *mine*. Something I did for me. By myself. Without my father. Without Ari.”

“Right. *Ari*. Crazy that you were best friend’s with Virtue’s son in boarding school. What a coincidence then he married Quinn, your other best friend.”

I don’t know what he’s getting at but a thought occurs to me. “Did you send me that text, asking me if Quinn knew?”

“Yes.”

“Why?” I don’t understand. If this was all so calculated, what was the plan?

“I had to see the type of person you are. Would you engage, lose your cool? Or would you ignore it, stay in control.”

Ah, that makes more sense. “So I passed your test.”

“Yes. You continue to impress and amaze me, Georgia. Gabriella. Until tonight when you tried to throw me back to my wife. Aren’t you curious what Nicolette had to say about it?”

I shake my head, tears freely falling now. “No. I know what Nicolette wants. She wants you.”

“What do you want?” he asks.

He moves, just slightly.

Then I see the flash of his knife in the lamp light.

The blade that’s sharp enough to slice all the way through me.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Georgia

“I want you, Alex,” I whisper, because I do. I still do. I want him to love me, and only me.

“I want you to tell me the truth. That’s what I’ve been waiting for—you to tell me who you are.”

This is all a calculated plan on his part.

I shouldn’t be surprised. I shouldn’t be hurt.

But it destroys the fantasy I had that somehow he just saw me across a crowded room, being cornered by a gross old pervert, and he rescued me. My gallant white knight, swooping in to whisk the undercover princess away in a private jet on an adventure, saving her from poverty.

Then, in a montage worthy weekend of sex and makeover shopping, I fell in love with me.

I hate myself for being that naive. For believing that fantasy, that he met me and wanted more than sex. That he wanted forever.

“You don’t care about me at all, do you?” My voice is trembling. “I’m just a tool. Just another Donatelli daughter to use to perform your duty of having an heir.”

“Don’t be fucking ridiculous,” Alex loosely grips the knife with his thumb and palm, fingers peeling on and off of the handle.

He doesn’t sound angry. But Alex can be deceptively calm even when he’s violent. I’ve never been afraid of him before,

but then I thought he cared about me. Maybe he doesn't care about me at all, any more than he did Nicolette.

I track the knife with my eyes, well aware that I can't get it away from him. He's a weapons expert. He spends an hour a day in the gym, boxing. He's agile and strong.

But while I may not have a physical advantage over him, I have other weapons. My brain and my body.

"Why is that ridiculous?" I ask carefully, wanting more time to interpret what he's thinking and feeling so I know how to respond.

"Because I told you everything and you've told me nothing. You've shared nothing with me but your pussy," he says. "I opened myself up to you tonight, shared truths about my marriage that no one knows and it was the perfect opportunity for you to do the same."

Yes, he sounds angry.

But he also sounds hurt.

It makes my fear recede.

He does care. He opened himself up to me and he doesn't think I've done the same. While I stand here thinking he was calculating, he's thinking the same about me.

Maybe it's true. We are calculating. But that doesn't change the end result—that Alex and I have discovered a deep and desperate connection between us, a big and powerful and dominating love that sweeps away everything else entirely. It's fucking magic, that's what it is, and I'm not letting it go without a fight.

Conviction flows through me, determination to not be distracted by inconsequential details. Maybe we came together exactly the way we were meant to.

"I was scared to tell you the truth," I say, letting my arms drop from their defensive posture over my chest. "Besides, I just thought you wanted me for a night. Maybe a few weeks, at the absolute most. That I would accept some financial help

from you, save myself from eviction, and I'd never see you again. Why would I tell you under those circumstances?"

"I understand that. But you kept hiding the truth."

So did he. I'm not sure it's fair to lay it all at my feet, but for now, I'll let that slide. I can't risk him taking my baby from me. Or worse.

I refuse to lose his love. I've wanted passion like this my entire life. I want to be more than the half-wanted daughter of Lorenzo Donatelli. I want Alex to love the whole of me.

"It's a secret I've carried for so long, it feels like it has to stay that way." I reach out and rest my fingertips on his chest. "Besides, it hurts to know my father never really wanted me. He called me Bug, you know, when I was kid. He called Nicolette Princess."

Alex's expression softens. "I'm sorry you felt like you weren't wanted. I'm sorry he's an insensitive asshole." His hand covers mine and the touch of his flesh on mine sends a zing through my inner thighs.

God, I love this man.

"There can't be secrets between us, though," he says.

And I know that I have him still. He's softening.

What I say now matters more than any words of love I've ever spoken to Alex. He needs to understand. He needs to believe me. "What do you want to know, my love? I'll tell you everything."

"Did you try to kill your father when you were sixteen?"

Hearing that spoken out loud, something no one has ever said, makes my face flood with heat. But I say without hesitation, "Yes. Who told you that?"

"Your mother."

Jesus. So much for my mother keeping my identity a secret. "Why would she do that?"

"I have no idea. She just volunteered the information. I think she just wanted me to understand you."

I believe him. “She should have told me.”

“It seems all of us should have said things we didn’t. Did you ever meet Nicolette before today?” he asks.

“No. She doesn’t even know I exist.”

He nods. “I agree with you. She would have told me.”

That Nicolette would share anything that deeply personal with him both irritates me and seems unlikely. Why would she tell the man she merely co-exists with something that might make her vulnerable?

But I keep my mouth shut. “It was like the nickname thing. He wanted me to feel less. He wanted me to know she got his attention all the time and I got the leftovers. He also probably never told her because he didn’t want her mingling with my less-than-pure DNA.”

“He has no idea what an incredible woman he’s missed out on knowing. You’re everything, Georgia. Fucking everything.”

He kisses my fingertips, one by one, and my stomach swoops. I sigh into his touch, reveling in what feels like forgiveness. I can’t lose Alex.

“When did you last see your father?” he asks.

“When he dropped me off at that hellhole he called a boarding school. And then I thought I saw him on the street the day we found out I’m pregnant but I think I’m just paranoid.” Better to be honest, lay it all out there for him.

Well, almost everything.

I only have one secret left but I can’t reveal it. Not now. Maybe not ever.

Alex shifts our hands to my belly, his thumb massaging me gently.

“When I planned this, I thought about killing you,” he says, casually, as if it isn’t a big deal.

I go still, fear creeping up my spine. “What do you mean?”

It's hard to misinterpret "killing you" but I'm so shocked I ask for the clarification.

His gaze lifts from my belly and locks onto mine. His cool gray eyes are unreadable. I can't tell what he's thinking or feeling. He's surrounding me, feet caging me in, body pressing forward, dominating my space with the breadth of his shoulders, his height, his wiry restrained power.

If he wants to kill me he can. Easily.

"I contemplated your death," he says. "Being the cause of it."

It doesn't feel like a threat.

It feels conversational. Sharing.

I know better than to react with fear. He might enjoy it too much. I'm not passive, I'm not a pinball to be bounced around.

He twirls his knife now almost absently, like a baton twirler. It goes around and around in circles.

"I figured your father won't object to your disappearing since as far as I can tell he's had no contact with you in years. I thought you could have my baby and then I would eliminate future custody battles."

By murdering me.

My breath sounds shallow, panicked to my own ears even as I concentrate on staying still, on not giving him any sort of reaction he might enjoy. "Why would there be a custody battle?"

He shrugged. "I thought I might get bored or you might be a total cunt. I was trying to plan for the long term."

Of course he was. It was all a plan. Every bit of it. I've been the puppet and he's been pulling the strings even more than I realized.

Though he could argue the same.

I had a plan too. His was just better implemented.

“I see. Murder me, make life easier, is that it?” I feel lightheaded and I press a palm to the wall to steady myself. “I can see the logic in it. But it seems like it might have been easier to hire a surrogate at that point. Less messy, less complicated.”

“That’s what I was planning to do. Offer you fifty grand to have my baby.”

I wonder if I would have taken it. It’s hard to go back now and envision Alex presenting me with such an option. I probably would have said yes just from a practical standpoint, but then I would have regretted it immediately. Giving up my baby seems impossible and painful beyond belief. But financial duress can cause you to make decisions you might not have otherwise.

That’s why I was at the party in the first place.

“That seems like a bargain price for the baby that blends two great families,” I tell him, determined not to show him he’s rattled me. “I’m offended you intended to lowball me.”

Show no fear even if my palms are still damp.

I know him. I know what he wants from me. The real me.

He chuckles softly. “And that is why my plans changed. You started speaking and I thought you were audacious and snarky and intelligent and *really* fucking sexy.”

That means everything to me. I do believe Alex finds me attractive. I crave his every touch, every look he gives me that shows he wants to fuck me hard.

“So you decided to drug me instead of offering me cash?”

“Oh, I was always planning to drug you. I’d offer you the cash after you were pregnant.” He brushes my hair back, but it isn’t a gentle touch. He tugs the strands. Hard. “But then I fell in love with you. You fucking turned the tables on me. You have no idea the power you hold.”

“Apparently my life hangs in the balance and I didn’t even know it.” My head drifts back, and I’m getting aroused, wet for him. My breasts feel heavy, my nipples tight and aching.

Alex kisses me but I don't kiss him back. Instead I sink my teeth into his bottom lip in a light nip. I need more than that. I need it all.

“What?” he pulls back and gives me a smirk. Still holding my hair he shakes me, just a little. “God, I fucking love you. But have I hurt your feelings? I guess we can call today a draw then.”

“I didn't know it was a competition.”

“It's not. We're just sharing. Being honest. That's the foundation of a good marriage,” he says.

I can't tell if he's being serious or sarcastic.

“That's probably a better foundation than the threat of murder.”

“Or failing to mention to your future husband that your father is his business partner and your sister is his wife.”

I laugh softly. “Fair enough. We really are perfect for each other, aren't we?”

“Yes, love. Perfectly paired, a king and his queen.” Alex steps back and tugs my sweat pants down. “Open your legs for your king.”

His harsh yank, his rough words, instantly make me wet. “Yes, king.”

Spreading my legs apart, I peel my sweatshirt over my head.

Alex lifts my thigh onto his hip as he studies me, gaze sweeping over my face and down to my breasts.

“I find you so very fucking beautiful,” he murmurs. “Never doubt that, Georgia.”

It makes me weak in the knees, this man reassuring me. I kiss him, hard, wanting him to sweep me away from every ounce of self-doubt I've ever experienced.

With him, I feel more me.

With him, I'm the strongest I can be.

“Do you trust me?” he asks as he unzips his pants and takes out his thick hard cock.

I nod, eagerly reaching between us to get the feel of him in my hand. I squeeze the base of his shaft, and brush down over his balls, appreciating the sharp inhale of his breath.

“Yes, I trust you.”

“Will you let me handcuff you again?” he murmurs as his fingers tease over the front of my panties.

It’s a dangerous question.

He could kill me.

But then again, he could kill me anyway.

And I’ve never shied away from danger.

“Yes.” I rock my hips forward, wanting more of his touch.

He shocks me completely by using the handle of his knife sheath to slide across my clit and ease my pussy lips apart.

But what shocks me even more is how much it turns me on. Moisture runs over the handle like a faucet has been turned on and I’m desperate for more.

“Fuck me, Alex, fuck me.”

“With what?” he asks.

I know the answer he wants.

It’s not even surprising to me it’s the answer I want to give.

“With whatever you want,” I say. “Just fuck me.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Alex

I'm angry with Georgia but that doesn't mean I don't want to fuck her.

"You like this, don't you?" I ask her, taking in her glassy eyes, her parted lips.

Both her mouth and her pussy.

I have her pried apart with my blade handle, just a teasing slide between those slick folds that is clearly driving her wild. She's struggling not to move, scared of being cut, but also maybe craving it, just a little.

"My Georgia likes pain, don't you?"

She nods, rapidly.

Leaning forward, I brush my lips up and down her jawline, then I murmur in her ear, "And my Georgia trusts me not to actually hurt her, doesn't she?"

She shivers, but she whispers in a low, plaintive cry, "Yes."

I enjoy pushing her. I enjoy hearing her repeat that she puts all her trust in me.

I've never had that before.

Not from a lover.

Maybe from no one, not even my own father.

"I'll never hurt you. Not ever."

"I know."

It sounds honest, heartfelt and it fucking means everything to me.

My mouth is hot and my cock is throbbing. "I'm going a little deeper, love. Just stay still and tell me how it feels."

I slide the handle further into her heat, bracing it with my finger, teasing them up and down together.

"Oh, God," she says, head hitting the wall behind her as she looks up, like heaven might help her.

Her tits are rising and falling rapidly in her black lace bra as she struggles to regain control. Her inner walls are twitching on my finger and she's clearly afraid to come on the knife, and yet so turned on, that she might come anyway.

The pregnancy has her bursting over the top of the bra and it's a view I can never get enough of.

Leaning forward, I suck the swell of her tit between my lips, bruising the creamy flesh.

"I love the way your body is changing. I may have to keep you pregnant all the time," I tell her.

"That's what you want?" she says, and her voice is strained with pleasure. "Breedable and submissive, that's me. You found the right girl."

"That is you, with a side of smart ass." I add another finger alongside the handle and revel in her low moan. "Just the way I like it."

