



DE LUCA CRIME FAMILY BOOK TWO

# HEATED

*Caress*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

E.C. LAND

*Heated Caress*

DE LUCA CRIME FAMILY

BOOK TWO

E.C. LAND



# *Contents*

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Trigger Warning](#)

[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](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Also by E.C. Land](#)

[Cyprus's Truth](#)

[Dancing Struggles](#)

[Nines' Time](#)

[Grimm](#)

[Social Media](#)

HEATED CARESS

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are all products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblances to persons, organizations, events, or locales are entirely coincidental.

Heated Caress. Copyright © 2022 by E.C. Land. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission from the author, except in the case of brief quotations used in articles or reviews. For information, contact [E.C. Land](#).

Cover Design by Clarise Tan, CT Cover Creations

Editing by Jackie Ziegler

Formatting by E.C. Land

Proofreading by Rebecca Vazquez

*For my brothers.*

*If not for you, growing up to be who I am now might not be who I turned out.*

## *Acknowledgments*

My Husband – For years, he’s worked himself to death to give our family everything we needed or wanted. He encourages me every day to follow my dreams just like he did the day he told me to take the chance. He’s my best friend, and I wouldn’t know what to do without him. Or the fact he listens to my non-stop rambling or my always having a notepad with me in case I need to write something down that pops into my head.

My Three Kiddos – Every day, I watch them grow up into little people who want to take over the world. Well, in their own way, that is. They are inspirations all by themselves. They love to find out what I’m working on and give me ideas. One of my favorite things is to ask them what I should have someone do or how they should act. Some of their ideas are wicked.

My Alphas – You guys rock big time! Thank you all for being the first to read the stories as they come alive. It means the world to me. Especially when you all start to get mad, that’s when I know I’m doing something right. And in doing so, pushing me to keep going with all the different plots that form in my head. I’m thankful to you all for being ready and willing to read and give your input.

Diane – If not for you, I swear I would lose my head. You set me straight when I don’t know which way to look. Thank you for everything you do in being the best PA I could ask for. However, you’re also one amazing friend.

My Editing/Plotting Team – Thank you all for working with me. I truly enjoy working alongside you all as I bring each book to life. I don’t know what I would do without each and every one of you to help me when I need it most.



## *Trigger Warning*

This content is intended for mature audiences only. It contains material that may be viewed as offensive to some readers, including graphic language, dangerous and sexual situations, murder, rape, and extreme violence. Proceed with caution. This book does entail several scenes that may very well be a trigger to some.

Also, tissues are a must with other scenes.

Not for the faint at heart.

If you don't like violence and cannot handle certain subjects, then this is not a book you'll want to read.

# *Chapter One*

MIA

“Ellie, talk to me. Tell me who it is, and I won’t have to fire your ass.”

The girl chews gum, crosses her arms over her generous breasts, and gives me the kind of look that would hold more power if she wasn’t half off those tits on coke.

I know it’s cocaine. I know she’s fucked up, and I know who gave it to her. But there’s nothing I can do to prove it until she admits to it.

Drugs and booze on the job? They inhibit judgment and get the girls into trouble. My policy since I took over Hellfire Dancers for Reaper and Angel has always been zero on that front. Now, after everything that’s happened, it’s forty below that and falling.

Ellie’s here for practice. It’s eleven in the morning, and she’s already flying in the clouds. This is something I can’t have. They’ll become a liability, and I don’t want to see them hurt in any way.

“Ellie?”

The girl doesn’t say anything. Mind you, she was talking. A mile a minute chatter and about nothing at all. But now I’m asking specific questions, she’s apparently lost the power of speech, and is chewing her gum to hide the grind coke brings.

“Ellie?”

“What, Mia?” She snaps her gum.

I sigh. “Ellie, we have a problem, and I need you to talk to me, okay?” I pause. “I need you to tell me who gave you the drugs.”

“What drugs? Don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You do, and you know the rules here. You’ve been here long enough. We have zero tolerance for drugs at Hellfire Dancers,” I say, tapping my fingers on the wooden desk between us. “I’m offering you a deal. Tell me, or I’ll fire you.”

“I can get a job anywhere. “Look at me,” Ellie says, gesturing to her slender body and ample chest.

Nodding, I don’t doubt it. “True, but you’ll probably have to spread those legs and service your clientele. Or put up with groping.”

Her eyes narrow as her foot bounces.

“Who was it?” I ask.

“Not saying a thing. I’m fine.”

“No, you’re fucked up,” I say. “You have a kid.”

“So?” She rolls her eyes. “And I’m not. Just took some antihistamine.”

I don’t even bother to hide my disbelief. “Consider this your one and final warning. Come in drunk or high again, and you’ll be out on your ass quicker than you can blink. And don’t think I’ll give you any references.”

She gets up in a huff, rolls her eyes, and flounces to the door. I wait until her hand is on the knob.

“And Ellie?”

Her back stiffens but she doesn’t turn. Just a crack of gum in the air.

“Take the day off. That’s an order. I don’t want you in here on anything, not even aspirin. Got it? Or you will be fired.”

“Yup. Fine.” She flicks her hair, opens the door, and slams it behind her.

Honestly, firing her would be the smart move, just for the purposes of business. I don’t want or need sloppy, and I definitely don’t need trouble. But she’s young, a single mom, and firing her won’t get the culprit. It won’t even take a client away from the dealer.

And I can’t help but feel it’s more than just selling drugs to my strippers to make extra bank.

I slump down in my seat, rubbing a hand over the scar on my face, a reminder of my fucked-up life, of the cost of being a De Luca.

My therapist would tell me to get another job, to walk away from this place and the sex that’s on display here in the form of half-naked girls. She’d tell me the nightmares might have a chance of going away if I spent time on myself. Away from this life, away from the domineering men I’m surrounded by.

The thing is, she’s right. But I can’t.

Coming back here after being raped, held captive, and shot was hard. Harder than when I was taken and tortured and used as a carving board.

Hard because of how people look at me. How I look at myself. Like a freak.

At least this last time, they drugged me so they could do what they wanted. The fucking monster—I won’t use his name anymore, anyone with the last name Gheata doesn’t deserve it, and him most of all—call it plausible deniability.

This last time . . . God. Did I really just think that? Like it’s . . . normal?  
I laugh.

It's either that or cry. And if I start crying, I'm not sure I'll ever be able to stop.

I'm not going to do that. I'm stronger than that, and I won't open the floodgates.

I can't even go on some kind of revenge vendetta. The monster is dead at my family's hands, of course. But the monster within me? It is me, and there's no defeating it.

But . . . I take a breath and stand, smoothing my fingers down my jeans and forcing my head back to the problem on my hands. I need to try and talk the other girls into giving up the name of who's pushing them to buy. Knowing by instinct is not the same as evidence, and it's just too easy for this dealer to circumvent me.

This is MC territory, and Reaper—cousin not by blood but through spilled blood—and Angel own this place. We share said blood through their sister, who was killed alongside my aunt.

I used to love it. Loved taking it from sleaze and elevating it, setting rules up to protect the girls and keep it all above board.

Like my family, I'm aware of the crime and the underworld ways that go on. My brother runs the De Luca crime family. I'm versed in that way of life. But I don't want it here. Not in this place. I understand danger, and I don't want the girls in it. Hellfire Dancers is meant to be safe for the girls who work within these walls.

Getting up, I leave the office. I've got things to do before I come back this evening. But first, I need to have some chats.

I walk through the empty club and lean against the bar where inventory is going on. On the stage, some of the girls are working on a pole dance routine, and a waitress in her street clothes is helping out the barback and busboy in cleaning the tables.

The air is stained with old, spilled beer and spirits and the unmistakable scent of fuel and grease that just seems to linger in the space like a ghost waiting to haunt the inhabitants. It's black, this place, with some art on the walls that I've slowly spent time replacing and upgrading.

It should be depressing, being in the empty, black bar in daytime, but it's not. It used to be, back when it opened early and the barflies would buzz and watch the girls. I've changed all that, and even though Reaper wasn't sure about the move, he's happy now.

I'm bringing in more revenue for the business.

Slowly, I make my way to the stage area and into the back to talk to the girls there. But no one wants to tell me anything.

Frustration bites cold.

I catch my reflection in the mirror, and a jolt rushes my blood. That vicious scar that marks me as used goods. The scar that brings pity and not a few offers of sex by guys who have some kind of fucked up fetish.

I was pretty before. I'm pretty on one side. I can see that now. But not full on. Full on, I'm half monster. The scar ripping through previously smooth skin, the scar that is angry, raised, and cutting up to my eyelid.

What did they say? I'm lucky I can use the muscles. I'm lucky I didn't lose my eye. I'm lucky it didn't make my eye droop. I'm lucky it wasn't worse.

Lucky, lucky, lucky.

I don't feel lucky.

I feel like I'm a walking X marks the spot.

There was a boyfriend, sometime after the kidnapping where I was used for carving practice, who urged me to take up the doctorly advice of plastic surgery and to use hairstyles that covered the mark.

That ended.

And now, after I was taken along with my cousin's now wife, I . . .

Nope. Not. Going. There. I can't.

I come back out from the bar area, the frustration hot inside. At least I have a mountain of paperwork to take it out on.

My phone's buzzing in my pocket, and Andrew, my favorite bouncer here, raises a brow at my frown as I look at the screen before pushing the phone back into my pocket.

I shake my head at him and storm off to my office. My damn brother, Leo.

Freaking Christian.

I pull the phone out again. It lights up.

A message from Leo, and then the buzzing starts again. It's Christian, my brother's closest friend and right-hand man. My cousin, Theo's, brother-in-law. All-around thorn in my side. I close my eyes as I lean against the office door.

Christian.

A shiver of heat races through my veins.

The man is hotter than sin, and he knows it. He's dangerous, and not just

with his hands and gun. He's dangerous to hearts and libidos everywhere. But not mine. I'm a pity project. One he feels guilt over because my being taken last time had to do with the woman he was banging.

That's the other thing about him. He's a world-class fuck boy. If it's female and hot, he wants it.

Not me. He doesn't want me. It's worse than that.

He's put himself in the role of designated Mia protector. And I hate it. Every single part. I only finally got rid of him. But how long that will last, I don't know.

The last thing I need in my life is my every move watched and judged. They can all keep their cotton wool and coddling gestures. I won't have someone come and protect me. It's enough that I have to deal with these overbearing men who suffocate.

I need my space. I need to prove to myself I'm okay. And fuck everyone, including my therapist.

Taking a step, I stop and look down. Frowning, I sweep up the piece of paper on the floor. I'm about to dump it on my desk, because I figure Ellie dropped it, but my breath catches.

Mia.

Written in block letters.

My hand shakes as I open it.

*Mind your own business and stop asking questions. Or else.*

I ball it up and throw it at the small trash can, wiping my hands on my jeans as if I could wipe the sentiment off.

I grab my hoodie and pull it on, wanting more than anything to pull the hood up over my face. But I'm not going to do that. Instead, I head out, stopping to speak to Andrew.

The man's built like a tank. All the bouncers here are except for one.

"When's Frank coming in?"

His gaze catches mine. I know he's not a fan of him either, but so far, Frank's kept up that illusion of Teflon clean.

"It's his day off, Mia. Problem?"

For a moment, I think of the note, but it's not like threats and warnings don't come with this territory. And Frank isn't about to sneak in anywhere. He's huge, like Andrew.

"Nope. Just curious."

He looks like he wants to say something but doesn't. Instead, his

handsome face splits in a grin. “Let me know if you want heads crushed or, ya know, a shoulder for support.” His ears turn a little pink.

I slide my hands into the pockets of the gray hoodie. “I’ll be fine. I’m stepping out for a couple of hours. Reaper said he might be by later, so let him know I’ll be back.”

“Sure thing, boss,” he says. “You got this place running like a well-oiled machine. Delivery is here now, so I’ll make sure everything’s squared.”

“Thanks.”

And I step out and go through to the side of the lot where my car is and get in.

Finally, I can breathe, away from men and drugs and Ellie. And I enjoy being on the open road heading toward Dallas.

It’s not until I finish my therapist session and am on the way to a club that I notice the car.

My heart starts to beat rapidly, and my fingers bite the wheel.

Someone is following me.

The car isn’t flash, just nondescript, tinted windows and . . . every turn I make it takes. It’s like fingers sliding deep into places they shouldn’t go. It’s like everything bad is happening all over again.

I turn left. Then right. So does the car. Finally, heart in my mouth, I pull up in the lot of the club.

The car keeps going.

I start to tremble, and it turns into shaking as hot tears press against my eyes and burn in my throat. Closing my eyes, I drop my head to my leather-covered wheel. I’m hot and cold, and I need a few minutes.

I thought I was getting better. But now I’m imagining being followed?

No, the car had followed me. Perhaps it had been heading in the same direction, and maybe it’s because I’ve been asking questions at work. Or maybe, just maybe, therapy is bringing all kinds of shit I don’t need to the surface.

With a deep breath, I open the door and cross the sunny lot to the door of the club. A distraction is what I need, and I take it gladly with both hands as I step inside.





I feel better and freer as I head back to work after a few more stops.

My plans are bigger than what I'm telling Angel and Reaper. I'm telling them nothing at all, not until I can solidify it.

Burlesque, something sexy and sensual and with a little something for everyone, that's what I want for Hellfire Dancers. I want it classy. But that's something to just work at, to focus on for the future. I know burlesque isn't what my therapist means by having a goal to work toward, but I also don't want to run a restaurant or anything like that. Even a normal bar isn't my goal. Maybe I couldn't protect myself, but the girls?

I can do that.

And eventually, I can give them—at least offer—a different slice of the world they're in. They do it for the hours and the money and because that's all there is for them. Some are going through school. Some are like Ellie, single young moms. Some are even married. Some like it. Everyone is different.

But to offer them a place where they can class it up is appealing. And I can grow that. I know I can.

There's something in the air as I step into the darkness of the club. Even with the lights up, it's dark. People are busy, but there's a shift. It's electric, and it makes my skin tingle.

I still haven't looked at my phone, and I suppose I should. I pull it free as I open my office door.

I'm not alone. That electricity is like a livewire in the space of my office. And before I can turn, strong hands grab me and push me against the wall.

"Hey, Mia," Christian says. "Since you weren't answering your phone, I figured I'd come see you in person."

This man with the killer dark amber eyes, and the hard mouth that has a sensual edge looks at me like I'm his next meal. Then he slides a leg between my thighs and presses his large, strong body against mine.

Christian Bandoni does the unforgivable.

He kisses me.

## *Chapter Two*

## CHRISTIAN

This fucking woman drives me right to the center of hell and back again. I brush my lips against hers in a fleeting caress. But I hold her there against the door because I can, because I want to, because I'm not allowed to strangle her.

Fuck me.

I'd plunder that mouth if I could.

But Mia, with that pretty, just past the shoulders, black hair, big brown eyes, and full lips, is forbidden territory. She's my boss and friend's little sister.

And she's been dragged into a hell far different from than the one she drives me to, too many times.

If I could kill the fuckers who laid a finger on her all over again, I would.

She's also the most stubborn, irritating woman I've had the misfortune to meet. Her careening about town, about this place without me, without personal security, is a crime all its own.

She kicked me out of her life recently, along with all the heavy-handedness of her brothers, cousin, and father, because she's that pigheaded, and she kept pointing out everything was a-okay in her life on both a personal level and on a safety level.

But as I've learned, that isn't true. And now I'm going to keep her safe, whether she wants me to or not.

"Get off me, Christian."

"You'd know it if I was on you, Mia. I gave you a kiss hello."

She lifts her face, and the scar she wears like a brand of her strength and inner beauty, catches the light in her office. Her eyes narrow and to say she isn't happy to see me might be the understatement of the year.

"Your thigh is where it shouldn't be. And your hands are on me and not broken into tiny pieces. I'll gladly do that. Break every bone in both your hands."

I shift, moving up a little more against her. "You talk a good fucking game, Mia. But can you walk the walk? Also, what if it wasn't me?"

"No one else would dare come into my office with everyone out there." She offers a small, cold smile.

“Was that a . . . compliment?”

“No. And go back to my brother’s side like a good boy.”

“Boy?”

“Boy.”

Laughing at her attempt to fuck with me, I just bring my mouth to her ear. “Gotta try a little harder if you want to insult me, Mia.”

“Go away. I’m safe.”

I almost hold up the note I found crumpled up next to the trash, but I don’t. I’ll keep that one up my sleeve.

“Not true. No one saw me come in. I’m better than most, but, sweetness, I waltzed in, and no one saw. If I can, others can. You need help, and I’m here.”

“Want me to call my father again?”

I laugh and step away because if I stay where I am, I’m going to end up with a massive hard-on instead of the semi I’m sporting now. “And your brother, my sister, your cousin, the list goes on. They didn’t want to listen last time—”

“But they did,” she says, voice full of too much sugar, “and they will again.”

“No. They won’t.”

She stomps to her desk and leans against it, and I cross my arms and stand between her and the door.

It’s Mia. I won’t put it past her to make a run for it. And if she does . . . well, let’s just say I might enjoy getting up close and fucking personal with her again.

Maybe I’ll do more than kiss her hello.

Just to show her how fucking easy it is to take hold of her.

But I stop that line of thought. She knows that. And I’m not here to traumatize her. Just keep her safe.

“You know this whole fucking bullshit isn’t over with the Gheata family.”

“It is for me. I see one of them, and I will wipe them from this planet. I have a gun and I know how to use it.”

At least she has a fucking weapon. “Did you take your gun today?”

“You followed me.”

“Did you bring your gun when gallivanting around the city?”

“You fucking followed me, Christian? Adding stalking to your list of

skills? Can't get any now your little Gheata got caught?"

I'm on her so fast I can't stop myself. I grab her wrist tight. "Don't you dare fucking go there."

"You will fuck anything anywhere, anytime, Christian. You're a whore who can't keep his dick in his pants and—"

"You don't think I have to sleep every night knowing my part in all that? Knowing because the bitch I was fucking on occasion was out to cause trouble? You don't think that if I could take it back, I would?"

"Christian," she whispers. "You're hurting me."

Fuck. I let her go like she's searing my palm.

Pushing my hands through my hair, I pace. "You drive me fucking insane."

"Good thing you don't need to be here."

"Yeah, I do." I stop and point at her. "You don't listen to a fucking thing, not one single warning. Just because we killed the pricks doesn't mean you're not in danger. There's shit going down here."

"Angel," she mutters, shaking her head. "Reaper. I'm having words with them."

"You refuse protection, but this time, Sarah Connor, you're not getting the chance."

"Sarah . . . as in *The Terminator*? How old are you and your references? And for your information, I'm in control. I don't need you or want you."

There's a sweet soft rose that touches her cheeks, telling me she might be lying. Good thing for her I'm not about to test my little blooming theory. Good thing I don't want to.

"That makes two of us, not wanting or needing. Protection, on the other hand? I'm here for that. Orders."

She raises a brow. Fair fucking point. We both know all it would take is for her to text her brother and know no one gave me orders. Unless you count me. Which I do.

"I don't have time for this, Christian." She straightens, goes to her desk, pulls her laptop around, and does something on it.