Her pussy is quivering. Her thighs are shaking with the strain of holding back and her skin is flushed pink and dewy.

I pull the blade away, out of her completely, my fingers coming out drenched in her arousal.

Her knees buckle and her hips rock forward, her pussy desperately following me, seeking out my touch. "No, don't stop!"

But I'm on the edge and I want her to tumble over it with me.

Into a marriage of intense pleasure and aggressive love, where we clash and collide in the best fucking way possible.

“I’ll never stop.” I shove her against the wall. “Put your hands above your head.” I yank her arms up. “Like this. Now don’t move. Be completely still.”

Her eyes track my gaze as I lift my knife. I pull the blade from the sheath.

“What are you doing?”

“You know what I’m doing. Trust your body, your gut.”

She watches me but she doesn’t say anything else. I release my hold on her wrists, but her hands remain where I placed them.

Then I raise my arm and strike with the knife.

She doesn’t flinch. She doesn’t move.

She gives me her full trust.

The knife sinks into the wall with a thwack.

I never would have cut her. Even if she had moved, I would have been able to prevent a strike. My timing is impeccable.

I’m in complete control.

But she doesn’t know that.

And it’s instinct to react to perceived danger.

She’s in complete control as well.

Nothing could be hotter.

“That’s it, baby,” I breathe, kissing her hard. “You’re such a fucking badass.”

Easing my dick between her thighs, I thrust deep, lifting her off her feet.

Just like that, she comes all over me, her orgasm milking my cock in a hot warm grip.

I pound Georgia into the wall, never breaking eye contact as she whimpers and gasps and cries her way through my

possession.

But it's when she says "I love you" that I lose myself.

The release is sharp and immediate, like an electrical jolt surging through me.

It could be seconds, it could be an hour, but I lose all sense of time as Georgia and I breathe into each other, pressed against our bedroom wall, our bodies still joined.

This is what I'm waiting for. Who I've been waiting for. The one who can stand up with me, stand up for me.

I brush my lips along her jawline, and nuzzle her earlobe.

"You are my everything," I murmur roughly.

She shivers in my hold, her breath warm against me. She repeats "I love you," and I close my eyes, savor in, take it all in and hold on to this moment.

I love to win.

And this is fucking winning.

"I love you too."

It costs me nothing to admit that, to give her the power of knowing what she does to me. Instead, it's rewarding to share myself with her, a woman who appreciates the man that I am.

When we're finally heading into the bathroom to shower together, I tell her, "I have a gift for you."

"More flowers?" she asks, her eyes sparkling. "You spoil me."

"This isn't flowers." I hit a button on my phone to play an audio.

Immediately she pauses in stripping off her bra. The color leeches from her face. "What the hell is that?"

A man's tortured cries fill our bathroom. "It's the guard from your boarding school. Getting his dick cut off."

Her nostrils flare and her hand reaches out to steady herself on the glass of the shower door. I can see what the

memory of his voice does to her. She looks haunted by the sound. “You were there?”

“I was the one who did it.”

“Thank you.” Her voice is tight, fiercely exultant.

“You’re welcome, love. He’ll never hurt you or anyone else ever again.” I turn on the shower and hold my hand out to her. “I’ll never let anyone hurt you again.”

She puts her hand in mine.

We step into the water and I get down low.

I can wash her from toe to tits, and then I worship her pussy with my tongue, flicking it over both her scars and her clit.

Lifting her knee I rest her left leg over my shoulder so I can get deep inside her, while she comes over and over.

It’s only when I pull back do I realize that the audio is still playing from my phone on the countertop.

“That’s my girl,” I tell her. “Coming like a fucking mafia champ. I’m so fucking proud of you.”

She is her father’s daughter in every sense.

And my child is going to be a combination of the greatest of both of us.

“This isn’t going to work. She knows you’re not me,” I tell my twin, feeling frustrated.

“That’s only because I didn’t understand that you’re a complete fucking pussy with her,” he tells me with a smirk. “I have a better handle on it now.”

I glare at Luka. He’s baiting me and I refuse to go for it. “You just wanted to fuck my girl, admit it.”

“I want to fuck all of your women,” he says with a snort. “It’s a twin thing. I want what you have, you want what I have.”

I sip my old-fashioned and relax back in the plush velvet of the low back swivel chair that adorns the private room we always secure in our favorite restaurant, Inferno. We also happen to own it.

“That’s the annoying truth,” I admit.

Being a twin is both advantageous and irritating. Sometimes at the same time. Luka would die for me and vice versa, but we’re competitive to the point of danger.

Except in one particular case.

“You never wanted to fuck Nicolette,” I say, the corner of my mouth lifting up.

He makes a face. “No. I did not. A slab of veal in a meat locker is warmer than her.”

That actually makes me laugh. “That was a beautiful description, brother.”

“I thought so. I don’t have that degree in British Literature for nothing.”

I scoff. “You don’t have that degree. Dad bought you that piece of paper.”

“Still jealous, I see.”

I’ll never admit it out loud, but I’m still mad twenty years later that Luka decided to leave New York and attend Brown. Without me. I’d been working the amateur boxing circuit and I’d had no interest in academia. But Luka had loved it. The ivy covered brick, the girls in wool skirts, the intellectual discussions.

I’d visited him twice and fucked his girlfriend both times, though it wasn’t as satisfying as that sounds because it was his idea. His friends had been assholes to me, calling me the psycho twin. Which I still resent. Virtue’s kid Aristotle was a psycho. I was just never a guy who wanted to hang out in the classroom. I get restless.

No one had thought it was funny when I made a bet with his drunk friend who swore he could take me and instead I knocked him out in one punch.

It was fucking hilarious, let's be clear on that.

But after those years, I had learned restraint, and the power of charm, which Luka wields as viciously as I do my knife.

I casually put my ankle on my opposite knee, shifting my hand to my waistband. "We both have our own talents. And I'm still the older brother."

Luka rolls his eyes. "Lucky you. Being born first got you Nicolette, didn't it?"

Around the same time Luka abandoned me for college life, I resented the hell out of my role as first born. That Luka would never suffer an arranged marriage. But I long ago came to terms with the pros of cons of birth rank. Yet I still massage the butt of my gun and grin at him. "Now who's jealous?" I joke.

Luka grunts. "One of these days you're going to accidentally shoot yourself in the foot," he says wryly.

"Fat fucking chance. So you think we're good?"

"Fuck yeah we're good. Let's lock this up. We'll get rid of Donatelli once and for all. Let's hope you chose the right bait."

"I did." I'm confident Lorenzo will be curious to see his cast off daughter, Gabriella. "We need to keep Nicolette out of the way."

In spite of our lack of connection, Nicolette had never once mistaken Luka for me. She can tell the minute he turns around. Sometimes she can even tell just from the way he walks. She also told me once we smell different as if she's some kind of goddamned bloodhound.

Georgia also knew.

One of them will know.

But by then it won't matter.

Chapter Thirty

Nicolette

My stomach is in knots as I see him walk in.

Hell, my stomach has been in knots since I realized that Alex has truly moved on from me. It doesn't matter if it's ludicrous that he could love the little legal assistant he met through Quinn Virtue. What matters is that he thinks he loves her and by the time he realizes it's just a case of dick-driven absurdity, it will be too late.

We'll be divorced and she'll be pregnant.

I want to be pregnant. I want a baby.

But you can't conceive a child if you don't let a man fuck you.

I should have done something about all of this years ago but I was angry with my father for shoving me into this position, for everything he subjected me to as a child, but all I've managed to do is destroy my own life with my petty standoffishness.

His stride is confident, arrogant.

That of a man who knows the world will accommodate his needs.

It's not just money that does that.

It's his presence.

I don't bother to greet him. I've spent my whole life being polite, the perfect daughter, the perfect student, the perfect hostess.

What has it gotten me?

An empty, cold, lonely life.

Without the feel of a man over me, coaxing me into the understanding of what it feels like to be a woman.

“Don’t look so bitchy,” he says. “It’s time you let that mask crack.”

“I’m nervous,” I say, biting my lip. Then stopping myself from biting my lip because it’s unseemly.

My father would smack every time I acted in a way he considered ill-mannered. But he did it in a way that would never leave a mark on me because he valued my beauty more than anything else about me.

It was like a flutter of taps that were too hard. Head whacks. Ear boxes.

And those were the good days.

The bad days involved something much, much worse.

I bit my lip again. Hard. I can taste the blood.

“Don’t be nervous.”

It’s easy for a fucking man to say that. I narrow my eyes at him before I remember that I can’t show my actual feelings, that if he saw the true depth of my inner passions he might feel a sliver of fear himself.

“Just tell me it’s taken care of,” I say carefully, smoothing my silk dress down the middle, taking a slow easy breath to steady myself.

“It’s all taken care of. In two days, Georgia Ryan will be dead.”

And so will my father.

Chapter Thirty-One

Alex

“**G**ood to see you, Lorenzo,” I say smoothly, holding my hand out for him to shake.

He ignores my hand.

That’s a first.

“I can’t say the same, Alex.” Lorenzo isn’t a big man like my own father, but he has a steely and commanding presence even at nearly seventy.

He waited until later in life to have his daughters, until he was no longer the most physically strongest man in the room and needed a young wife and a hot cocktail waitress mistress to validate him in a different way. I never met Nicolette’s mother, who died about ten years earlier, but the photos I’ve seen of her show a thin, waifish, ghost of a woman. She looks haunted, wearing a blank stare and designer clothing.

Like she was disconnected from her life and the fact that at eighteen she’d been married off to a forty year old man.

Like her daughter to follow.

Though Nicolette got a much better deal. Not only am I better looking than Lorenzo, I’m only a dozen years older than her and I’m a fucking nice guy.

“Having a bad day?” I ask, as I slide onto a stool and gesture to the bartender.

“Don’t be fucking cute with me,” he says, voice deceptively calm. “Nicolette is texting and calling me nonstop

crying over you. How dare you disrespect and embarrass my daughter?"

He's lying. Nicolette doesn't cry. "She won't give me an heir. What would you do in my shoes?"

"We're not talking about me. We're talking about my daughter."

"So you're going to fuck with me and my brothers and my fathers in retribution for the fact that I'm just protecting my own interests?" I pointed to the bourbon when the bartender approached. "Give me the Weller."

He glances back at the bourbon that is behind a locked case. "That's—

He's about to name the price, which offends me. It's roughly a ten thousand dollar bottle of bourbon. It's insulting he thinks I don't know that or can't afford a pour. "I know," I say, cutting him off. "Give me a two ounce pour."

The bartender blusters and stammers to apologize. I wave him off.

When he goes to get my drink I turn back to Lorenzo.

"Tear up the divorce papers and get my daughter pregnant," Lorenzo tells me. His signet ring flashes as he raises his glass of vodka to his lips.

I notice he's getting girthier in the middle. He looks tired, under eyes dark and puffy.

"Your daughter doesn't want to get pregnant," I tell him. "I'm not welcome in her bed either."

"She has a choice?" he asks, giving me a scoff. "Do what you need to do."

That makes me lift my brows. "So divorcing her is disrespectful but raping her isn't?"

It makes him furious. He slams his glass down on the bar top with enough force that liquid splashes over the edges. "Don't fuck with me, Alex."

“Call off your bullshit,” I tell him, done with the casual chatting. “Don’t test me, seriously. Taking my sister was crossing a fucking line, Lorenzo.”

“Don’t threaten me.” His hand moves just slightly.

But he knows I can pull a weapon faster than him so he doesn’t complete any action other than reaching for a napkin to wipe the vodka off of his hand.

“I do have good news for you though,” I tell him, feeling instantly more cheerful. I’ve won this round. “Nicolette and I may be divorcing, but as soon as it’s final, I’m marrying Gabriella. Your other daughter,” I add, as if he doesn’t know.

The only outward appearance that he’s heard me is his nostrils flaring. He remains still.

The bartender gives me my bourbon and casually, Lorenzo tells him, “Replace this vodka. It’s warm.”

Once he’s retreated again, Lorenzo turns to me. “I don’t have another daughter.”

“That’s a shame, because she wants you to meet us for a family dinner so we can tell you our happy news.”

“What news?”

But the minute the words are out of mouth, he realizes. The fury seems to rise up from him like a mushroom cloud. His face turns a violent shade of purple.

I take back my bourbon in one swallow and stand. I lean over to him and murmur, “Georgia and Alex sitting in a Lamborghini. F-u-c-k-ing. First comes lust, then comes marriage. Then comes your grandson in a baby carriage.”

Peeling off two grand from my wallet for the bartender, I toss it on the counter and wait for Lorenzo to say something. Anything.

But he’s clearly not going to.

He’s too angry.

I’m a little surprised he hasn’t tried to pull a gun out and shoot me on the spot.

But that wouldn't solve his little problem. Georgia is still pregnant.

I clap him on the shoulder. "I'll text you the dinner plans, Dad. Happy to remain your son-in-law, if in a different capacity."

He finally finds his voice. "Watch your back, Alex. She might kill you in your sleep."

"That's what makes it exciting," I tell him. "You know that."

Lorenzo lifts his glass of vodka to me in a toast. "Very true. I look forward to being your dinner guest."