Most likely pretend, since it isn't on. I can see that from here. Silently, I count down from fifty to calm my blood and temper. I'm a fucking stone-cold killer, dangerous. Men run and piss their pants. But Mia?

She pushes buttons and sends temperatures soaring.

"You don't have time?" I shake my head. "I don't have time for your

bullshit.”

“Makes two of us.”

“You don’t have time for your own bullshit?”

Her gaze flashes to me. “Yours, Christian. Now, go away, I’m busy.”

“Might help if your computer is on. Unless you’re doing some magic-powered stuff there.” I wave a hand in the air. Outside, music suddenly blares to life.

“It’s called making a point. Go away.”

“There’s trouble here, and everything went down too easily for us getting you and Blake back.”

Her back is ramrod straight. “I don’t want to relive the past, so leave it.”

“Mia.” I take in a deep breath and come up to her, but this time, I don’t touch. No matter how much I might want to. “It doesn’t take much to know you’ve got shit to deal with. I’ve got shit to deal with too. And if anyone’s going to come after us, they’re going to go for, say, someone that refuses protection. So, I need to be here. Make my presence known. Draw them out, but to me, not to you.”

“I’m not a child.”

“Stop acting like one.”

“Only if you stop being the bully.”

“Sweetness, you haven’t seen me bully anyone yet.”

She comes around to me, and I’m reminded of a Valkyrie. One that smells sweet and is soft and feminine, and oh, so touchable.

The thing is, there’s something going on here. The note tells me that. But Mia’s not going to play if I push in that way. I need a different path.

The De Luca crime family has enemies. It’s the name of the game when it comes to the underworld. But games have rules and wars are played out low to the ground, cold, in measured pieces.

When the Gheata family worked with my fucking parents and their late lawyer in trying to destroy my sweet sister and take her inheritance, they vastly overstepped.

I know it’s personal. I know they’re trying to get us riled to make the first real move in a war. We’ve decimated so much of that family now, but there’s danger. There are other players, and Mia is vulnerable. The club.

This is MC territory, but Mia is a De Luca. And that paints her as a target. Another man wants her to align the families. The move there hasn’t been made because Mia isn’t like most mafia women. Mia does what she wants,

when she wants, and she's not letting anyone clip her wings.

"I get it, Mia," I say, "I do. You've fought to get here, and you're strong. But someone is trying to target Hellfire Dancers."

Her gaze doesn't meet mine, and I know I'm onto something. She isn't surprised at all.

"So, I need to be here to draw them out. You get how all this shit is played."

She's silent for a long time, but finally nods and looks at me. "I do, Christian. I know exactly how it's all played. I grew up in that world. Even when they wrapped me in cotton wool and tried to prepare me for a life of being protected behind whatever barricades or strong man I knew."

I frown and go to say something, but she holds up a hand.

"I knew it wasn't ever a guarantee for safety. I knew that. When my mom was killed, I understood that. When Reaper and Angel's sister was murdered, I got it. When I was kidnapped, beaten, and carved, I really got it. And this last time, well . . ." She laughs and shakes her head, and I want to take hold of her.

I don't move.

"Well," she says, "let's say that message was more than received. No one can do anything but keep me locked up, and I don't choose to live my life like that. So, find another war, another turf, another woman to test your rusty armor on. I'm not interested."

"Fine, I won't protect you." It's a lie, and we both know it. "But I need to be here."

"To take care of your business that has nothing to do with me?"

"This place might be MC property, but it's also a De Luca business interest," I smile coldly, "so you're just collateral."

"Good to know." She looks like she's going to say something else, but then she smiles back.

Just as cold.

It turns me on even more.

And pisses me the fuck off.

She turns to her desk and does something underneath. She doesn't bother trying to hide whatever she's doing, like she's feeling underneath it.

The door opens, and a big brick house of a man steps in. His gaze meets mine, and for a moment, he pales, like he just had an 'oh shit' moment. But he locks eyes with Mia, who walks past me and stops at the man. "Take out

the trash for me, and don't let it back in.”

And then she leaves.

The guy shifts, clears his throat, and I wait. “Uh, Mr. Bandoni?”

“I wouldn't.”

The guy looks like he's about to melt in fear. Even though he outweighs me, it seems my reputation is known.

Good.

“I have to.”

“Well—”

“Andrew.”

“How about this, Andrew? You give me a tour of the outside of the property, all the ways in, and a run-down of the staff, and then I'll take care of Mia.”

The guy sighs and nods. “I'm gonna get so fired. C'mon, this way.”

I follow him out, aware Mia is watching like she's just won a prize.

She hasn't at all, and she's going to learn that.

But damn if the woman doesn't win some points for her ballsy move.

I let Andrew take me outside. As we tour, I suddenly stop and look at him.

“Okay, tell me exactly what's going on. Or else I put a hole the size of a bullet between your eyes. Your call.”



# *Chapter Three*

MIA

I'm not going to lie.

It felt so good doing that to Christian. And I know throwing him out isn't going to hold. He left, but I suspect it was because he decided to do so, not because of anything Andrew did.

Christian is not a man intimidated by anyone or anything.

Macho, overbearing men can all get out of my life.

And Andrew looked pale and a little green at the edges when he finally returned.

I've started on paperwork and other things I need done, but the music and my thoughts are both too loud to concentrate. So, now I'm sitting at the bar as the strippers go through their new routine.

The music has a hypnotic beat and is full of sex and female empowerment by whoever is the big name at the moment. It's not bad, and the guys coming for the show won't pay a lick of attention to the lyrics, not when the girls are planning on moves like what they're doing now.

In the back of the room, the pole dancers are arguing over who goes where and when. I don't need to hear them to know that's what's happening. They do it all the time. Certain slots mean making more money, and the later in the night, the more options there are for lap dances—if the girls want to do that.

The headliners are the draw, they get paid the most, and they put on a show.

They know their moves, and they know how to draw customers. I handpick each and every one, and I'm more than aware of the ideas and dreams in the back of my head that fold into why I picked them.

I'm at the front where the bar is, and I lean against it, perching on one of the stools. There's a scent of beeswax mixing in with everything else, and the bar gleams slightly in the light.

There's an urge just to pack it all in, but I'm not giving in to that. I love this place, and all I've done to elevate it. I've learned that the urge to run always passes.

Lisa, the head bartender, spies me and puts down the rag and can of wood polish. She grabs a small folder and comes over, slapping the folder in front

of me. A short, unpolished nail hits the top. “The latest costumes for the cocktail waitresses and bar staff. I’m wearing one myself.”

“I can see that you updated.”

She laughs. “A girl needs a change. Drink?”

I shake my head, and she goes to the drinks gun and gets herself a Coke.

“Let me know what you think, I took in all the specs you talked about. And this is what we got. They’re all in the back and ready to go. On your say, of course.”

“Thanks.” Lisa’s doing her part to try and help.

Unlike most of the men I know, she keeps it all low-key and small. Men want to fix problems. Women? We tend just to do little things and biggest of all—be there to listen if it’s needed.

I’m grateful for Lisa, and I can talk to Blake.

Everyone knows what happened to me, and I hate that. Not that I’m about to admit such a thing. But I hate the fact my private shame, the horrors I went through, are general knowledge. Not what, exactly, just I was taken, hurt, and shot.

No one who was there would have said a word, but me not being here? Reaper and Angel breaking heads? That shit all feeds the rumors.

God only knows what everyone thinks happened. There are times when I get a look from someone who doesn’t think I see, and times when I want to just take out a two-page spread in the paper so everyone has the facts.

Instead of doing something so stupid, so rash, so ridiculous, I gather my strength about me and keep them all at arm’s length.

Including family.

It just helps.

I flick open the folder and look at the outfits.

All black and a choice of level of exposure. Tantalize or outright tease.

I’d never have the ovaries to wear these. Not now. But I know Christian would probably want to fuck each and every one of the women here dressed like this.

Probably?

Would in less than a heartbeat.

And dressed like this?

He’d be up in there with them in their street clothes. The outfits are a bonus.

And they’d all be happy being a notch. Most women he sets his gaze on

are happy to be anything if they get to touch him.

Asshole.

“What do you think?” Lisa asks.

I look at her, my mind a little scattered. With an effort, I pull everything back into focus.

“Let me see.”

She turns in her outfit, black pants that look painted on with a laced-up panel on the side of each leg that shows flesh. She has on a low-cut tank too.

This woman could wear a caftan and make men’s dicks stand at full salute.

“Looking good.”

She smiles and pushes her blonde hair away from her face, twisting it into a ponytail. She starts unloading beer cans into a tub, ready to be iced later. “Thanks.” Lisa pauses. “Is it okay if the bar staff wear this? The other isn’t going to work without giving patrons a free view of our wares.”

“Absolutely.”

There’s a part of me that’s over outfits like this, over the ogling of men. I have a strict hands-off, no sex policy. It’s why there are no drugs or booze for my girls. I want them in total control. And if they want to make money doing other things, then they can work elsewhere. I’m not about to let anything go on in an actual sexual way, not even in the VIP lounge.

Lap dances, yes. Stripping obviously. Touching of a sexual nature? That’s a huge no.

I shift on my bar stool as Christian’s appearance comes back again, the way he makes my skin tingle, and my blood heat.

The very last thing I want or need is a reaction to a man. And to him?

No.

The fact he’s so hot he could burn things to the ground by just looking at them makes it all that much worse. The fact I’m not immune? The worst of all.

He’d chew me up and spit me out. That’s if he wanted me, of course. Apart from maybe a walk on the forbidden side, or a taste of kink in the shape of the woman who wears her scars so blatantly on the outside, I know he doesn’t. Not the real me.