The bait worked.

I can lure Lorenzo with plans to meet Gabriella.

It's an excellent idea.

Unfortunately, I don't account for Georgia's mom dying that night.

Georgia

It's all a blur.

Mom's neighbor calling. My grandmother calling.

She's gone.

I never realized how much I hate that phrasing until Martha says it to me.

As if my mother left of her own free will, abandoning her family.

It also implies she could return if she chose too, when we all know she can't. That I will never, ever see my mother again. She didn't go to the damn store, she died.

I'm alternating between numb shock and painful sobbing.

On the private jet on the way to Miami, Alex gives me a wide berth. He isn't saying much, just occasionally hugging

me or petting the back of my head. Kissing my forehead, squeezing my hand. It's exactly what I need.

I don't feel like talking.

Quinn hasn't picked up on that fact, which makes sense, because she's used to me saying whatever I'm thinking. Or what she perceives as whatever I'm thinking. I am a blurter. There's no denying it.

She's sitting across from me on the jet, being a supportive best friend accompanying me to my mother's funeral, her hand repeatedly going to her tiny baby bump. She looks nervous and uncertain how to treat me. I feel bad for her. She's trying hard to engage me in conversation and when I give pat yes or no answers she bites her lip.

"Quinn," I tell her, knowing there is one way to kill her sympathy. "I have to tell you something."

Alex looks up sharply from his phone and gives me a questioning look.

He's wondering which secret I'm going to reveal. For a second, I'm not even sure.

I give him a little shrug and mouth, "baby."

It's the easiest confession to make.

Ripping open my heart and soul and spilling secrets held in silence for years is like prying open a rusted metal trunk. It's going to take a mental crowbar.

Alex nods to indicate he's fine with the reveal, though he does glance over at his twin brother, who is sitting across the aisle reading a book.

I didn't want Luka here but Alex insisted he accompany us. I can't stand the sight of him, which is ironic since he looks exactly like Alex. But when I look at him all I can think of is his hand on me and it makes me furious.

"Yes?" Quinn asks.

She's dressed in a black dress with an empire waist, her hair pulled back in a severe bun. Jane Eyre chic. *Quinn goes to*

a funeral. She looks expensive and stylish and ethereal, like a strong wind could blow her over.

I wonder what I look like.

Shit. That's what I look like. I have dark circles under my eyes, my skin is dull, and I didn't have time to get my nails done. They're covered in chipped hot pink polish, which seems garish and out of place next to my black dress. I wanted to wear a pencil skirt but the waistband was pressing into my stomach, making me nauseous.

Not only did my mother die the night before, I've started to get morning sickness. I feel like a snail is crawling up my throat. Swallowing carefully, I press the back of my hand against my mouth when the plane shudders a bit in some minor turbulence.

"I'm pregnant."

Her face clears. "Oh, Georgia!" She undoes her seat belt and comes over to hug me. "That's so exciting! You must be so happy!"

I applaud her innocent delight. Quinn is the type of person who assumes a pregnancy is always good news.

"We're very happy," Alex says, his arm snaking around my neck possessively.

I shoot him a look of annoyance. "She's talking to *me*."

He's conscious enough of my fragile mental state that he apologizes. "Forgive me, love. I'm so excited to start our family together that I get carried away." He lifts my hand and kisses my knuckles.

Quinn retreats to her seat, looking nervously between us.

"I'm happy," I tell her, mustering a smile. "And we had time to tell my mother before she died. She was thrilled for me."

Tears fill Quinn's eyes. "That's wonderful. Georgia, we're going to be able to raise our babies together. You're just a few months behind me."

I nod, my throat suddenly too tight to speak. Tears fill my own eyes and I'm not even sure why. The loss of my mother? Joy at motherhood? Fear?

"Congratulations," Luka says.

I turn and see he's closed his book. Tolstoy.

That makes me roll my eyes. He can't actually be reading that.

"What?" he says. "You doubt the sincerity of my well wishes? My brother is going to be a father. I'm going to be an uncle. It's very exciting and I'm thrilled for you, sister-in-law-to-be."

He makes me want to throw up.

My stomach roils.

Fortunately, Alex is between the two of us. When Luka offers his hand for a shake, I don't have to touch it. Alex accepts his brother's congratulations.

There seems to be an undercurrent between the two of them, but maybe I'm just paranoid. Or maybe I just can't stand Luka.

"Can I tell Armani?" Quinn asks.

I nod. She's going to tell him no matter what I say. She's very in love with her husband and submissive. She calls him daddy and has since before she was pregnant. It's their thing.

I trace my finger across Alex's palm as he holds my hand.

What's our thing?

The sharpness of pain. Of feeling alive. Of pushing each other to the edge.

"I'm really sorry he couldn't be here," Quinn says again. She's already apologized twice for her husband being in London.

"It's not his fault," I say.

I also don't really care who is at the funeral. If anything, I'd prefer it was just me and my mother in her casket. There

are so many things I could have asked, should have said. So many times I stayed away, from lack of money, to resentment that she had let my father push her around, literally and figuratively. That she didn't let him die, which would have spared me the torment of boarding school.

I never told her the truth about that hellhole. I told her it was like Hogwarts. A gothic boarding school upstate.

I never told anyone about boarding school.

Until Alex.

“Quinn,” I say, suddenly overcome by the urge to let her know what I had been through. What Ari had been through. “Did Nash ever talk about going to boarding school?”

Her nose wrinkles. “What? Yes, I suppose so. He went to a lot of boarding schools. It's my understanding he challenged authority and would get kicked out. Why on earth would you ask me that?”

“Because I never told you that he and I went to boarding school together. Back when he was still Aristotle. We called him Ari.” And he was beyond high school by then. He was just a prisoner, like all of us.

“You went to boarding school?” Now she looks thoroughly confused. “I thought you were...”

Poor. That's what she means. She thought I was poor.

It's not an insult. It was true during my years at NYU. Quinn herself comes from a modest family in the Midwest who respects hard work and family values so I know she's not being rude. But contrary to being embarrassed by poverty, I take no small amount of pride in what I accomplished after my escape.

“I was. I am still, technically. I'm not married to Alex.”

Alex squeezes my hand, hard, but he doesn't correct me.

“My mother had nothing at the end. My father took it all away, because he was spiteful, and it was my fault. My mother blamed me. I blame me. She died with nothing but what Alex provided for her because I failed her.”

The tears roll down my cheeks now, fat drops of shame and pain, beading on my lips, cascading down off of my chin onto my cleavage.

“Georgia,” Quinn says, leaning forward to take my hand, her face filled with compassion. “It’s not your fault. It’s not your fault and you can tell me whatever it is you’re hiding. I won’t be angry. I know your heart, if not your whole past.”

My heart?

What is in my heart would shock even my father.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Alex

“**Y**ou told Quinn about Georgia’s past.”

I’m on the phone with Armani Virtue as we’re waiting on the airstrip for the staff to retrieve our bags from the plane. It’s hot in Miami, the sun blasting me even with my sunglasses on. Georgia and Quinn are arm-in-arm, no evidence that Quinn is upset with Georgia for withholding major information about her past from her.

My brother is also on the phone, strolling back and forth about ten feet away from us, his hand in his pocket.

“Yes. I’m not going to keep secrets from my wife.”

“How progressive of you,” I say, undoing the button on my jacket. I feel like I’m cooking from the inside out in this fucking heat. Today is going to be a stressful day.

“You don’t tell Georgia everything?” he asks, his voice amused and mocking.

“She’s not my wife.”

I say it because it’s what he expects me to say. But it’s starting to get under my skin that we’re not married. Georgia is mine. I want that ring on her finger. Not on Nicolette’s. It irritates me that Nicolette thinks she has any right to wear it. I want Georgia to have my ring, my name, my future.

Virtue laughs softly. “We’ve known each other a long time, Alex. I never thought I’d see you fall this hard for a woman.”

“Likewise. Rest assured, I’m looking out for your wife.”

I can see what Armani enjoys about Quinn. She's like a porcelain doll, her beauty impeccable, her fashion sense modern and classic and edgy all at once. But she's not my type. I prefer all the strength Georgia displays, her curves, her smirk of a smile. I have every intention of taking care of her, but at the same time, I admire how she can take care of herself.

Virtue loves a baby doll, I love a fighter.

To each his own. I'll be forever grateful to Virtue for the introduction to Georgia and her tits and all I discovered about her after.

"I know that," Armani says. "I'll be there tomorrow."

We end the call and the stroll over to Luka. Georgia was irritated that he came with us, but he's an important piece of the plan. I'd intended to do this in New York, but Miami will serve the same purpose.

Tatiana and Maxim are waiting at the arrivals gate for us. My sister hugs Georgia, who looks surprised but touched by the gesture. She hugs Tatiana back but merely nods at Maxim, who she's never met.

I offer an arm to Georgia, who is walking very slowly to the car, chin up, sunglasses up, shoulders back.

"My brother is at the house, right?" she asks. "We're picking him up?"

The brother who, more likely than not, will end up living with us at some point. Georgia's grandmother is in her seventies and Roca is only eight. He'll need to be around men during his teen years. I don't mind the idea. Family is important. It's everything.

"No, we're meeting them at the funeral home," I tell her.

Georgia wanted the service immediately. Over and done with. Which is fine with me. Her mother chose an inconvenient time to die, which seems to match her mother's personality. At the end of the day she was still a cheeky cocktail waitress at heart.

I have no idea what to expect or how many people will be in attendance at this service. Georgia has only mentioned her grandmother and brother to me as her family but surely Maribel had friends and other family. “My men are taking them right now to the funeral home.”

Georgia nods and takes a deep breath. She leans on me a little. She looks up at me. “I have something to tell you,” she murmurs.

“I know. Later, love.” I bend down to kiss her, then caress her cheek. “You can do this,” I tell her. “I know you can. You’re strong beyond belief.”

I believe that. I wouldn’t be here with her if I didn’t.

“No, I really need to tell you something.” Her voice is low and urgent.

But right then Luka gives me the nod.

“Hold that thought, darling,” I tell her, kissing her on the forehead. “Go with the bodyguard. I’ll be back in two minutes.”

“Alex,” she hisses, but I already know what she’s going to tell me and I don’t deem it important right now.

As I step away, my sister takes her cue from me and starts peppering Georgia with questions.

Tatiana makes an excellent distraction when she wants to be annoying, which is often.

“Let’s do this,” Luka says.

We go back up the steps into the jet.

Nicolette

A mafia wife never loses her cool.

That’s been drilled in me since birth.

So as I sit across the breakfast table from my father out of protection, out of training, out of muscle memory, I don’t even

flinch when he tears up my divorce papers in front of me and tosses them aside in disgust.

“I can’t believe you signed these,” he says, shaking his head. “Don’t have you have sense of fucking self-preservation? Jesus.”

That almost cracks my mask.

Is he kidding me? How can he even say that with a straight face?

My whole entire life has been one continuous act of self-preservation.

It’s interesting to me though that he doesn’t seem to know that I didn’t even need to sign the paperwork. Alex pushed the divorce through without my consent. Bribed the judge. My father should understand that. It’s a move straight from his book.

“Alex doesn’t want to be married to me and at this point, I don’t want to be married to him,” I say calmly.

What I want is actually irrelevant. We both know that. My actual emotions are irrelevant as well, whether or not I want to be with Alex. What’s important is pride. Saving face. Winning.

“Why, because you’re fucking his brother? Don’t be stupid.”

I can’t help it. I gasp. “What are you talking about?” My heart starts to race. He knows. Of course, he knows.

“Oh, for chrissake, Nicolette,” he says, lifting his snifter to his lips and taking a sip. “Luka has been seen going into your apartment and not leaving again until the next morning. I don’t think the two of you are playing pinochle.”

It was naive of me to think my father wouldn’t know that Luka has come over. To be honest, I’ve been so preoccupied, it never even occurred to me. He also understands my interactions with Luka are more business than pleasure.

“He took me home from a party at Armani Virtue’s house where I thoroughly embarrassed myself. He’s been a friend.”

“Okay. We’ll call it that. But regardless, you’re not signing divorce papers from Alex. He’s your husband and he’s going to stay your husband.”

“Why?” I ask.

It’s a defiant question. For me, anyway.

It catches him off guard. “Why? Because that’s in everyone’s best interest.”

His best interest.

That’s all that matters.

“Alex has a girlfriend.”

Who is the complete opposite of me.

She’s a brunette, more vivacious, with a bright smile and a curvy body. Her eyes are sharp, her stance casual.

Alex’s effusive display of affection with all those damn flowers in their new apartment cut me more than I care to think about. He bought me flowers twice a year, every year. On my birthday, and our anniversary. The cards always said things like “Regards, Alex.” Or a simple “Happy Birthday.” They were ordered by his assistant.

He’d written a different message in every one of those for Georgia and while it may be all lust driven, new and fresh and exciting, it’s still more than I ever got.

“So?”

“She looks cheap,” I say, because she does and I’m bitter. Grossly bitter about everything. I know that and right now, I don’t care if that’s unseemly or if my father finds it offensive or if it’s not fair to Georgia.

That makes my father chuckle. “Snob.”