“They look good. I’d have to see the other one in action, though,” I say, deliberately dragging my head back into the game.

She smiles, waves, and another bartender who’s scheduled for today

comes out and does a mini mix-and-match fashion show. Skirt and crop top, then tank and skirt, and finally, crop top and pants. When she's done, I let her return to get changed into her street gear.

"Works. What can I say?" I offer a half smile, and Lisa wipes down a non-existent mess on the bar.

"I've also been asking about the other problem."

I go still. "And?"

"Look," she says, setting the rag down and leaning a hip on the bar as she pulls out a sheet of folded paper that she smooths open. I can see the name of the liquor distributor from here. "Call this unsolicited advice you're not going to like and fire me if you need to."

"I'm not going to fire you for saying something."

She nods and continues to smooth the paper. "I've worked all over. Here, small towns, Los Angeles, New York, and drugs are going to be part of the job."

"Not here, they're not."

"Your policy, your place, your rules." Lisa meets my gaze. "I get it, I do, and I make sure that my girls don't use. Drinks . . . occasionally, bar staff has a drink bought."

A muscle ticks in my jaw. "I want my ship clean."

"And they know it, but if someone's offering drugs, it isn't to this side of the staff, and the dancers? They aren't talking." She straightens up and gets a pen from the other side of the bar and starts ticking off things on the piece of paper. Right over the top of where it's already been done.

I close the folder and push off my seat. "Thanks."

"You suspect someone, so why not just take action?"

It isn't as easy as that. There are connections, and Frank is a transfer from another establishment. You don't rock boats unless you have a reason. And by reason, I mean evidence.

"Just let me know if anyone says something to you, okay?"

And with that, I go back to my office to work.



The rest of the day and early evening pass with me locked in my office. I use the quiet time after the flurry of activity during the day and the opening hours

to work. The entire time, Christian is there, heavy in my head.

I'm still annoyed Reaper and Angel felt the need to install the panic button I used earlier that morning to summon Andrew. It took me a bit to find it, and yeah, I'm ashamed I resorted to that.

Then again, these men in my life all do what they want, so why not turn something they use to control me—take away some autonomy by way of telling me I'm a vulnerable female—on them?

It's so small a victory it doesn't register.

But if I don't have this freedom, then I might as well be shoved into a cage somewhere.

Which is what all the men in my life want.

Leo's called me again. My father too.

Something about family business impacting Hellfire Dancers. I deleted the messages because it smacks of everything Christian.

With a sigh, I go out into the bar where the place is alive and jumping. My skin prickles all over like I'm being watched. That's in my head. No one is watching me when so many beautiful and almost naked women are everywhere. It's probably something else I need to talk about in therapy.

A hand lands on my ass, and I freeze. "Hey, baby, give me a lap dance."

Anger surges through me, white hot, sharp, looking for blood, and I turn, grabbing the drunk man's hand. He's probably twice the size of me, but I really don't care. I want him to feel the pain for his actions in touching me. I want him begging for his life.

I twist back his finger, and he howls, and before he can get up, someone grabs me, iron-vice like and pulls me off. There's a flurry of activity, but I can't see it because I'm dragged off into the dark hall near my office and shoved against the wall.

Christian's gaze glitters down at me, and I strike out at him. He catches my hand and pins it down. He's pressed hard on me, his entire body holding me there. "Calm the fuck down, Mia."

"Fuck you."

"Gladly,." His voice drops, turning into warm velvet. "Anytime. You tell me the place, and we can go at it."

His words send a different heat streaking through me, and the feel of his hand on my ass is suddenly nothing but a distant memory.

"I'm not sleeping with you. Go get your rocks off somewhere else."

"You're the only thing that gets my rocks going, Mia. Hate to break it to

you.” His mouth is a whisper from mine, and my entire being is consumed with him. I want to run. I want to beg him to make me forget everything but the pleasure I know he can give.

“Let go.”

He sighs. “You annoy the living fuck out of me, Mia. What were you going to do out there?”

“Me? I was going to maim that man for putting a hand on me.”

His mouth skims the side of my throat, and I shiver while sparks of delight shower through my blood. “You already did. Your bouncer boy is taking care of him.”

I push at Christian. “Stop that.”

“What?”

“Touching me.”

“No can do, Mia. You’re too delicious.”

I shove harder, and this time he steps back. “I thought I had you kicked out.”

“Thought being the operative word here. And I told you, someone’s trying to target Hellfire Dancers, so like it or not, you’re stuck with me.”

“Fine.” I breathe out. Breaking down battles into bites I can take on is the name of the game.

Until I can come up with a way to get Christian off my back, I’m stuck with him. But I can make it on my terms. Right?

I lift my head to look at him.

“Fine,” I say again.

“Good to hear you’re listening. Or, you know, pretending.”

Asshole. The rage surges. “Think what you want. If you’re here on a mission, do it, but keep out of my way.”

“Seems like you need help.” His hands come up to my face to cup it with a gentle touch.

“I don’t need help.”

And I don’t need that gentle touch. It threatens to undo so much. I try to pull free but his fingers tighten a little. “Yeah, sweetness, you fucking do.”

Christian is fire and danger and sex. All the things I don’t want.

Not . . . not from him.

“If you have a mission, go do it, but don’t involve me.”

Then he comes in close again, and before I know what he’s doing, his mouth is on mine, soft and sweet and the kind of seduction that undoes

something inside me.

A wave of need comes up and threatens to drown me in his center as his tongue slides against the seam of my lips, and I can't stop myself, I open for him.

The kiss changes when his tongue touches mine.

It sparks and flares, and deep down in my belly is a tingling, hot need for more. He shifts, his erection hard, big, and blatant as he slides his hands around to the back of my head, angling my face to plunder my mouth in a deeper, carnal way.

And I react. Kissing him back, pushing up into that erection, into that hard, hot body, my hands on his lean waist, and I delve into him too.

It's a ferocious kiss, one full of flame, need, and naked desire that makes me want to seek the hardest, sharpest edge of it. To tease those edges, to push to see how far I can make him go. How far I can go before I disintegrate and lose myself?

His mouth is hard, tongue demanding, and he tastes like the darkest sin. Like delicious secrets whispered in the night. He kisses like he knows my truth and can find the naked center of me I keep down so deep I'm not sure I can even find it.

He kisses like he's the key to my lock, like he can drown me in pleasure so exquisite I'll never come out again.

And—

I rip my mouth from his. Breathing hard. "No."

I expect him to say something, anything. But he doesn't. He just stands there, hands still on me, still pressed into me. If he does something sweet, I'm going to shatter, and I'm never, ever going to forgive him.

But he doesn't do a thing, just keeps his hands on me, his gaze too. "No isn't going to cut it, Mia," he says, voice rough. "Not now."

My head starts a slow spin. "I can't—"

"We're going to do this. My way."

I blink. "Do what?" It's like I'm not sure what we're talking about.

"This. I'm here for a reason, and you're going to help me."

"You do you, I told you that."

He smiles, his teeth glinting in the darkness of the hall as the music and noise vibrate through me. "I'm going to. There's something going on, and I'm going to find out what."

"As I said—"



“Not done, Mia. You’re going to help me by being my cover.”

I frown. “What does that mean?”

“It means you and me, we’re going to be a thing.”

# *Chapter Four*

## CHRISTIAN

The way Mia's looking at me is not any kind of fucking ego booster.

"What the hell are you on about? Are you drunk? High?"

"Don't touch any of the merch, Mia. And I haven't had a drink."

The feel of her mouth, those soft, warm lips, are still lingering like a brand on mine. I shouldn't have kissed her.

Fuck, I shouldn't do a lot of things, but that's never stopped me before.

"I'm saying we need to make it look like we're a thing."

"Like you're undercover?"

"Yeah."

"No."

"That's not any kind of acceptable answer."

She blows out a breath, and I stroke my thumb against her cheek because I'm still touching her. Her skin is like satin, and the scar on the other side calls for my tongue to trace its path.

But she's not going to let me do that. At least, not yet.

The things I want to do to her are things her brother will murder me for. Want to murder me for, I amend. Because I'm a lot harder to fucking kill than that.

I might be third in command at the De Luca crime family, and close friends to Leo—fuck, he's a brother to me in many ways—touching his sister isn't going to go over well.

But I think I'm going to be touching her. A hell of a lot. In all kinds of interesting, debauched, and filthy ways.

I'm not wrong about the whole reason I'm here. The reason beyond protecting her. But putting on a front like the one I told her we'd be doing meets my goals. The first one is keeping her safe, and the second is digging into the deeper tendrils of what's happening.

Not just the fucking note and the fact there's something going on here, but the rest of it. Like what Andrew told me.

There's that offer Leo is weighing about Mia. Theo told me about it. My sister had words that would have gotten her punished if she wasn't my baby sister, and she has given me the cutest damned nephew on the fucking planet.

But the rest worries me.

Gheata family camps are no doubt still licking wounds and plotting. I don't like Mia was targeted twice, and there's someone looking for a different sort of connection. Exactly what, I don't know, but I know everything came together for us a little too easily.

But I need to have a sit down with her. And I need to get her to tell me what she knows.

"Well, Christian," she says like she didn't just kiss me back, didn't just kiss me like she wanted to devour me, "that's the only answer you're going to get."

I put my face right near hers. "Sweetness, you lie. You know something's going on, and you know this makes sense."

"What makes sense is you're here on De Luca business. Which is me. Which is binding me down under the name of keeping me safe."

The words 'binding me down' do nasty, wicked things to my already off-the-charts libido. Mia wrapped in rope and taking her down the path to the brink of orgasm, and then back again, until she's mindless, until she's spread open and begging for me.

I want her to beg for me.