“Just like you raised me.” I lift my glass of champagne in a toast to him.

“You don’t seem like yourself tonight, princess. Where is all this coming from?”

Gee, I can’t imagine.

“You’re telling me I have to fight this divorce and I find the idea humiliating. He doesn’t want me, Dad.” Saying it out loud is like walking naked down Fifth Avenue. I feel exposed. All eyes on me.

I’ve always been told that I was wanted. Important. That I had a role to play. Now I don’t and I don’t even know who I am without it.

“Make him want you.”

As if it’s that simple.

“He wants her more. The divorce is already finalized. Weeks ago.”

That stuns him for a second, but his face reveals nothing. Finally he says, “He can’t marry her, Nicolette, do you understand me? He can’t.”

I sigh, tired of it all. “Why?”

“Because she’s your half-sister, that’s why. If he marries her, they’ll have a stake in both sides of the organization.”

He drops the bomb casually, as if it’s not a big deal.

She’s your half-sister.

There’s a ringing in my ears and my face is hot, my breath shallow. “*What?*”

Georgia Ryan, the bombshell who stole my husband, is my *sister?*

But my father doesn’t explain any of that. That’s not his concern. “You have to offer Alex what she can’t. Pedigree.”

None of that matters to me. All I can think is that I have a sister. “How long have you known she was your daughter?” I ask, trying to lift my glass but immediately setting it back down. My hand is shaking.

“Since she was born.” He shrugs, like it’s unimportant. “I used to go spend time with Bug and her mother in Miami once a month or so.”

My face goes from hot to ice cold. “Georgia is Bug? I thought Bug was a friend of yours. A colleague.”

He used to tell me all the time he was hanging out with Bug, going to the movies, to amusement parks, to dinner. On a private jet to Disney. I thought Bug was a bookie or when I got older, a woman. A mistress. But Bug is Georgia and she’s my sister and my father *hung out* with her while he did exactly nothing with me?

They had a real relationship and I had our father training me like a pony.

The jealousy I feel is overwhelming. It’s crawling up my throat. A hot, metallic taste that floods my mouth.

Georgia has my husband and my father and I have nothing.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Georgia

Alex's dismissal of me at the airstrip made me angry and I chose to sit with Quinn in the car on the way to the funeral. He doesn't seem aware that I'm ignoring him, which irritates me even more.

But none of that matters as much as the fact that when I walk into the funeral home, my mother is displayed in a casket. I almost throw up when I see her, appalled at the waxy pallor of her face. My grandmother wanted this, and my aunts and uncle. My mother's whole family seems to love a body at a funeral.

As I child, I was subjected to multiple family funerals with the deceased loved one splayed out like a buffet table, garnishes at the edges, like flowers and pictures or sports gear. In my mother's case, I did put my foot down at displaying her with a bunch of embellishments, and given that Alex is paying for the funeral, my family couldn't argue with me.

"Just take a deep breath," Quinn murmurs to me, squeezing my hand gently.

I blink hard, and try not to sob. I turn away from the body, knowing I can't find my mother in that casket. She isn't there. No one is.

My little brother is standing to the right wearing a suit that is too small for him. It's his first communion suit from the year before. I recognize it from the pictures.

Jesus. My heart breaks for him.

He's just a fucking little kid and he's lost his mother.

He never had his father.

I swallow and steel my shoulders. "I have to go talk to my brother," I tell Alex. "Stay here with Quinn."

He nods, not questioning the harshness of my statement. I'm being bitchy, probably unreasonably, and yet it's made worse by the fact that he doesn't even seem to notice. He keeps looking at his phone.

Roca surprises me by running over the last few feet between us when he spots me. He gives me a tight hug and I say, "Hi, kiddo, I missed you."

"I missed you too." He speaks into my stomach.

His fierce grip is killing me. I feel horrible. He's been given such a shit hand in life.

I need to step up, be a better sister to him.

My grandmother looks old and tired as she comes up behind Roca and gives me a side hug.

"You look tired," she says to me, pulling back and giving me a disapproving up and down assessment.

"So do you," I tell her.

She sighs and shrugs. "I guess that makes sense. Where's your man?" She says it with a healthy dose of disdain.

She never liked my mother dating my father, a married man, and here I am doing the same thing.

"Over there," I say, tilting my head in Alex's direction.

My grandmother eyes him and turns back to me, her hand going to Roca's hair to smooth it back. "Very handsome."

"He's very generous," I say, pointedly, as Roca pulls away from us both and wanders a few feet away, spinning on his heels.

It's the wrong thing to say to my grandmother.

"Until he's tired of you," she says, a bite in her voice. "Enjoy it while you can."

She thought my mother was a whore, and clearly, she thinks the same of me.

My emotions are too chaotic to care much. Let her think what she wants. I did what I had to do and I will continue to do that to protect my brother now that my mother is gone.

“He won’t get tired of me,” I tell her, pride making my voice sharp. “I’m good at what I do.”

That shuts her the fuck up.

My petty triumph is short-lived when I see who has walked in the door behind my uncle Tony.

It’s my father.

My father looks commanding and powerful and rich. He’s shaking my uncle’s hand, and greeting my Aunt Mary, who hugs him. They seem impressed he’s come to pay his respects.

I don’t believe in the sincerity of the gesture at all.

“Jesus,” I whisper under my breath. “Lorenzo is here.”

“What?” My grandmother swivels, alarmed. “Gabriella, hide him!”

I don’t even need her to tell me. I have Roca by the collar and I’m yanking him in the opposite direction of our father.

Everyone thinks Curtis Ryan is Roca’s father.

Only my grandmother and I know the truth. That he’s Lorenzo’s son.

And also his heir.

“What’s wrong?” Roca asks me as I drag him into the hallway through the opposite side of the room.

“My father is here,” I tell him, because he’s too old not to recognize that I’m scared. “You know he was mean to Mommy. I don’t want to see him.”

Today is not the day to tell him that Lorenzo is his father as well.

I pull my phone out with trembling fingers and text Alex.

Come in the hallway, please. Now. I need you.

On my way.

I'm trying to figure out what the hell to do, eyes darting around constantly, terrified my father might pop up out of nowhere, like a horror movie.

This feels like a horror movie.

I have Roca tucked behind an artificial bamboo plant, as if that will somehow shield us.

Alex appears and comes toward me. "What's wrong?"

"Take my brother out of here," I tell him urgently. "Lorenzo is here."

"Lorenzo is here." He doesn't look surprised. "Okay. So what is the problem?"

I step as close to Alex as possible and murmur in his ear, "Hide him, please. My father doesn't know he exists."

When I pull back, I see understanding dawn on Alex's face.

He looks alarmed, angry. But then he instantly shifts into action. "Hey, come on, Roca." He's already lifting his phone to his ear. "I need a car," he says into it.

"Go with Alex," I tell Roca, kissing him on the top of his head.

"But—

"It will be fine, I promise." I turn to kiss Alex on the cheek, but his phone is in the way.

Something feels off anyway when I shift into his personal space.

As he's leading Roca away, I realize in one fell swoop what it is.

That's Luka, not Alex.

Fuck.

What the hell is going on?

But before I can process the thought, I hear it.

“Bug.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

Georgia

The voice sounds a shiver down my spine. I haven't heard this voice in seven years.

It's a commanding voice. One that demands respect.

All through my childhood, I both loved his voice and feared it. He could be loving, attentive. He could also be harsh, demanding. My mother and I catered to him whenever he stayed with us and I didn't even realize it until I was older. And yet, I still did it even when I thought he had a lot to answer for with regard to his treatment of us.

The last thing he said to me wasn't even goodbye. It was, "You'll learn how to be grateful at school."

It probably burns him up inside that I didn't.

For a brief second, I feel like I'm going to faint.

But I steel myself and turn around. "Lorenzo. How nice of you to come and pay your respects to the woman you abandoned."

He laughs softly. "I see you haven't changed. Still not an ounce of humility or gratitude."

I don't even bother to respond. There's nothing to say.

He looks older, less powerful, though I doubt it has stopped him from dating women young enough to be his daughter.

"You look beautiful," he says. "All grown up."

That strikes a nerve. “My looks are average at best, remember? I didn’t inherit my mother’s beauty. How many times did you tell me that?”

Fury overtakes fear. What kind of a man tells his eight year old daughter she’s not as pretty as her mother?

He shrugs. “Maybe once or twice. It was true when you were a kid. You were a tomboy and puberty came late.”

A shudder rolls through me. “You’re disgusting.”

His eyes narrow. “I’m still your father whether you want to call me that or not. You owe me respect.”

“I owe you exactly nothing. You haven’t been my father in eight years.” I glance behind him, see that the room is filling up. “I have a viewing to attend.”

As I shift past him, I feel it.

The cold press of a gun into my flank. I freeze.

“Come outside with me, Gabriella.” His voice is smooth, confident.

The gun is pointed in a direction that makes me instantly aware of where my baby is growing, still so tiny and brand new. I don’t hesitate.

I walk out the back door of the funeral home with Lorenzo.

I’ll do anything to protect my unborn child.

Even if that means getting into a car with my father.

Alex

“What the fuck?” I demand of my brother. “You left her alone? That’s the exact opposite of what I told you to do!”

I’m pacing back and forth in my house, nerves giving me excess energy. I want to punch something. I need to punch something. Right now, if he was in front of me, I’d land one on Luka’s face.

“The kid, she shoved the fucking kid at me and told me to hide him, so I did. Did you know he’s Lorenzo’s?”

That gives me pause. “He is her mom’s boyfriend after Lorenzo. Some guy named Curtis Ryan.”

“Nope. Not according to what she just told me. She doesn’t want Lorenzo to know about him. The kid’s a secret and now I’m babysitting an eight-year-old in a suit that’s too small for him at McDonald’s while he’s missing his mother’s funeral. This is fucked up, Alex. Something is off.”

My head is spinning with both the problem and possible solutions.

Roca is Lorenzo’s. That complicates the hell out of profit sharing and inheritance issues. Lorenzo has three biological kids, not two like I thought, not just Nicolette like she thinks. But that’s not even the fucking issue right now.

We had a trap planned for Lorenzo and now Luka has left his post and left my girlfriend alone.

“That means someone tipped Lorenzo off. Which makes no sense. No one knew.”

Just me. Luka. And one other person.

“Nicolette,” we say at the same time.

She didn’t know the plan, but she knew the meeting locale and time.

We knew Lorenzo would show up at the funeral. That was a guarantee after he agreed to a so-called family dinner. But Luka was supposed to stay by Georgia’s side, pretending to be me, while I went home and set up an ambush. I could have my men take out Lorenzo, but I wanted the pleasure of killing him myself for what he did to Georgia, the hell he put her through.

“Nothing’s changed,” I say. Now I’m more determined than ever. He can’t ever find out about the kid. “It’s still time to take him out.”

“Agreed. What the hell do I do with this kid though?”

“As soon as Donatelli’s on the move, take him back to the funeral. He should be there for that. The kid should be able to say goodbye.”

I still remember my mother’s funeral. Some people may consider it more than a child can process, but I needed to see the whole ceremonial trappings surrounding grieving. I needed to see that my mother was important, that people were crying, that she mattered and would be missed. Here today, gone tomorrow fucks with a kid’s head.

Luka makes a sound of impatience. “I didn’t sign up to be a fucking nanny today. I don’t really like kids, you know that.”

“Good thing it’s me having a baby then, not you.” I’m sure he’s pissed I didn’t tell him and that he heard secondhand when Georgia told Quinn.

Yes, I want a baby. A child to raise that is half-me, half-Georgia. But at the end of the day there is a lot at stake. It’s a competition and I beat my twin brother. That itself is satisfying as hell.

But more important than that? Money and power.

And now I’ve found the woman I want to love and fuck forever.

I own everything and I fucking love it.

“Congratulations,” Luka says. “For now.”

That gives me pause. I glance toward my front yard, a sixth sense telling me there’s movement out there.

“What the hell does that mean?” I ask.

“Just what I said.” Luka disconnects the call.

Rage rolls through me like an electrical jolt. Did my brother just betray me?

If he did, I’ll rip him apart inch by inch with my entire knife collection. I’ll trade them out one by one and torture him until he begs me for mercy. I’ll destroy everything he was and ever will be in a bloody massacre.

Fucking twin or not, I'll kill him and enjoy it if he betrayed me. And unlike Cain, who was condemned to wander the earth after he killed Abel, I will own everything.

Not that I want to kill my brother. We're partners and I hope there is a better explanation for what he just said.

Maybe he means he's gotten some woman pregnant as well. Which isn't betrayal. It's his right to try to edge me out. I'd be pissed, but that's fair and I hope like hell that's what this is, not that he sold me out.

I have no idea who the woman could be, but then why the fuck would he tell me who he's been trying to knock up? It could be anyone. A casual hookup. A woman he hired. Some secret girlfriend I know nothing about.

I see it again. Movement.

Right as my phone rings. I swipe to answer.

"Yeah?"

"They're here, Mr. Kuzmin."

"Let them in." I end the call and wait.

Georgia

We rode in a car like this when he took me to boarding school.

A sleek, black sedan with the smell of an air freshener dangling from the rearview mirror. Lorenzo likes air fresheners. It's one of his many quirks. Or demands. However you choose to categorize it.

"What do you want?" I ask him, because I'm not sixteen and I'm not powerless. He doesn't control me anymore.

We're in the backseat together, his driver already pulling out of the parking lot.

"We need to talk."

“Here I thought you wanted to pay my mother your respects and instead you’re taking her only daughter away from her funeral. Classy as fuck, Dad.”

Without warning the back of his hand connects with my cheek. My head snaps back, pain shattering throughout my jaw and cheek, making my eyes water. *Damn it.* I’d forgotten what that feels like. How could I have forgotten how humiliating and painful a simple backhand is?

“I should have killed you that day,” he says. “But I didn’t because of my fucking ego, do you understand that? I was *proud* of you. You were cunning and calculating and not afraid to make the move. I admired that and yes, I admired that you survived whatever they did to you at school because you’re strong. Because you’re like me.”

I turn to him, refusing to wipe my eyes or nose. I just let the tears from the blow slip down my cheeks. I am strong. And yes, I am like him. It’s a reality I can’t deny, even if I can’t stand it.

“Don’t insult me then by calling that hellhole a school. It was a prison. And if you want to know what I survived there, it was being raped by a thirty year old guard when I was a teen virgin.”

Something flickers in his eyes. Remorse?

But then he says, “But you survived. You’ve done well for yourself, Bug. I’m impressed with you, like I’ve always been.”

A sick side of me, the little girl who wanted him to love her, is pleased. I’m soaking up his compliment like a cat in a sun spot. The other part, the woman I’ve become, wants to scratch his eyes out.

“That’s why it pains me to have to kill you, but you’ve given me no choice.”

My heart skips a beat. My skin goes hot. I try to breathe, try to stay calm. Not show him any weakness.

I’ve known for eight years he wants to kill me.

But hearing it out loud makes it real.

But more important than that, if he kills me, he kills my child.

I don't want him to know that though.

Nor will I go down without a fight, for my baby's sake. And mine.

“Not unless I kill you first.”

He laughs, softly, shaking his head slowly. “God, I wish your sister had an ounce of your toughness.”

The click of a gun in the front seat makes me jump.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Georgia

We're no longer driving. The car is parked in an alley a block from the funeral home. The driver has a gun pointed at me. He's not saying a word, just holding a weapon that could kill me in the blink of an eye. I know my father also has a gun. I felt it pressed into my side when he told me to go outside with him.

Fear is squeezing the air out of my lungs, shutting down my brain. I can't think. I can't speak.

But I can't let him know how afraid I am. I have to be strong. Luka will tell Alex, wherever the hell he is, and he'll come looking for me. For his unborn child. I just need to stall.

The passenger door opens and someone slides in.

It's Nicolette.

What the hell is she doing here, in Miami?

I glance down at the car door. It's locked, but I try it anyway. It doesn't open.

"As if I'd be that stupid," my father says, watching my movement. Then he leans between the two front seats and kisses Nicolette's cheek before settling back into his seat. "Good morning, princess. How did you sleep?"

She smiles at him, a pretty, passive smile on her perfectly symmetrical and beautiful face. "Hello, Daddy. I slept well, thank you for asking." Her eyes shift to me. "Like a baby."

There seems to be some kind of hidden message there.

She isn't looking at me like a pampered princess or a vapid diva, but with understanding, compassion. Urgency. It feels like she wants me to do something, but I don't know what.

This feels different from when she came to my apartment, arrogant and angry.

My gaze flickers over to the driver. He's watching me still, silently, intently.

Nicolette's hair is twisted into a braid and is resting over one shoulder. She has elegant and neutral fingernails on display as she smoothes her palms over her cheeks, as if she's testing the firmness of her skin. The diamond wedding ring from Alex flashes on her finger, mocking me.

Insecurity floods over me. What if Alex wants her back?

He wouldn't. He couldn't.

I tell myself that and I believe it intellectually. Emotionally I'm still the little wild child with the mud-colored hair who ran barefoot around Miami trying to get her father's attention.

That feeling is reinforced by what Nicolette says next.

"Hello, Bug," she says, casting me a disparaging glance over her shoulder.

Bug.

She knows. She finally knows the truth.

That she's Princess and I'm Bug. Perfection versus gawky angles, long legs, and unpredictable emotions.

I finally find my voice because if I don't speak, it will disappoint my father. He'll conclude I'm not the worthy adversary he hoped me to be.

"Nice to see you again," I tell Nicolette. "Too bad it's under such shitty circumstances."

"Is it?" she asks, clucking softly as she glances at the driver's gun. "Roberto, can you put that down? It's making me feel very nervous." She puts her hand to her throat and shudders as if she finds the whole thing distasteful.

He looks to our father for confirmation. Lorenzo gives him a nod.

The gun disappears.

I see it.

The flash of triumph on her face before it evaporates as quickly as it appeared.

It's enough to tell me the truth. She's not the delicate and fragile woman she lets men think she is. It's either a cunning ploy or a survival technique. Either way, it's probably allowed her leverage without anyone understanding she's pulling it.

Whatever Nicolette is doing, it doesn't feel malicious toward me. She might even be an ally, though I find that doubtful. At any rate, she's giving me an opportunity I didn't have alone with Lorenzo. She's a distraction.

"It's hot in here," I say. "I feel nauseous."

"It is, isn't it?" Nicolette fans herself. "Roberto, turn on the air."

Lorenzo makes a sound of irritation. "Jesus, could the two of you complain any more? Roberto, don't have daughters. They're fucking exhausting."

"Put the window down," I say, feigning urgency as I stand up straighter and hit the window button repeatedly even though I know it's not going to open. "I'm going to throw up."

"Christ," is my father's opinion. "That bastard really did knock you up, didn't he?"

"Yes. I have morning sickness." I force a gagging sound

Nicolette gasps. "You're *pregnant*?" Tears appear in her eyes, shocking me. "Alex?" she asks, pain in her voice.

It gives me an unexpected sympathy. I never thought I would feel empathy for my half-sister, who always seemed to be living a charmed life. I nod and clap my hand over my mouth and gag again.

She shoves at Roberto's arm. "Open the door for her, you idiot! I can't stand the smell of vomit." The princess is firmly

back in place.

And it works.

He unlocks the doors.

I yank at the knob at the same time I realize that when she shoved him, Nicolette also lifted Roberto's gun from his waistband.

Well, well, look at that. My sister is just as cunning as me after all.

Shoving the door open, I tumble out, dropping low in case my father decides to take a shot at my back as I exit the car.

Then a gun goes off, the boom cutting through the muggy Florida air as I drop to my knees.

Alex

I hear the shot before I see the car.

I take off running, gesturing to my man, Dmitri, to follow.

Raising my phone to my ear while I'm running, I order it to text Luka.

Leave the kid with Tatiana and get over here. Shot fired.

Nicolette fucked us over. That bitch assured me and Luka that she wanted a hand in betraying her father. Yet none of this plan to lure him to my warehouse involved Donatelli getting to Georgia first.

I'm furious that he wanted to get the damn jump on me.

I have to say, I'm getting a little fucking sick of my father-in-law. It's going to be a pleasure to kill him.

Georgia

For a split second, I don't know if I've been shot or not, but then I realize that nothing hurts and I'm not bleeding, I'm just shaken up. As I scramble away on all fours, I risk a glance into

the backseat of the car. What I see shocks the hell out of me. Lorenzo is taking the gun from Nicolette.

She's screaming. "It was an accident! Roberto, I'm sorry! I thought you were pointing it at me and I freaked out!"

The driver is moaning.

She shot the driver.

Nicolette shot the driver and I have a strong suspicion she did it to allow me to escape.

I don't know why. I could be totally wrong.

I don't really care right at this moment.

What's important is that I get away so I can save mine and Alex's baby.

I don't want to die either. I've been fighting to survive for years and I'm not about to give up now. Not when I'm on the cusp of getting everything I've ever wanted, including revenge on my father.

That's why I go around the back of the town car and stay low, checking out the alley around me. It's narrow and long. There's nowhere to go. There's no one else in sight. I wish like hell I wasn't wearing a dress.

I also wonder where Nicolette came from. She was obviously waiting for us to arrive. I spot it then—a closed steel door deep down the alley. It's going the opposite direction of potential freedom. There could be anyone behind that door. It also requires going past the open door of the car.

But the other way could result in me being in a wide open parking lot which would give me nowhere to hide.

And my father a clear shot at my back.

Inside the warehouse could be my father's men though.

Or they could be at the end of the alley.

"*Shit,*" I breathe out loud, plagued by indecision and furious with myself for it.

I'm wasting time.

This is also my only chance to kill my father.

If I don't, Alex will and I'd much rather the chance to do it myself.

I need to protect Roca and my baby at all costs.

I stand up, glancing through the back windshield.

Arms wrap around me from behind and I scream, kicking and elbowing out backwards to break free of the iron grip.

"Stop, it's me," Alex murmurs in my ear, holding me tighter.

I go still and glance back at him, breathing hard. "How..."

But I don't have time to complete my sentence before his arm raises and he shoots straight through the windshield of the car, shattering glass everywhere. I jump as he yanks me backward, putting me behind him. I scramble to see what is happening, heart racing.

Through the hole the bullet blasted out I see my father is slumped forward against the back of the driver's seat, bleeding.

Nicolette is screaming and throwing open her car door.

Alex meets her there and says, "Give me that," as he yanks the gun out of her hand.

For a split second I think he's going to shoot her too and I open my mouth, but before I can even speak, he sets her aside and leans in. He fires at the driver, whose hands are up protesting.

Nicolette is covered in blood and she stumbles around the back of the car, sobbing, before leaning over and throwing up right in front of me.

I'm not even sure what to think or how to feel. It's mostly just shock washing over me and a curiosity about Nicolette.

"Are you okay?" I ask her.

She nods and straightens up, wiping her mouth and her eyes. "I'm fine." Her voice is low, steely.

“Is he dead?” I ask Alex, sparing another glance at my father. It feels like... nothing. I don’t feel satisfied, I don’t feel triumphant. I do feel relieved but even that seems pale in comparison to what I expected, to the fact that I’m now completely free of him. No longer in danger.

Relief should appear like the pop of a balloon, dramatic, all at once. Instead, maybe it will be like slowly letting the air out of a balloon, a tiny sense of relief and normalcy eking out at a time.

It’s been so long since I wasn’t living under the weight of his ominous threats that I don’t know what it feels like to just live.

“Yes,” Alex says shortly. He sounds offended by the question.

Nor does he sound comforting. He doesn’t offer me a hug.

He actually looks pissed as he puts his phone to his ear and turns away from both of us to talk to someone.

“Where’s my brother?” I demand, coming around his side. “Is he okay?”

Alex nods, irritation flashing across his face.

He’s mad at me.

What the hell did I do?

I frown at his back and then turn to Nicolette.

“This is awkward,” she says, holding her arms out like the blood on her clothing won’t seep into her skin that way.

I almost laugh at that because it’s the understatement of the year. “I can’t stand here and look at his body,” I tell her. “Even if I did want him dead.”

“I agree.”

“You don’t seem as upset as I would have expected.”

“Are you kidding? He was a horrible father. He treated me like a show pony.” Her voice is bitter. “He didn’t actually give a shit about me.”

That surprises me more than anything so far. “He always made it sound like you were his favorite, that he was so proud of you.”

“I guess he was proud of me. Of the face I was born with, anyway. Of the commodity I could become for him.”

I can't admit out loud the reasons he was proud of me. Because I was like him.

We are both walking slowly away from the car. Nicolette is holding her braid, twisting it repeatedly. I have my arms across my stomach. “I thought it would feel better to see him dead than it does,” I admit. “Or maybe it just doesn't seem real.”

“I saw it. It's real.” She shudders, clapping her hand over her mouth to stifle a heaving sound.

We reach the end of the alley.

Luka is waiting there.

Nicolette starts toward him. “Luka, oh my God, I'm so glad you're here.”

She sounds genuine, making me curious. I glance back at the alley, at Alex, who is heading toward the door to the warehouse.

When I turn back, I'm stunned.

Luka is pointing a gun right at us.

“What are you doing?” Nicolette asks, sounding even more stunned than I feel.

“Ladies, you have some fucking explaining to do.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

Georgia

Luka has the gun trained primarily on Nicolette and I don't know what comes over me.

Maybe I'm just tired of feeling powerless. Maybe a part of me feels like Nicolette saved me and now I should save her. Maybe I still, somewhere deep in my heart, want a sister in the truest sense.

But whatever the reason, in that split second I make the decision to reach up and knock the gun away from Luka's hand.

The gun goes off.

The pain rips through me, a hot explosion in my forearm that robs me of my breath. Nicolette's scream sounds far away, like I'm on a train in a tunnel being pulled away from her and Luka. All sound recedes and it's just me in the hot sun, blinking.

Luka gaze is locked on mine and the steely gray eyes, identical to Alex's, are filled with something I can't decipher. Is he going to kill me?

He's speaking but I can't hear the words. It's just his lips moving.

Then the sound roars back and the pain explodes.