I want to mark her as mine.

It's a dangerous thing, wanting that.

Mia needs . . . fuck, she probably needs the thing I don't have to give—love. Not the kind she wants, not the kind Blake has with Theo.

She probably needs gentle and loving too. I don't do gentle. And loving goes hand in hand with love.

But making her mine?

Fuck yeah.

"If that's what it takes to keep you safe, then I'll bring the rope."

"You're a real bastard, you know that? After everything—"

"Don't." I flick my gaze to hers and hold her there that way too. "Don't even begin to use that card on me. I would never hurt you. Never take what you don't want to give, and you know it."

Her hands are still on me, and her heat is moving through me from where she touches my abs and my ribcage. I can feel her like it's bare flesh against flesh and not through a shirt. "I don't want you."

"That's a lie."

Her eyes narrow, and the anger in them feeds the hunger in me. "Not every woman falls on their knees for you."

“I’m not talking about every woman. I’m talking about you, Mia. And you want me.”

“I don’t want anyone.”

That slices into me. I don’t believe it for a second because of how she kissed me back. There are some things even the best player can’t fake, and that response was primal. She couldn’t have controlled it even if she wanted to.

And she didn’t even think when it happened. Like how every part of me focused on just her. I’m usually fucking brilliant at compartmentalizing, but Mia throws all that away just by being there.

Of course, right now, she wants to pretend. It’s a defense mechanism.

That’s what hurts.

When she tells me she doesn’t want anyone, she thinks she means it. She can’t even see it as the defense it is.

She’s visited hell more than most, and a woman like her should only ever see heaven, not the other place. And I . . . I need to think.

Not about me being here. That’s a given whether she wants it or not, because I’m going to get to the bottom of everything. The reasons for my being here, the deeper ones, now, that’s a different story. Why I need to think.

“You want me.”

“Go to hell, Christian, I’m going home.”

I straighten up and release her. “Great. My thoughts exactly.”

“Alone. Not with you. Never with you.”

And before she thinks I can stop her, she marches off.

I sigh and close my eyes, pulling out my phone. “This isn’t over, Mia. Not by a long shot.”



The next day I’m sitting in her office, sprawled in her chair, talking the shit with Reaper and Angel. I called them here for a meeting. So did sweet little Mia.

She’s going to be pissed off because I let her go home without me, just like she said—I’m ignoring the never part because I don’t hold with that crap—with a security team tailing her and sitting outside her door the entire night.

But when she storms in, the door hitting the wall, she sends me a look of such hate-filled rage. It warms my cold heart and piques my interest when it passes over me to settle on the two big bikers.

She points a red-painted nail at them. I know she didn't stop anywhere between home and here this morning, so she must have done them herself as part of her armor. She's even wearing a dress that looks at home in an office. I'm sure she thinks it's something to keep me at bay, but that corporate look on her revs my engine.

Of course, that seems to be a given with me when it comes to her.

"The only reason I'm not shooting all of you is I might as well utilize you." She flickers her gaze at me. "Why are you here?"

"Told you last night, Mia."

She makes a huffing sound and points at Reaper and then Angel. "I still might use Christian as target practice, but I figure if you are all working with my family to keep me caged, then you can help put a stop to the drugs here."

Angel frowns. "Drugs?"

"We don't run drugs through here. This place is clean. Your family wouldn't either, and—"

"Stop, Reaper. I read online that a girl died from an overdose near here."

"We can't stop that shit happening, Mia," I say.

Her eyes narrow. "It was cut with bad stuff, and you know De Luca drugs flow—"

"Careful," I say, getting up and coming to the front of her desk. "Because that's all of us you're blaming."

"I'm not saying my family cuts drugs. I know how it works. But it's too close to home and on top of—" This time she stops herself, and I remember the note.

"Of what?"

She looks at Angel. "Someone is trying to get something started in here. Giving drugs away, selling them. At first, I wasn't sure, but every time Ellie is fucked up, she's just seen the new bouncer, Frank."

I don't say a word because this is the thing that Leo asked me to look out for. My instincts tell me this is tied to something bigger, so for now, I just listen. She's so mad she's gonna talk more than if I lock horns with her.

"You sure about this?" Reaper asks, frowning.

"I'm sure of it. Since he came to work here, there has been talk of drugs here, and Ellie . . ." She stops. "Ellie and other people in the bars and clubs

around here seem to now be into that shit, shit that's flowing when it shouldn't be. Cut shit, guys. So yes, I'm sure of it."

"We fire him." Reaper shrugs. "And break his kneecaps."

Mia rubs a hand over her face and stalks over to pull out papers, one with a picture of the guy. He doesn't look familiar to me. She jabs it. "You can't go breaking kneecaps without solid evidence."

"Wanna fucking bet?" I say this so quietly, I don't think she's heard, but the way her back stiffens tells me she has.

"Evidence. Solid evidence. And I don't have it. That bastard is trying to sell in his club. He got one of my dancers high on coke, though she refuses to tell me who. So, while I already know who the culprit is, I lack evidence."

Then, Reaper and Angel exchange a look and glance at me, and the pieces clearly click for them.

Angel massages his shoulder with one hand. "Do we know who he's getting the drugs from?"

"Assuming he's supplying?"

"Fuck you, Christian," says Mia.

"Watch that pretty mouth, Mia," I say. "No."

I look at her, and damn I want to punish her for talking back in front of these guys. Or is it I just want to punish her and see where it goes? Because that punishment I want to inflict on her is going to be sexual and something she'll beg for.

"No," I say again, "I'm here for another reason, but now I'm thinking that reason and this might very well be related and popping out kids."

"So, you knew all about this?" Angel has a lot of questions, and I really want to get back to why I called them here, which was a courtesy meeting to cut them in the loop. I'm here to stay until the De Luca business is done and dusted and Mia is more than safe.

When I got here and heard she'd also called a meeting, I held off, but now? I look at Mia again, and this time our gazes catch and sizzle in the air. Now I just want to get her alone.

"No, no one knew about this particular . . . issue. Mia didn't see fit to tell any of her family about what was going on here. The only reason I know is I'm making it my business."

She glares. I smile.

"Isn't that right, sweetness? Your business is my business."

"I don't appreciate you—"

“Sure, you do,” I say, spreading my arms wide. The ice underlying my voice is not lost on anyone in this room, least of all her. “You just don’t want to admit it.”

“You put a security detail on me.”

“You wouldn’t let me watch over you.”

She smiles, and it’s a mean little thing that makes my blood spike. Fuck the things I could do with her.

The things I’m going to do with her.

I can’t deny my base nature, and I’ll fucking deal with her brother and cousin when the time comes. But oh yeah, sweet Mia and I are going to have our depraved moments.

She’s going to beg for it all too.

“I fired them.” Mia’s mean smile deepens. I bet she’d stop if she knew the heat it spikes through me, the way it feeds my libido. “And they won’t be coming back. I called the company and had the contract canceled.”

God, she looks so pleased with herself that I almost laugh.

“Did you?”

“Yes, so—”

“I’ll take over. Glad we’ve worked this out.” I’m aware the others are watching us with way too much interest, but I really don’t give a fucking damn. “Just so you know, you can’t fire me. Now back to business.”

For a moment, I don’t think she’s going to answer me. But she does.

“This isn’t Leo’s business nor yours, for that matter,” she says. “When it comes to Hellfire Dancers, I look out for it and report only to the owners.”

She gestures at Reaper and Angel.

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Good thing this is just tangled with why I’m here then.”

“You keep talking the talk, Christian. I really don’t give a fuck if you feel guilt. I’m fine. And I can take care of myself.”

“Mia, with what happened to you and Blake, I don’t give a damn if you think you can take care of yourself, if you want to assuage whatever guilt you think I have, and your level of fine. I don’t even give a fuck if you think this drug business is my business or not. It is. End of story.”

Her gaze holds mine for a long beat until she finally turns and glares at the other two. “Kick him out. Ban him. I’ll deal with my brother.”

“They can ban the fuck out of me, sweetness, it just means I’ll follow



your ass so close you'd think two had become one. It also means I have the time to be around you twenty-four-seven.

I don't point out I'm planning on that, anyway, at least as much as I can.

"You won't do anything of the sort."

"Try and stop me."

"I despise you."

"Well, I have some theories on that. I'll whisper them all in your ear when I'm superglued to you."

Her cheeks turn that rose shade again because she's definitely reading between those lines and getting what I mean.

I'm going to be with her, I'm going to tear down her defenses and fuck her so hard, the only name she'll remember is mine. And that theory of her despising me being cover for her desiring me? That's gonna be fun to whisper in her ear as I make her come over and over again.

Deliberately, I stop that line of thought. I really don't need a raging hard-on right now. Not with these two guys looking at us both with something akin to fascination.

Then Angel shakes his head and pinches the bridge of his nose. "Can you two deal with your shit after we handle this guy?"

Talk about deflating a moment. "I don't think you should. In this, Mia is right."

Now she's looking at me like I've grown an extra head.

"In what way? This is our club," Reaper says, "and we keep it clean."

"Get that, but if this ties into other De Luca business, then," I shrug, "keeping this guy around is a smarter move."

"Not if it hurts Mia."

I hold Angel's gaze. "I'm not about to let anyone hurt her. Not ever again."

He finally nods. "That goes for you too."

"Wouldn't have it any other way."

The rest of the day passes in icy silence from Mia, and my temper rises by increments.

After the talk that morning, she heads out onto the club floor, and the rest of us agree to keep an eye out.

I'm staying to watch over her. I'll be moving into her place whether she likes it or not, and the rest? Yeah, I'm keeping her safe.

I don't care. I let her get hurt once. Never again.

And this, I suspect, is a lot bigger.

I quietly let Angel know how we all need to keep on good behavior and our best watchful faces on.

But it's agreed without a single word said, if anyone even thinks of harming or touching Mia, we will come down on them and destroy them.

I make all the calls I need, to my sister, Theo, Leo, and to our most trusted men.

Then I lean on a wall just inside the club near the hall leading to her office and watch.

Not the shit on the stage. I can get tits and ass anywhere, any time, and though it's beyond fine, we're talking premium quality with the moves and faces to take it into another realm. I'm not interested beyond a primal going over visually.

No, Mia holds my interest. The way she moves. The sensuality she tries to hide, and the way she keeps herself separate from others.

It pisses me the fuck off she tries to hide her scarred side when she talks to people. I don't even think she knows she does it. There's no shame in those scars. They add to her, instead of detract.

But my temper is rising because she's fucking flirting. With men. With trouble in the form of that bouncer, Frank. I've already got people digging into him. But Mia insists on needling him.

I can't hear what's being said, but it's clear what she's doing. The glances from the hot blonde tending bar to the pained expression on Andrew's face, an expression he can't hide.

Andrew likes her, I suddenly realize.

As in he wants her. Probably thinks he's in love with her.

And if I thought for a moment he'd put a hand on her, I'd kill him and not think twice. But I don't think he would. So, he can breathe, for now.

Mia catches my eye, and a man slides an arm around her waist.

My heart starts to beat hard and fast.

Not just because he's touching her, but because she smiles that mean little smile at me and then sways into him.

I don't even realize I'm doing it until I've crossed the floor, pushing people out of the way. I grab her arm and pull her away, not giving her a chance to pull free.

The man starts to say something and puts his hand out to remove mine when I look at him.

He steps back and holds his hands up. "Sorry, Mia."

"Let go of me," she says, her voice a hiss.

I ignore her and drag her back across the bar to the hall. I don't stop until we reach her office.

Then I let her go.

She spins, gaze full of fire. "What the actual fuck?"

"Same to you, Mia. You go plaster yourself over some guy to piss me off? Well, you did."

"You don't own me. I can do what I want."

"You're wrong," I say, stalking up to her.

"In what way?"

"Right now, I own you, Mia. And no, you can't do what you want. Not without my say so."

"Asshole."

"You think I'm an asshole now? You fucking infuriate me with how you flaunt your vulnerability. I found that fucking note, Mia, and you didn't tell me or the guys? What in hell kind of game are you playing? You piss me off, not the other way around, and I should spank you for all this bullshit. For you not coming to me."

Her eyes glitter. "Spank? I don't think so." She puts her hand on me to push me away.

Something in me snaps.

I take hold of her and spin her, pushing her so she lands on the desk, ass inviting in the air. Leaning over her, I slide a hand between her legs, and she moans low.

"Christian . . ."

"I could spank you, but I have a better idea. I'm going to fuck you instead."

# *Chapter Five*

MIA

Christian is pressed down on me. He's big and hard, and I'm wet.

I should be screaming, running, fighting, but I'm not. The word no is on my lips, but I don't give it breath.

Fucking Christian is a mistake. Him on me like this is a violation, and one my body shockingly wants. I'm wet, I'm pushing back into him, and I'm losing my mind.

"You want me to fuck you, don't you?" His breath is hot on my nape, his tongue wet as he traces a line there, and his other hand, that's between my thighs.

It moves higher.

I don't want this. I want this. I . . .

Oh. God. He's touching me now, fingers running along the gusset of my panties. He presses up, his fingers teasing at my opening with the panties, and they slide against my slickness.

He bites down on my nape, and I cry out, a small spasm rocketing through me.

"Beg me, Mia."

"Christian." I hiss his name, and his hand moves from me, his weight. But he holds me there with one palm on my back as he tugs up my dress, and the cool air teases against my ass.

The clink of a belt buckle is followed by the sound of a zipper. He brushes against me as he moves down, little bites along my cloth-covered back to my bare ass, where he sinks in his teeth, biting hard.

I cry out, and another small spasm hits me, my clit hitting the side of the desk as I do.

"Tell me to stop, sweetness."

My mouth refuses the words even though I know I need to say them. But it's been too long, way too long since a cock I've invited in has been there. I want it all banged away. I want all the nightmares and the hazy memories banished.

And forgive me, but I want him.

Right here and now, I want Christian Bandoni.

I want him hard and deep. I want him to mark me. I want him to come in

me and destroy any other branding by those monsters.

I just want him.

He rips my underwear away, then he pushes my thighs apart even farther. I know he's sunk to his knees, I can feel the heat of his breath on my exposed pussy.

"Your cunt is magnificent, Mia. It's pink and so fucking wet." He pulls me to him.

I scream as his tongue licks me from my clit to my ass, and then he delves into my center.

"You taste like nectar." He pushes two fingers into me and one into my ass. I'm going to have you everywhere, you understand? Every fucking inch of you will be mine. I'll make you feel like no one has ever touched you other than me, sweetness."

He starts to pump his fingers in me, and I'm moaning. I can't stop, he's bringing me to the edge fast, so fast, and the need and pleasure building in me is an avalanche. But he stops, and then he's on me, his fingers pulled free and holding my hip, his other hand moving up from my back to tangle in my hair.

And his cock . . .

It's right there, at my entrance.

"Beg, Mia."

I bite my lip, and he comes up over me, pulling my head around, he leans the rest of the way to kiss me hard, then he says it again.

"Beg me to fuck you, Mia."

His cock. If I can just get it in . . . I try to wiggle, to move up, but he won't let me, just the fat head of his cock there, all promises, all damnation, all out of reach.

I break. Something cracks open, and tears burn my eyes. "Please, Christian. Please fuck me."

"Good girl." And he slams home.

He takes me hard and fast. Christian's cock is big, stretching me, filling me, and he hits deep every time. I rock against the desk, and the flames inside lick high as he fucks me. I lay there, letting him take me, letting my brain just float, until the grip on my hair jerks my head up and me back into the game.

His other hand bites into my hip, and he leans on me, his mouth at my ear. "It takes two, sweetness, so fuck me back."

"Leave me alone."

Laughing, he bites my lobe. "Hard to do when I'm balls deep in your

cunt, Mia. And stay with me.”

“Goddamn you, Christian.”

He slams into me again. “I don’t believe in a God that lets monsters torture you.”

Anger sears me, and I try and fight him off. I’m pushing back against him, every thrust in me is etching itself into me, inside and out. “You bring that up now?”

“I want you present when I’m fucking your brains out, Mia. Because I’m not going to want to leave it at this.” And he slams deeper again. “I’m going to want you again and again. I want you to offer me every last piece of your fucking soul.”

“Go to hell. I don’t like sex anymore.”

“You just begged me to fuck you.”

“No, you made me.”

I’m so fighting mad that every stroke of his cock shoots pleasure through me. I push back against him, wanting it deeper, harder, all-consuming so I don’t have to have this conversation.

“That’s it, sweetness, push that ass into me. Ride me.”

It’s then I realize he’s not moving, I am. I’m driving myself down on him, wanting him everywhere. And his hand slides down off my hip as he moves back a little, and I follow, not wanting to lose the fullness, the sensations of when he bottoms out in me, the way everything sparks and sings and begs for more and more and more.

His hand slides down and around to my clit, and he starts stroking me as he releases my hand and wraps the other around my throat.

Christian has me now. I’m his, totally. He has all the control. He could cut off my air, he could do as he taunted, take me in the ass, and I wouldn’t be able to do a thing. But he lets me fuck myself on him, and there’s a strange sound in the room.

A keening moan, and as my body starts to really hum, the pressure of the pleasure builds and centers around my clit and pussy where I’m the one doing all the drilling. I’m almost dazedly shocked to find out that the sound is coming from me. And I bite my lip.

“Mia. Fuck. Mia.”

“Oh, God.” I bite harder, everything building, like pressure in a pot, and I’m starting to bubble over as the orgasm builds and stretches and grows, not quite there. “Oh, yes . . . yes . . . yessss . . . .”

And I explode, my entire being lighting up with pleasure that crashes down over me, and I'm coming hard, my pussy contracting around his cock.

He suddenly groans, and his finger is still working me, still playing with my clit, making that whole sensitive spot explode again.

Christian bites down, hard, on the back of my neck, and he shudders, his cock spasming inside me as he fills me with his cum. I can feel it inside, and it's better than anything I've ever felt, or known before.

I slump on the desk, cheek on a file, and squeeze my eyes shut. Another tiny roll of pleasure unfurls, and he lets go of my throat. His hand coming to stroke my hair and my scarred cheek, and I lie there.

Through all of it, he never closed that hand into a fist around my neck. He never lost control and tried to hurt me.

Oh, I could run through all the things that were wrong with how this started, but I can't shake the feeling, no, the knowledge that if I'd said no to him, we wouldn't have had sex.

He pulls out of me, his cock still fairly hard, and air moves over my exposed pussy, my dress flipped up. He dresses. The zipper, then the belt, and shame starts to slide into me.

"Y'know, I wouldn't help you if I didn't think you'd actually try and shoot me," he says, a strange kind of warmth in his voice as he smooths my dress into place, covering me. "Because fuck, you're vision. You look even better like you are, best with your dress still up and everything on display, showing me how much I marked you as mine."

"I'm not yours."

He's silent a moment, his fingers gentle on my hair. "You are, you know. Mine."

Slowly, I pick myself up from the desk, keeping my back to him as I smooth things back into place, as I try to get hold of some semblance of equilibrium.

But it's not there.

My hard-earned shell is in pieces, and I don't have it in me to put it together.

I take in a breath, hating myself for giving in so easily. For being another notch.