"Georgia!" Luka is saying. "Look at me."

He's shaking me by the shoulders.

“Stop touching me,” I manage to say, his grip tight and invasive, the motion rattling my skull. “Let me go.” I look down at my arm and see the blood. It’s running down my hand and dripping onto the asphalt. It feels like warm water has been poured over my skin.

“You’re going to be fine,” he says.

Then his face disappears and Alex is in front of me. “Georgia, sweetheart, I’m here.”

There’s pressure on my arm and it makes the pain sharpen. “Ow, that hurts. Alex, stop.”

“It’s okay, baby,” he says and his voice is calm, soothing. He sounds different than he normally does. Concerned? His arms wrap around me, preventing my knees from buckling. “I’ve got you.”

Maybe I’m not okay if Alex sounds like that. Gentle. His eyes are warm, his grip on me strong, tender. Maybe I’m going to die.

But knowing that he is in control of the situation, I allow my eyes to roll back in my head.

Alex

“*Fuck*,” I say, glaring at Luka. “She’s passed out. We need to get her to the hospital.”

I feel something that might be considered panic.

It’s so unfamiliar I’m not sure what it is exactly.

I just know when I heard the shot and came out of the doorway and saw Georgia bleeding my heart just about stopped. And I’m man enough to admit that.

“It doesn’t look bad at all,” he says, wrapping her arm with his shirttail that he’s ripped from his waistband. “I think the bullet just grazed her and the bleeding is already slowing down. It’s just shock that caused her to faint.”

He’s probably right. I’ve seen a lot of gunshot wounds over the years. Relief floods me like a tsunami. Anger follows

in its wake.

“You shot my woman,” I roar, furious at him. “What the *fuck?*” Georgia is dead weight in my arms, but she’s already coming around, thank God.

“It was an accident,” he says. “She grabbed the gun.”

Her face is pale but her eyes flutter open. “Hi,” she whispers.

I’m so relieved that she’s okay, I chuckle. “Hi, beautiful.”

Brushing Luka’s hand away so I can see her wound, I confirm he’s right. It’s just a graze. Bloody, but superficial. “You’re fine,” I tell her. “You’re going to be fine.”

“Luka shot me.”

“He says it was an accident. Jesus, why did you grab the gun, Georgia?” I ask her, throat tight, holding her against my chest and applying pressure to her forearm to staunch the blood flow. I sound angry and I can’t stop myself. I should be comforting her, not accusing her but she scared the fucking hell out of me. “You could have been killed.”

Which would destroy me. The very thought has me gripping her closer, a vise-like squeeze, as if I can prevent death from ripping her from me if I just hold her tight enough. I’ll fight off the grim reaper with one arm if I have to. Nothing and no one is going to take her away from me.

“Because Luka was going to shoot Nicolette,” she tells me.

“No, I wasn’t,” my brother protests, sounding cranky about the whole situation. “Why is everyone so damn dramatic all the time?”

“Then stop waving a fucking gun around,” I tell him. “What the hell were you even doing?”

“I was making a point that some shady shit is going on with these two. And you’re one to talk. You can’t take a piss without a firearm.”

“My gun only goes off when I intend it to.”

I want to punch him and see him drop like Georgia just did.

It's also not the time.

My concern right now is Georgia. She's trembling and I need to get her some water and a place to sit down before taking her for medical attention. I want the all-clear from a physician.

"Take care of Nicolette," I tell Luka. "Figure out what the hell happened. I want to know if she fucked us over."

Nicolette doesn't exactly look like a devious backstabber right now. She's actually using the wall of my warehouse to hold herself up and she's covered in her father's blood. She looks dazed and sick.

"Yeah," Luka says.

Something in his tone has me narrowing my eyes. I study him. He's looking at Nicolette with an expression I can't decipher. Which irritates me, because I know him as well as I know myself.

"What the fuck is going on?" I ask him.

But he frowns. "Nothing. I'm just pissed thinking that Nicolette told Lorenzo we were going to be here."

I glance back down the alley. Dmitri is already shifting the dead driver so he can pull the car into my warehouse and clean up the mess. "Make her tell you the truth."

"You want me to interrogate Nicolette," he says flatly. It's not a question. He already knows the answer.

I nod, sharply, well aware that Georgia is listening to every word we say, gunshot wound or not. I pet the back of her hair, keeping her face pressed into my chest. I'm angry that this is twice now I didn't protect her. It makes me so angry that I want to make sure she understands how dangerous all of this, our world, is.

As Luka stalks away in irritation, I kiss the top of Georgia's head. "You are so fucking brave," I tell her. "And it's one of the reasons I love you with every ounce of my heart

and soul. Every molecule inside my body. But you're going to fucking kill me if you pull a stunt like that again. Don't you *dare* do anything like that ever again, do you understand me? It was reckless and dangerous."

For that brief second, when I thought she'd been shot in the chest, my world had nearly ended right then and there.

My voice is low and rough with emotion. I sound like a prick, but I don't care. She shaved a decade off of my life.

But she peels her head off my chest and glares up at me. "Your asshole brother shot me. Why are you yelling at *me*?"

She has a point. Not that I'll admit it. I stare into her blue eyes and lift her higher in my arms so that our faces are closer. So she can see in my own expression what I feel. "Because if you die, I die. Now that I have you I'm nothing without you." I give her a little shake.

"Alex," she murmurs, and the sweetness of her tone is a soothing balm to the sting of my anger.

I brush my lips over her temple. "I don't exist unless your heart beats next to mine."

"Our baby's heart is beating between us," she says.

That hits me hard, a sucker punch in the gut. Holy shit. A baby. Made from her and me. Reality goes behind a pregnancy test, the triumph of besting my brothers, the plans for the future. I set her down on the ground gently, and rest my hand over her belly. I understand now, all at once, and I know all over again she is the fiercest protector I could have ever chosen to make a baby with.

"This is why you went with Lorenzo," I say.

She nods. "Yes. I had to protect our baby."

I cup her cheeks and kiss her, hard. "You are fucking amazing, love. And I'm sorry about your father."

It doesn't matter how much of a prick he was, he was still her father. And I just killed him.

But my Georgia doesn't want sympathy. "I just wish I could have pulled the trigger."

That makes me laugh softly. "We need to get you to the hospital." She's steady on her feet, but I'm still holding her against me, and holding her arm up vertically to stem any blood flow. I want her to be seen by a doctor.

"I have to go to my mother's funeral. Just bandage me up for now," she says.

I assess Georgia. Her face is stubborn. I consider my options. Taking her to the hospital anyway or giving into her request. I understand why she wants to go and pay her final respects to her mother. This is it. There are no fucking do overs with a funeral.

I nod, texting Dmitri to get the first aid kit out of his car so we can clean the wound up. "Of course we can go to the funeral."

"Where is Roca?"

"With Tatiana."

She makes a face but doesn't say anything else. Tatiana wouldn't be my first choice for a babysitter either but that's Luka's doing.

Luka is currently being loud and demanding with Nicolette. "Tell me what you did," he says. "Now."

She's crying but otherwise she's not answering him.

"What will it take to get you to talk?" he asks. "Should I fuck it out of you?"

My eyebrows shoot up. Not the interrogation method I was thinking of, but it's probably a hell of a threat to use on Nicolette given her disgust toward sex.

I steer Georgia toward the car I arrived in with Dmitri.

"What's going on?" Georgia asks. "Why was Nicolette here?"

I have some idea but now isn't the time to discuss it.

“That’s what Luka is finding out.”

Nicolette

“Don’t,” I murmur to Luka. “Please.” I feel nauseous, still in shock at seeing my father’s blood and brains scattered everywhere over the car, and me. I can smell it. Blood and gunpowder, acrid in my nostrils, lingering on and on.

It’s not grief I feel, but shock and disgust. I never envisioned the gruesomeness of my father’s death. I just thought he would be gone without me seeing any of it and I would be free. Cut loose from both his restraints and those of marriage.

“No? You don’t want me to fuck you?” Luka shakes me a little. “Then tell me the truth.”

I bite my lip and don’t say a word.

He grabs my arm and yanks me, forcing me to stumble over the asphalt and follow him. The sun is in my eyes and it’s too hot to be wearing the suit I’m in. I want to peel off this blood-soaked jacket and toss it into a dumpster.

“Where are we going?” I ask, heart racing.

“I told you. I’m going to fuck you until you spill every secret you’ve ever had.”

His words make me forget about the restrictive clothing I’m in. My mouth goes dry.

“I’m going to fuck you until you’re begging me to stop. Until you’re screaming for mercy from the relentless pounding of my hard cock in your tight little pussy.”

A shiver rolls across my skin. Along with an unexpected rush of warmth between my thighs. My cheeks blaze with heat. “You wouldn’t dare.”

I say it with a defiant haughtiness I’ve been groomed to use since birth.

It has no effect on Luka.

“You’d be amazed by what I would dare to do,” he tells me, opening a car door and shoving me inside.

Then he climbs in after me.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Georgia

I go through the motions of the funeral, accepting condolences and hugs and murmurs of “what a sweet woman” my mother was. It’s an interesting thing to say. Because my mother was a lot of things but sweet wasn’t really one of them. It’s like her family just thinks they’re supposed to say that and that sweet is a virtue above all others.

These people are her family. My family. Yet I don’t belong with them. Because I would describe my mother as resilient, loyal, cunning, and flirtatious. There was nothing she couldn’t get with her female charms but she was no user and never cruel. She was devoted to the men she loved, even when she shouldn’t have been, and she loved me and Roca with her whole heart.

My brother seems to have emotionally checked out. He’s playing a game on my grandmother’s cell phone, which I think is disrespectful, but I haven’t been raising him, she and Mom have, so I can’t really say much.

Under my blazer my bandaged wound pulses with heat and I can still smell the gunshot residue in my nose, feel the startling impact that sent my arm flying backward and blood arcing up in the air. It had looked like splatter art before landing on the canvas of Luka and Nicolette’s chests.

Which meant my blood mingled with my father’s on Nicolette’s suit.

What a gruesome reality.

Maybe I'm as checked out as Roca. It feels like I've disassociated, that the room is warm and muted, like a dream, and the voices are mere murmurs, mouths moving but the words delayed. Like when your show streaming stalls and the actors lips don't align with the sound.

Just mouths moving and all I can think about is my blood trickling through my father's on Nicolette's designer clothes.

Alex's hand is on the small of my back and while his stance is loose, I can sense his tension. He wants me to see a doctor, but he respects me enough to allow me to stay here. I glance up at him.

His voice I hear. It would penetrate through the deepest fog.

"Are you doing okay?" he asks.

He looks concerned yet he also understands me. I'm not fragile.

Quinn has already returned to our house with a bodyguard, tired from traveling. I envision her on a Victorian fainting couch, though we obviously don't have one. It's a good look on her. It brings out the nurturer in her husband, a man not known for his gentle nature. It's not a look I can pull off. This works better between me and Alex. He respects my strength, my stubbornness.

It also turns him on.

I nod. "I'm fine." It's true. I'm fine.

There is an irony to my grief, so profound for my mother, so absent for my father.

The reception line has ended and so I turn to Alex. "It's like closing the door on my childhood all at once. The lid on the coffin of both of my parents slamming shut, literally and metaphorically."

"We have to attend Lorenzo's funeral," he murmurs. The words allow for no arguing but he softens the delivery by brushing my hair back off of my temple and running the back of his knuckles down my cheek.

I nod. There will be speculation as to who killed my father, but we have to play the game. Pay our respects. Pretend that everyone isn't scheming all the damn time. "I know. I know how all of this works." I do. My mother was a mafia man's mistress after all. And now I'm going to be a mafia wife. "You're going to marry me," I tell him. "In case you were wondering."

The corner of his mouth turns up as he fights the urge to smile. "That's not for you to decide," he says.

"The hell it isn't."

Now he does smile. His hand tightens on the back of my neck and he stares at me with hungry possessiveness. "You're such a pretty little bossy slut. I'm going to fuck you later until you apologize for speaking to me like that."

"Then you'll be fucking me all night," I tell him.

Alex leans in and brushes his lips over my earlobe. Then he bites me. I can't help it. I gasp as heat shoots through my pussy. The pulse of heat between my legs throbs almost as painfully as the beat from my forearm.

"Perfect," he says. "That's what I wanted anyway."

I suddenly need to leave this dusty hushed funeral home. "I need to get out of here," I tell him. "I can't stand another minute."

Alex doesn't question it nor does he hesitate. He trusts me.

He just nods and takes my hand. He cuts a swath through the room and explains and apologizes and mentions morning sickness and tells my grandmother who will be driving her and Roca and where.

Then we're in the car and I sigh, leaning back against the seat as I briefly close my eyes. My arm is throbbing, like a heartbeat, radiating out in all directions and robbing me of my focus, but I refuse to take anything for the pain because of the baby.

"Are these windows tinted?" I ask.

"Yes."

“Good.” Undoing my seat belt I yank up my skirt without hesitation and climb onto Alex’s lap.

He’s already unzipping his pants. He knows what I want. I want to be fucked to feel alive. Fucked to forget. Fucked to feel.