For going there willingly when I know exactly what it means.

His?

Bullshit.



I'm his for as long as it takes him to grow bored.

That's what that means. Nothing more, nothing less. Being told I'm his is not forever, it's for right now. And what am I even thinking? Forever? I don't want him. He got me worked up, and I scratched that itch, nothing more.

"Well, you can add the scarred girl to your list. Congratulations."

Christian is there, hands on me, turning me, his grip hard and biting, harder than when he had me by the throat.

His eyes blaze with an angry fire. Hazel-amber flame. They change when he's this angry, back and forth between the two. What are his eyes like when he's having sex? When he's losing himself?

No, I don't want to know. That was a one-off.

"Let go, asshole."

"I love it when you get spicy with my cum running down your thigh. Marks you even more as mine."

"I'm not your anything, Christian. Everyone else on this planet gets a ride on you, so I decided to have a go. I've had better."

He laughs. He actually laughs. "You loved every second of it. And yeah, I'm gonna call you out on that lie."

"Does your ego need every woman to fall over themselves in awe of you?"

Christian moves in, his mouth against my ear, and a shiver of pleasure I don't want rushes through me. "Just you, sweetness."

"Then you're out of luck. Because awe is the last thing I feel when it comes to you."

"So," he says, his tongue sliding over my lobe, "just adoration, then?"

I shake him off, and he lets me go, stepping back a little, the anger still there, but also a smugness I hate.

Glaring, I say, "You got what you wanted."

"No, I want you safe, believe it or not."

"I am safe, you asshole. Look where I am."

"The note?" he asks.

"Something stupid, which is why I threw it out."

"Yeah?" He crosses his arms. "I'll be the judge of that since I'm now part of your life."

"You're not. At all. Not even in pretend world."

"You're wrong."

This is what I didn't want. I can handle Reaper and Angel. Even Leo and

my father. Theo too. But this man? He refuses to be handled. I let him in, and he takes over my life, simple as that.

I don't want anyone doing that. It's why I sent him packing before. Why I went to battle with my family. The last thing I need is the cage that is Christian. The fact he can make me burn with desire makes it all worse.

Because he's going to want to take over. Not even with whatever bullshit business he claims is his reason for being here. Even if that's true—and I really have my doubts—the deeper he delves, the longer he stays, the more my hard work for autonomy will crumble like dust.

Because the moment he finds out or discovers anything more than what is here, he's going to bring in Leo. He'll bring in the whole family.

I can't.

All of that smacks me hard in the face over the kidnapping, the rapes, the shooting, everything. I'm a mess, but I'm my mess. He'll swallow me whole.

"No, Christian," I say. "I can't have you here. Not with me. If you have De Luca business, then do it elsewhere."

"I told you—"

"You're back for two days, and already you're trying to take over."

"Only," he says, his voice low and dangerous, "because you don't listen, because you're happy to put yourself in danger. And like it or not, this really is De Luca business."

"I'm De Luca business, you mean."

"You'll always be that, and you know it. By birth, you're that. But this is more than me just protecting you. That's just a perk."

"And what was this? Taking payment? Pity it's with me, isn't it?"

"You're not a whore, Mia."

"And if I were?"

He narrows his eyes. "I wouldn't give a fuck, and I wouldn't call that payment. Long overdue unsaid business, perhaps, but not payment."

"You got in security."

"Because you didn't want me there. It's me or security, your pick."

I stalk up to him, aware my underwear, or what's left of them, are on the floor, but I'm not about to dignify myself by getting them. Not in front of him.

"I'm going to tell you what I'll be telling Leo. Keep the fuck out of my business."

And with that, I push past him and walk out.

# *Chapter Six*

## CHRISTIAN

“Well, dickwad,” I say out loud, “that was a real smart move there.”

And one I’m really trying fucking hard to feel bad.

I’m trying and failing.

I sigh and push my hand through my hair, totally not thinking of how hot, wet, and tight she was around my cock. And it totally doesn’t throb with a renewed need, either.

Fuck.

It’s late, I guess, but the night at Hellfire is still fairly young. I could go after her, but those security guys she fired? She might have called them off, but the company has sent others. I know because De Luca owns the fucking company. Only this time, they’re more the type to fit in here, and they are out there now.

I don’t want them following her, but they will let me know if she even thinks about leaving and they’ll join forces with Andrew the moment any trouble brews.

Yeah, I could go after her, but she needs a few moments. To adjust to how her life is gonna be for the foreseeable future.

Pulling out my phone, I call Leo. I fill him in on the latest—minus the fact, I just fucked his sister—and get the latest from him.

Nothing’s come up on this Frank Smith, and we both agree he’s too clean. Not to mention it’s probably a fake fucking name.

Leaning back in Mia’s seat behind the desk, I turn in the swivel chair a bit and stretch out my legs. The thump of the music is a constant companion.

“Angel said Mia hired him. They’ve given her that power here.” Leo’s voice is neutral, a sure sign he’s annoyed and worried, all rolled into one.

Not that I blame him. This is his sister, and after what happened, we’re all feeling that way. “Get them to dig deeper, into all the avenues beyond the regular.” Normally I don’t go around giving orders to Leo. As his right-hand man, I don’t need to. Leo’s smart, he’s on things quickly. But this is Mia.

“I’m going to do that, man.” He pauses. “What are you thinking here?”

“I’m thinking that rat we had might have had links to other rats. Everyone knows Mia’s a De Luca. And if this guy, who’s new, got one of the girls here hooked, then there’s a problem.”

“Mia’s problem. Do you think they’re our drugs?”

“Fuck if I know. That’s not the issue. We have our standards, and we cut down any of our own distributors who cross us or cross a line, like sell to kids or cut with shit that gets people dead. But I haven’t heard of anyone buying big enough to sideline.”

“You’re thinking about something. Out with it.”

“We all agreed things were too easy, and I know there’s another deal, someone who wants in with our family. That’s not my business here.” Unless it has to do with Mia, but I keep that to myself and run a finger along the underside of the desk, smiling when I find the panic button. “My business is making sure nothing happens to Mia because of another rat or someone trying to fuck things up.”

“The Gheatas right now are more than decimated.”

“We have more fucking enemies than that. There’s the Russo family, who’ve been looking for a way to encroach for years—”

“Haven’t made that move yet, Christian.” But there’s steel in his voice. “I watch them. But if you think the problem with this bouncer goes beyond just selling drugs where he shouldn’t, then make sure Mia is safe.”

There’s another warning in his tone, one I choose to ignore. I’ve already gone and done that, so, yeah, no point paying it any heed. When I decide exactly what I’m doing with Mia, and how deep it might go, well, then I’ll deal with Leo and his father.

Until then? That side of things isn’t anyone else’s business.

“I’ll keep her safe, Leo.” I pause. “But she’s gonna complain. She’s going to do what she did last time.”

“She’s always had a mind of her own.”

And she’s hurting. I don’t need to say that. Oh, Mia puts up a good front, but any fool can see the pain, the self-doubt, and all the rest. I meant what I said to her. That she could have fucked every man she met before I fucked her and I wouldn’t care.

She throws me being a whore in my face, and she’s fucking right. I am. I love women. I love fucking. I’m never going to hold that against a woman who likes the same.

As long as she doesn’t do it when I’m fucking her and only her.

Funny, I never cared about that until now.

I don’t examine that or the ramifications of my meaning.

The bottom line is I want Mia as mine. However long that might be.

“Mia can have a mind of her own,” I snap, “but she can fucking well have it while doing what I say and letting me keep her safe.”

Leo starts snickering. “And if she doesn’t let you?”

“I’m not giving her a chance. I used our security company. I will want Tizio, Nicolo, and Diego on standby, but I’m going to move in to her place. Mia’s not going to be able to move without me being there.”

“And it worked so well for you last time,” Leo says.

I snort and smack my hand down on the desk. “This time, we have a united front. I’ll talk to Blake and so will fucking Theo. We all have to band together. I don’t want anything else happening to her.

“Okay. I’ll let you know when I find anything. And Christian?”

I bite back a sigh. “Yeah?”

“Keep her safe. In every way.”



After I’ve finished my calls, I leave the office because I want to keep an eye on her. And staying in there not only tempts me to breathe in and go through her space like I can take something of her from the air, like I can get in her head by touching things that are her, but it creates some kind of false dichotomy.

I don’t want her to think she’s won.

At all.

She hasn’t.

There’s also the small and significant fact if I’m going to put it out there, we’re together—whether she likes that or not isn’t my concern—I need to be seen with her.

It’s got nothing to do with getting my hands back on her. Nothing at all.

The bar’s dark, and the girls are doing their thing on the stage. While I could do with a drink, I don’t because with so many people here, I need to stay as sharp as I fucking can. Keep an eye on Mia.

She’s talking to someone, and my first instinct when the burly man touches her arm is to crush him, but she isn’t bothered by the touch. So maybe that’s also why I want to crush him. Her not being bothered, is a lick of heat with an edge, something with a greenish tinge I vaguely recognize.

Mia nods and shifts, and the man drops his hand. She knows him, and he

respects her, so I guess I'll let him live.

And then there's Frank. The one she suspects is supplying drugs.

I cross my arms as I lean against the wall.

There's something about him I can't put my finger on, something that's dark and the wrong kind of danger. It's not overt, but I've spent years studying people, ever since I lied about joining the military when I first went to work for the De Lucas.

Years and years and in so many situations that other men would have ended up dead.

I've learned to read people, and sniff out the lies and those who are hiding things.

Frank's hiding something.

Even if I didn't know he was too clean on paper, I could tell there was really nasty dirt clinging to him.

The fucker's beady eyes are on Mia when he doesn't think anyone else is looking.