He helps me by gripping my waist and hauling me right onto his cock. As my body slides down over him I moan in ecstasy, tossing my head back. I pump my hips frantically, lifting up and down, wanting his hard rod to impale me like a stake, to shift my focus from pain and grief to pleasure.

“Fuck it,” I demand. “Fuck me so hard.”

“My pussy,” Alex says. “This is my pussy, do you understand? I’m going to fuck this hot little cunt every day for the rest of your life.”

“Promise?” I’m out of breath, frantic, tits bouncing in a way I know he likes. “The rest of my life?”

“Yes. Come all over my cock, baby. Make me nice and wet and show you how much you need me.”

I’m starting to lose sense of reality, of time, of anything other than our hot rhythm, of slapping flesh and deep penetrating pleasure. I explode on him, stars bursting behind my eyelids. Alex shakes me.

“Look at me,” he demands harshly. “Look at me when you break so you know who broke you.”

That causes my orgasm to roll right into a second one. He’s such a filthy prick and I love him so damn much. I tear my eyes open so I can see his stare, see the contours of his strong jaw and his nostrils flaring. His breath is warm on me, his teeth gritted. He’s holding back.

I grip his lapels and say, desperate, “Come inside me, Alex. *Do it.*” It’s my turn to shake him. I’m not even sure why I am, I just need him to lose control the way I have for most of my life.

Everything was so out of control for *years* and now I have it all tidied up, all under control. My future. Alex. A baby.

Financial security. My brother's safety.

But I want him to lose himself in me. I want to own him the way he owns me.

He pauses, then swears. I felt the hot spurt of his cum burst inside me.

I see his love for me in his eyes.

It makes me feel triumphant.

I'm not the only one who needs the other.

He needs me too.

It's evident when his shoulders go slack and he squeezes my face between his palms and kisses me, hard, still buried inside me.

"We're getting married as soon as we get back to New York."

I smile, victorious. "But you're still married to Nicolette."

Alex kisses my neck, softly. "No, I'm not. We were divorced the night you and I met. That's why she was so upset."

I'm confused. "But... she said she wouldn't sign the divorce papers."

"She didn't need to sign them. I paid the judge to sign off on the divorce without her signature." He eases me back by the shoulders so he can study me. "You've never been the other woman. You've always been *the* woman. My woman." He kisses me. "My one." He kisses me again. "My only." And a third brush of his lips over mine. "My always."

That has my throat tightening and tears filling my eyes.

I'm his one and only.

And we're getting married.

"Tonight," I tell him.

"Tonight what?"

"I want to get married tonight then."

Alex chuckles. “Then we’ll get married tonight, queen.”

Alex

“Is there anything you need to tell me before we get married?” I ask Georgia, watching her exit the shower, skin all dewy pink, her clutching a towel modestly as if I haven’t seen and claimed every single inch of her flesh. “Bodies you’ve buried or money you’ve stolen? Anything I need to know?”

She gives me a sheepish look. “There is something.”

This ought to be fucking good.

“What is it? You can tell me anything.”

She tightens the knot on her towel while I lounge in the doorway, leaning against the doorframe. I’m only partially dressed for our wedding. I have my pants on, but no shirt because the bathroom is filled with steam. We’re still in Miami at our house, a rack of wedding dresses in our bedroom for Georgia to pick from.

She unwraps the towel from around her head and shakes out her hair. Fuck, she’s so sexy without even trying. I’m distracted by how amused I am at myself. I’m so in love with this woman.

“I made him up,” she tells me. “Curtis Ryan.”

That catches me off guard. I stare at Georgia. “What?” I’m not following her. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, he’s not real. I stole the name from a headstone in the cemetery when I got out of boarding school and came home to Miami. I made him social media profiles and backdated all his posts. You can do that, you know, give new posts old dates. Anyway, I lifted photos of some random guy with his baby and I pretended like he was posting about the birth of his son, Roca, that he had with my mom.”

For a second, I stare at Georgia, then I start to grin. I can’t help it. “You devious little snake. I fucking love you.”

She gives me a look as she runs her fingers through her hair. “You’re crazy.”

“Crazy about you. How did you manage to give you and your brother his last name legally?”

“I didn’t. I just started using them. You’d be surprised how easy it is to just declare yourself someone. Once you have a single document, which in my case was a fake birth certificate, the rest fell into place. Driver’s license, student ID, social security...”

She continues to impress me. “The photos I saw of you and him with your mother at your college graduation?”

Georgia shrugs. “That was all photoshop. My mother would never set foot in New York knowing my father lived there. I took a separate picture of me and my mother with our arms around each other and swapped out my friend at graduation for her. Then I added Curtis next to her. The guy I named Curtis anyway.”

I actually want to laugh out loud but I resist the urge. “So simple. So fucking clever, my darling.”

“My mother thought I was insane. That we’d be found out. I don’t think my father ever really bothered to check but if he had, he would have just seen my mother in a new relationship. I didn’t want him to make any sort of connection between him and Roca.”

“I’m impressed. I’m glad you told me. Are there any other secrets you’d like to share?” I ask, because I suspect she has at least one more tucked away.

“It’s not a big one. I just might have stolen a flashdrive from my father when I was sixteen out of his apartment.” Georgia flashes me a smug smile. “It has all the numbers to his offshore bank accounts.”

Now I do laugh. “What were you planning to do with those?”

“Hold them until he died.”

“And now he’s dead.”

“And now he’s dead.”

She knows what it means. We have control over hundreds of millions of dollars in assets. But more importantly, we have leverage over the branch of the organization he left behind. And Nicolette.

“Go put a wedding dress on before I fuck you right now for being so damn clever.”

She bites her lip and gives me a wide-eyed innocent act that I don’t buy. “Can’t we do both?”

And that’s why she’s fucking perfect.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Georgia

Alex likes to watch me.

It's part of our routine now. When I asked him what was so fascinating about me blow drying my hair he said, "I like to make sure you're real and not just my fantasy."

What woman would argue with that?

He can watch me all he wants.

He's changed my life. He's restored me to who I always was and should have been. My father's daughter.

And he loves me as much as I love him, which is fiercely and with every breath I take.

"Why do all these dresses have plunging cleavage?" I ask, standing in my bra and panties as I go through the closetful of dresses Alex has bought me. We're at home in New York, about to attend the reading of my father's will.

He doesn't answer and when I turn I see he's lounging on the bed watching me, hands behind his head, a smirk on his face. "Why do you think?"

"Because you're obsessed with my body?" I ask, sweetly.

"Correct."

He's already dressed in a suit, which is disappointing. I like when he lays on the bed in his unzipped pants, bare-chested, tattoos and muscles tempting me to climb on top of him. He does fill a suit damn nicely, though. He's all in black, in deference to the occasion. I realize I should do the same, so

I pull out the most conservative black skirt and jacket I can find amongst all the slutty chic clothes Alex has bought for me.

“I need maternity clothes.” My stomach is just barely visible but it feels profoundly different to me. I run my hand over it, in awe.

“Buy whatever you want, sweetheart. Just don’t cover up too much.”

“You’re very generous.”

“And you’re brilliant and sexy all at once.”

Shimmying into the skirt I approach the bed. “Zip me up.”

“I only unzip,” he says, but he obeys me, rolling onto his side to brush his fingertips lightly across the bare skin on my lower back and the curve of my ass. “Mine. All mine.”

I shiver, thinking he’s going to take me to bed, but he zips the skirt.

I turn and give him a pout. “I thought you were going to play with me.”

“This meeting is important, love. Then we’ll fuck. Are you nervous?” he asks, giving me a little push. “Finish getting dressed.”

“I don’t want to see Nicolette,” I tell him.

It was awkward and horrible at our father’s funeral. Nicolette avoided me and Alex studiously, and refused to allow me to stand in the receiving line. I don’t understand how she feels about me or what she wants. I could have sworn she was trying to save me the day Lorenzo died, but maybe I’m wrong.

It hurts me more than I want it to. I always wanted a sister and I have one, but at the end of the day Alex is my family. My grandmother and brother as well, but even that feels restrained, complicated, clouded by my grandmother’s harsh judgment.

“Nicolette is harmless. She has an icy stare, true, but she’s a follower, not a leader. She’ll just politely get the information from the attorney and then leave.”

“Until we blow everything up.” I slip into a blouse and button it.

“Don’t worry. It will be fine. Trust me.”

Alex always has everything go in his favor so he doesn’t understand that for most of my life it’s been the opposite.

Luka assured us that Nicolette wasn’t a part of any machinations. She was, as always, obeying our father’s orders, and didn’t know what to do when he changed the plans. She was then, he swears, and is, on our side in the sense that we all shared the same goal.

Elimination of Lorenzo Donatelli.

What that means now that he’s dead, I have no idea.

Alex rises from the bed and helps me into my suit jacket from behind. He brushes my hair onto my shoulder and kisses the back of my neck. “I adore you. I worship you. I love that you’re my wife. My beautiful and brave wife.”

His voice, his touch, never fails to send tingles throughout my body. “I love you too.”

“When we get home you’re going to shut the fuck up for once and take my dick like a good girl.”

My stomach swoops. I love the way he wants me, the filthy way he talks to me. I shoot him a look over my shoulder. “We’ll see.”

“We’ll see you on your knees,” he says. “With that kind of attitude.”

“Yes, sir.” But I ruin it by smirking.

“You won’t be smirking when I come on your face.” Then he eyes me as I head to the closet for my shoes. “Though knowing you, you still will be.”

“You know me so well.” I pause in the doorway of my extraordinary closet that he’s had designed and filled for me. I

run my tongue over my bottom lip. “It’s a date then.”

Stepping into my shoes, I return to my husband and run my hands over his rock solid chest. “I can practically feel your cock in my mouth already.”

I’m tempting him to make us late. I know that. But I want the distraction. I don’t want to go to this meeting.

“You’ll have it soon enough. Now get moving.” He cracks his hand on my ass.

I moan, softly. “We can be late,” I tell him.

“My pretty little slut... I fucking love you.” He yanks my hair back and kisses me roughly, deeply. “But no. Get in the car, Wife.”

Alex

“What the hell are you doing here?” I demand of my brother.

We’ve walked into the lawyer’s office and Nicolette is there, her hair in a tight bun on top of her head. She looks pale and sickly.

None of that is a surprise.

But Luka sitting next to her is.

I wasn’t expecting that.

Georgia shoots me a troubled look as I stride forward.

Luka stands up and holds out his hand for me to shake it.

Like we’re colleagues, not identical fucking twins who have shared everything with each other since before birth, including a damn uterus.

“Nicolette needed a ride,” he says smoothly, in that calm, collegiate voice he has.

“She knows how to flag a taxi. Or maybe she doesn’t if she’s not going shopping.”

Nicolette looks at me like I disgust her.

Which infuriates me. I let her do whatever the fuck she wanted for five years. Five fucking years of my life. I protected her. I let her spend my money however she wanted. I let her ice me out of her bed. I let her have the full force of my name and the status of the label of my wife, when she was never my wife. Not in any sense of the damn word.

“This is how you repay me?” I demand. “After everything I gave you?”

She doesn't respond. She shoots a troubled look at Georgia, then Luka, but she doesn't meet my gaze.

“Relax,” Luka says. “We're all here to support each other.” He leans over and brushes his lips over my wife's cheek. “Hello, Georgia. I'm so sorry for your loss.”

I want to flick him, remove him from my wife's personal space. I don't want her to feel his touch.

I've never been jealous of my brother before. I really fucking hate it.

“Which one?” Georgia asks him.

Luka gestures for her to take a seat. “Both, sister-in-law. Both.”

The lawyer greets us with similar offerings of sympathy.

We were surprised when he contacted Georgia with the full knowledge that she is Lorenzo's legal heir just as much as Nicolette is. He didn't even require the DNA test we were prepared to offer, because he said he'd known since her birth she was Lorenzo's daughter. That Lorenzo had made provisions for her throughout her life and he needed to share with Georgia what is in the will.

If I have to guess, it's something designed to fuck with Georgia's head. Like he left her a dollar or something equally cruel and taunting. I tried to prepare her for that, but truthfully, Georgia doesn't need preparation. She knew her father better than anyone, Nicolette included.

The money doesn't matter anyway. I have more than enough, and we have quietly shifted some funds from

Lorenzo's offshore accounts.

"Lorenzo loved his daughters," Stanley, the lawyer, tells us. "More than anything, as I'm sure you both know."

Georgia, seated next to me, stiffens.

She is thinking about that detention center. I reach over and wrap my hand over hers, squeezing lightly in warning.

"He has left a good portion of his assets to be split between the two of you."

Nicolette betrays herself by giving a sniff of disdain.

I squeeze Georgia's hand harder, pleased that Lorenzo wasn't a total prick who cut her out entirely. I glance over at my wife. Her cheeks are pink, but otherwise she isn't reacting. Her expression is blank, her posture straight and stiff.

The lawyer gives numbers and lists various other assets, like his vehicles and apartment, which go to Nicolette.

Good. If she has her own real estate, she can get the hell out of my apartment then and I'll sell the place that reminds me of our pointless sham of a marriage.

"To Gabriella, he left Sunset Grove Correctional Facility."

Georgia, as she still prefers to be called, gives an involuntary gasp.

"He owned that place?" she demands, unable to keep the outrage from her voice.

The lawyer nods.

I look at her. She's pale, processing. She doesn't say anything else. I know what she's thinking. That her father could have done more, much more, to protect her there. He had infinite power. He wanted her to be brutalized, as punishment for attempting to kill him.

"Where does the rest of his money go?" I ask, mindful of Stanley's terminology. *A good portion of his assets to be split.*

"It will be split equally between any other children he's found to have and any grandchildren born to Nicolette or

Gabriella within the next twelve months after the date of his death.”

“My younger brother is Lorenzo’s biological son,” Georgia says in a clear voice, strong and steady.

She’s been waiting to do that for two weeks. To her credit, she doesn’t sound as smug as I would if it were me.

Nicolette gasps.

My brother adjusts his tie and shifts a leg over his knee. He knew, of course. He’s not an idiot. He knew why we pulled Roca from the funeral. He clearly did not tell Nicolette, which I find reassuring.

“So the remainder will be split between my brother and mine and Alex’s child,” my wife continues.

“Gabriella is pregnant now,” I tell Stanley.

The lawyer, who has probably seen everything, rolls with it.

“Excellent. Congratulations.” Stanley leans back in his chair. “Your brother, you say? And Lorenzo didn’t know?”

“Correct.”

“Can you prove that?”

“Of course. There’s no question about it.”

Which means me, me and Georgia, get all the remainder of that miserable bastard’s assets. We’ll hold it in a trust for Roca, of course, but she’s won the game. Bested her father.

“It will have to be a three way split,” Luka says.

I narrow my eyes at my brother. “Why is that?”

“Nicolette is also expecting.” He flashes me a smirk of triumph.

Oh, he fucking didn’t.

Georgia jerks in her chair.

Nicolette is gripping the armrests of her own chair, her knuckles white. She looks like she’s fighting the urge to throw

up. She doesn't look at Luka. Nor does she deny it.

“Well, well, how exciting,” Stanley says. “The little cousins can grow up together. Wonderful.”

Rage fills me, a hot geyser of furious anger.

“You're an asshole,” I tell Luka.

There are so many reasons I'm angry, I'm not even sure which one to focus on. My brother lied to me. That's huge. He never lies to me. It's a huge betrayal.

I also don't understand the end goal of the game he's playing.

Or how in the hell he got Nicolette on board with his plan.

This has implications with our own father as well.

Unless he's lying. Maybe he's making it up, but that would be easy to uncover so I doubt it. Holy shit. He's been plugging my ex-wife. I don't care what they do in bed, which can't be anything exciting or satisfying, but I do care that he's being so fucking sneaky.

“Don't be like that,” Luka says to me. “Why should you be the only one who's happily enjoying the first flush of new love?”

It's mocking sarcasm.

But Georgia suddenly stands up, letting my hand fall away. She goes over to Nicolette and leans down to embrace her in a hug. “Congratulations, Sister. I'm so very happy for you.”

It sounds genuine.

Nicolette is taken aback. She bursts into tears as she hugs Georgia back.

I know my role. I stand up and offer my brother my hand. “Congratulations, then. Love has always been your goal, I know.”

“Like yours.”

He's testing me, pushing me. I bounce a little on the balls of my feet, wanting to release my anger right into his face.

“Love was never my goal. It found me against my will, but it’s the best damn thing to ever happen to me.”

I’m going to focus on Georgia and our child and restrain my fury at my brother. It’s like when we were kids. We were always trying to best each other. This is no different. But I’ve already won because there is no way Nicolette is further along than Georgia.

“You’ve always been the fighter. I’ve always been the lover.” Luka puts his hand on Nicolette’s shoulder. For a brief second, I feel sympathy for her. She’s a pawn, yet again.

In the end, none of this matters.

Unless it does.

Luka and I are going to have a little chat after this meeting.

Stanley speaks. “One more thing.”

I sense it before it happens. I feel his body shift. Hear the telltale edge in his seemingly jovial tone. Smell his aggression.

It’s what I’m trained for. It’s what I know.

My gun is out and I’m shoving Luka in front of Georgia and Nicolette to protect them.

Stanley drops before he can finish raising his weapon.

He was aiming it at Georgia.

So her father did have one last little surprise planned for his daughter.

What a fucking charmer.

Nicolette screams.

Georgia does not.

My brave and cunning little wife crawls around the back of the chair in self-preservation, then rises when she realizes the danger has passed. She glances over at the desk, but Stanley’s body isn’t visible. Just a pool of blood forming, rolling out from where his head is behind the furniture. Her nose wrinkles but otherwise she doesn’t react.

She smoothes her skirt down, her trembling fingers giving away her fear. To the casual observer, who doesn't know her like I do, she's cool and in control. "I hope the two of you will be better fathers than Lorenzo. If not, I'll kill you both myself."

"That's my girl."

Georgia tosses her hair back and walks toward the door. "Can we please leave? I think this meeting is over."

That makes me smile at her as I make a phone call. That's such a Georgia thing to say. "I need you to take care of a body," I say to Dmitri.

Nicolette is sobbing and Luka is trying to get her to stop. His comforting skills could use as much massaging as his interrogation methods.

"Stop it," he tells her, shaking her a little by the shoulders. "You're fine. You're stronger than this."

She responds by throwing up on his shoes. Just a violent projectile of bile that has him swearing violently.

I grin. Maybe not appropriate for the situation but that's fucking funny.

Luka glares at me and moves away from Nicolette, shaking his shoes off.

"I'm sorry," Nicolette says, wiping her mouth with trembling fingers.

"The path of true love never runs smoothly," I tell Luka.

He's looking around like a fresh pair of Italian shoes will appear out of thin air. "Fuck you."

That makes me laugh out loud. "Go get your baby mama a glass of water," I tell him. "Your paramour skills are lacking."

"At least I can control my woman. Yours is rifling through private property."

He's right. Georgia has returned to the desk and is going through a stack of papers on it.

“What are you doing?”

She pulls out a piece of paper and shoves it at me. “Burn this. I never want to see this again.”

I assume it has to do with the boarding school deed.

“Whatever you say, love.” I take the paper and hold out my arm for her. “Shall we?”

We leave without a backward glance.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Alex

When we're outside and my brother and her sister have paused in the lobby so Nicolette can sit down, Georgia loops her arm through mine and leans on me.

"Do you think Nicolette is actually pregnant?" she asks.

"It certainly seems that way. Then again, who knows? Maybe she has the flu. Or an aversion to death." I'm struggling a little to believe they've been having sex. It doesn't seem like something either of them would want from the other. But at the end of the day, I don't actually give a shit what their relationship is.

I just care about the impact, which will be none.

"Is it insane that I keep wishing for a sisterly relationship with her? I don't think that's what she wants though."

"I have no idea what she wants." That's the truth.

I know Georgia has a million questions. None of which have any answers. At least not right now.

Or that I can share with her.

It's cold outside. I wrap my arm around Georgia so I can pull her in tighter against my chest. "I'm sorry about your father. Everything."

She stares up at me. "Thank you for protecting me."

"I'll always protect you. Watch over you." I even see my brother exiting the building right now behind us. "Love you deeply and madly."

She smiles. "I know."

"Nicolette needs to eat," Luka says as they approach us. "Would you like to join us for lunch?"

I'd rather have red hot needles shoved in my eyes than sit through some awkward meal with my ex-wife and my brother. But Georgia wants a relationship with Nicolette so I'll defer to her.

"Georgia?"

But before she has a chance to respond, Nicolette asks a question. "Why are you still calling her Georgia? Her name is Gabriella."

"Gabriella disappeared in boarding school," Georgia tells her. "Under the slaps and kicks of the guards. I prefer Georgia."

Nicolette's already pale face goes even whiter. She's damn near translucent.

She opens her mouth to speak, but then closes it again. She turns and walks away.

"Another time for lunch," Luka says with a smile, like all of this is just a normal day in the city.

"Absolutely," I tell him, knowing full well that it will never happen if I can help it.

"Do you want lunch?" I ask Georgia as Luka strolls away after Nicolette.

My brother is following her like a bodyguard. I'm amused.

"No." She gives me a smile. "Take me home so I can go on my knees for you."

A kick of lust hits me. "As if I'd ever say no to that."

Georgia

My mother always said that good luck means to open your mouth and shut your eyes.

Those words couldn't be more true.

Because here I am.

"Sometimes I think you've been drugging me this entire time," I say as I skim my fingers down the length of Alex's thick cock. "Otherwise, how is it possible to feel this way?"

Alex yanks my head back by my hair so I can see him as he stands before me, naked and powerful. The sting draws moisture to my eyes.

"Love is a drug," he says.

"Clearly." He wants me to say that I love him, but I tease him by brushing the tip of my fingernail, with my perfect manicure, over the tip of his head.

"Say you love me," he demands. "I want to hear you admit it a million times over."

I love his fierceness. His violence. His protectiveness. His devotion. I love him, and all his flaws, just as he loves the broken shards of me, inside and out. "I love you, Alex. With all of me."

Then I slip my tongue out and flick it over the head of his cock, still meeting his gaze. His grip eases on my hair.

"Take it deep."

I obey, descending my mouth over him, opening the back of my throat and taking the entire length of him as far as I can. Alex makes a sound of approval.

"That's it, pretty girl. Take that dick."

I'm on my knees, as promised, but on a pillow, because for all his harshness, Alex takes care of me.

I want to both remember and forget everything, all at the same time.

Here, in our bedroom, it's just me and Alex. No past, no future. Just right here, right now, magnetic pleasure drawing us to each other.

Alex moves with me, meeting me halfway.

We find a rhythm, our fast and rough pace, like us.

When he comes, he does it on the way out, so that the hot burst half fills my mouth and half slides out of the corners, down over my lip and chin. Messy. Like me. The way he prefers it.

And he always gives as he takes.

Alex pulls me to the bed, tosses me down. He doesn't bother to remove my panties but hooks the front with his finger and yanks them to the side, plunging his tongue into my soaking wet pussy.

I sprawl across the bed, our marriage bed, and stare up at the ceiling, fingers curled into the expensive sheets as he takes me to that tight realm of anticipation. The place where it's just me, him, and my body, mind free, floating.

No one can make me feel as free as he does.

Nor can anyone make me let go completely, shattering inside and out, and revealing all of me. I cry out, the pleasure a brilliant agony.

He kisses the insides of my thighs deferentially, softly, on my scars, the proof of my suffering. It's his acknowledgement of what I've endured, and at times like this, his tenderness astonishes me, moves me to tears.

When he's lying beside me a moment later, he palms my breast, rough again, smug about my quick orgasm and his place in my life. "Loving you is easy."

And yet so very few have.

"Why the snake?" I ask him, tracing the outline of the tattoo on his forearm. "You've never told me what it means."

"The snake represents immortality, shedding its old skin over and over in rebirth."

"I think I need a snake tattoo then," I tell him, his body hard and warm next to mine. Our legs are entangled.

Wrapped together, around and around, like two serpents, squeezing each other in survival.

“You’ve earned it,” he says, nuzzling my earlobe with his lips.

His voice tickles my inner ear. “You’ve earned anything and everything.”

I know what he means. He can’t make up for my past but he can give me a future.

I’ve already shed the skin of my old life. “There’s just one thing left.”

“It’s yours.”

Epilogue

Alex

I let Georgia light the match.

Hell, she's been lighting the match metaphorically since the minute I met her.

But this is the actual tip striking phosphorus and the subsequent flame.

Along with some accelerants.

For safety, I make her stand back and toss it through the open window.

There is only a soft thump, but then a moment later the flames flicker, rising like a starving beast, as old papers, mattresses, and bone dry wood furniture feed them. Oxygen from the open window aids in the march of the flames across the office of Georgia's teen prison.

"It's beautiful," she murmurs, awe mingling with satisfaction in her voice.

This is my wife, shedding her skin.

She rubs her inner wrist, where she has a delicate new tattoo, a twisting writhing serpent, in a subconscious gesture that is part of her mannerisms now.

"Very beautiful."

She turns and sees I'm watching her, not the building.

Georgia's cheeks color. I can still make her blush at the oddest times.

“Take a few steps back,” I tell her, taking her hand and tugging her toward the car.

We drive a few hundred yards away from the burning fortress, then I park and get out with her so she can watch it burn. I’ve bribed the local fire department to drag their feet, but we only have a minute or two.

“Is there anything else I can do?” I ask. Her happiness is my purpose now.

“I have everything I want. Thank you.”

The wind is sending her hair flying in all directions, the air sharp and cold. She’s shivering but standing her ground. The trees are to the left, and the bright hot flames in front of her. She looks like a witch, an enchantress, commanding the elements to do her bidding.

I’m one of those elements at her command. And I’m hers.

The fire that fuels each other.

“Then let’s go home, Queen.”

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CRASH

HIDE

EXPOSE

About the Author

Drew Jordan likes all things mysterious and sexy. She loves writing dark and dangerous romance books for readers who love twisted plots and wounded characters.

When she's not writing, she can be found drinking wine or at the beach. Or drinking wine at the beach.

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