The perv Andrew's gaze is also on her, but his is different. There's a spark there, like a heartbeat.

Actually, I don't mind Andrew. I'll kill him if needed, if he touches my property wrong, but yeah, he's loyal.

Mia . . . she worries me on a certain level.

She's too in control, tied tight. Everything that happened, fuck, I don't care how strong she is, things like that make an impact. Cut deep, cause the kind of wounds that fester. But she's also something like I've never seen. And while I'm not a therapy guy, I'm glad she has someone to talk to in that way.

At first, I wasn't into the idea. But Blake sat me down, shoved the squalling baby Rocco in my arms and told me point blank to stay the fuck out of that part of Mia's life. That Mia needed therapy.

My little fucking sister acting all grown up when I'm the one responsible for her happiness. I threw her and Theo together.

But she told me she goes to a therapist over what happened. And Mia . . . that was worse.

I sigh, watching how she moves, her limbs long, supple breasts perfect, I can tell. And I haven't even seen them. Yet.

She knows I'm there. She knows my gaze is on her.

And we both know she's sans panties.

Is my cum on her thighs?

I shift. I need to stop thinking such shit because otherwise, I'm going to have a problem.

Suddenly, she turns and crosses to me, her smile fading with every step, and even in the low light of the crowded bar, her cheeks grow pink. That lovely rose color.

I look at her as she stops. "Couldn't resist?" I give a cocksure smile. "It happens. Women—"

"You're disgusting." She pokes me in the chest, and I catch her hand.

"Say that again."

"You heard me."

I pull her into my arms, turning her and wrapping an arm around her waist, anchoring her to me. "I did. And you're right. A disgusting pig, y'know, with one thing on my mind, and that thing is all about you and me, and you maybe on your knees."

"Can you not grind your erection into me?" She wiggles, and I bite the side of her throat.

This is a power struggle, one she's already lost and doesn't know it. Anyone else watching will see two lovers, me laying claim to my property, and her wanting it.

Because she does. She wants me again. I know she wiggled to try and push me away, but her voice caught when she spoke. That catch holds volumes, as does the shallow rise and fall of her chest, and the way she starts to lean into me.

I slip my free hand down her side, then between us. I should probably adjust my erection, but I don't. I want her to feel it. I like her on edge and ready to unravel because she isn't sure what she should do.

Run? Give in?

Demand?

When she's like that she's ready to crack open. And I need her cracked, open, and shining naked bright.

So, I thrust my hips against her as I slide my hand and her dress up.

"Stop that," she says, her hands on my arm, "we're in public."

"I'm disgusting. Just living down to your expectations."

"Someone will see."

"Do you really think I give a fuck, sweetness?"

Mia gasps as I slip my fingers between her thighs, along the slick



nakedness of her flesh. She's perfectly waxed, smooth. And wet. Wetter than just from me fucking her. Turned on Mia is smoking Mia. And she moans as I start to stroke her flesh.

"I'm going to make you come here and now," I say. "Make you shake and shatter and not be able to stop."

"Don't."

"Say please."

"I hate you, Christian," she says.

I slide a finger and my thumb into her. She moans as I start to thrust into her.

"You don't."

She gasps as I use my middle finger on her clit. "I do."

I set a pace, loving the tight, wet heat, a little swollen from our hard sex earlier. Arousal adds to that, too, and she moans again. This time she reaches up and grabs my hair, coiling her fingers in, and I'm not sure if she's trying to push me away or pull me to her.

I kiss the side of her neck, sucking on the flesh and her cunt tightens on my fingers as I do so. "Ask me to stop, Mia. If you want that."

"Please . . . Christian . . . oh, God . . ." Her breath is short and sharp, and she quivers, pushing back into me, pushing down on my hand, and I finger her harder, plunging in deeper.

"Mia . . ."

"Please, oh, please, don't stop."

She comes apart in my arms, on my fingers.

Her orgasm is violent, and I grip her harder, shoving up deep, holding her there, playing with her clit until she whimpers.

I slowly remove my hand as she settles, slumping a little. And I just hold her. Tight.

Looking up, Frank's eyes are on us. Narrow. Nasty. But I catch that gaze, hold it as I kiss her throat, turn her to take her mouth, which is soft and compliant.

And then I lick my fingers.

For a moment, I forget I'm playing a strange game with this man. Because she is sweet and salty and unbelievable. I can taste me, sure. But it's that other taste, the one that's pure Mia, that intoxicates, makes me harder, and my balls hurt.

I drop my gaze from the guy because I made my point, and she's all the

way back down now, shutting down, pulling that wall about her.

I release her, only to catch her again, fingers sliding into her hair against her scalp to pull her to me. My mouth. And I take hers again, this time deep, plundering, and she kisses me back with heat and a wild need, right before she rips her mouth away.

“You don’t play fair, Christian.”

“Not with you.”

“I . . .”

“Mia,” I say, bringing her face to mine, “you and me, we’re not done. Not by a long shot.”

“You just—” She swallows, closing her eyes a second.

“I fingered you in public, where anyone could see? Yeah, I was there. And I don’t care. For all intents and purposes, you’re mine. And that just showed the world in here that.”

“My brother will kill you.”

“Probably.”

“You don’t sound upset.”

“I’ll sort Leo, and if people here get outraged over that,” I laugh, “then you have bigger problems.”

She frowns. “There’s no sex in here.”

“I disagree. You and I, we just had some pretty fucking hot sex, and that was off the charts, sweetness.”

“Let go of me.”

I brush her lips with mine. “Relax. I don’t think anyone knows what happened.”

And I really don’t care if they do. But I keep that to myself. I’m not entirely stupid.

“We should go. I think it’s best—”

“You can think what you want, Christian,” she says with an impressive amount of ice in her voice, “but I’m not going anywhere. I have paperwork to do.”

She stomps off, and I let her.

When she’s gone, I signal to one of my security people. He comes over, and we have words. I want them watching her and the exits too. If they need extra people, bring them in.

I’m here, but extra eyes help.

And, yeah, I don’t trust her not to fucking try and sneak off, actually.

I turn and follow her, knock on her door once and go in.

She's behind her desk, and she frowns at me.

"Where are my underwear?"

I pat my pocket as an answer.

"Collecting souvenirs?"

"Only from you."

She glares. "Go away, Christian. Go home. I'm staying until after closing."

"No can do, sweetness. I'm your shadow."

Mia gets up and stalks over to me, shoving me out the door. I let her do that. She slams the door in my face, and I laugh. I'm giving her five minutes. That's all.

I go and scan the crowd. Nothing seems amiss. Everyone is at their stations, and the bouncers are at the door. Andrew's talking to someone, checking their ID. But Frank . . .

The big guy with beady eyes and close-cropped brown hair is glowering in my direction.

I send him a 'fuck you' smile and head back to Mia.

This time, I don't knock.

I just open the door.

The office is empty.

She's gone.

# *Chapter Seven*

MIA

I'm half congratulating myself, half thinking it was too easy to lose him.

Then again, he's not all that.

Sure, Christian is brilliant. And he's hotter than a supernova, and he knows how to rev an engine, even one that doesn't want to be revved, but I'm not stupid. I just waited until he went back out into the club before I grabbed my bag and keys and slipped out the back exit to my car.

It's late, so traffic is light, and I don't go to my apartment. Instead, I keep driving, heading out to the sprawling property I love.

I turn on the radio and hum mindlessly to the music that plays, my thoughts trying and failing to catch hold of it.

But Christian takes up too much space.

"He violated me," I say.

"He took me against my will."

Both those statements are empty. They lack the emotional punch and meaning I want them to have. It's almost a desperation that coils through my blood.

The thing is, he didn't violate me, except on a level that I can't explain. Like he got past things he shouldn't have, and that, in and of itself, is unforgivable.

Christian also didn't take me against my will. He gave me the chance to say no.

Would he have stopped?

I want to say no. But I can't because he would have stopped.

Both times. In the middle, too, if I'd said then and there, stop. And meant it.

I said don't, I said . . . I said a lot of things, but I caved like some depraved weakling, caved and crumbled for a manwhore. For a fuck boy who adds to the notches on his bedpost with frightening regularity.

Over the years, I've crushed on him, thought I loved him, hated him. Christian never looked at me, never made a move. He teased. He flirted, and he fucked me with his eyes.

Christian Bandoni fucks women with his eyes like he's blinking. He flirts and teases like he takes in air.

It's part of him.

And I know it.

Me? I was never untouchable because of who my brother is. I was simply not ever touched by him because I'm not glamorous. I'm not beautiful, and I'm not the woman he fucks and collects like butterflies.

I was never up there beyond the usual flirt and eye fuck.

And that's before I was tortured and scarred.

Before I was kidnapped raped, and shot.

So why now? What in hell was all that?

A pretty new toy for him? Something new?

He's probably never fucked someone like me. Scarred and used and less than what maybe I should be?

I punch the steering wheel with a fist and gulp in a breath. Then I start the mantra my therapist taught me. It's all about I'm perfectly imperfect, like everyone else. I'm no less or more than anyone. And how my experiences both shape me and I can use them to shape my own path ahead.

It goes on.

I'm having trouble right now buying into it.

My eyes burn and blur, and I blink hard, swallowing the hot lump in my throat as I switch lanes to make sure I'm in the right one for my exit.

I need a big, stiff drink.

I need to forget this. Set up boundaries. Tell Christian that what happened is it. No more.

Tomorrow I'll do that, but tonight, I'm going to forget it all. I'm just going to drink a bottle of red wine or maybe some good, old-fashioned bourbon, have a bath, and wash his touch from my skin.

If I could wash his touch from the intangible parts, things would be perfect.

When my turn comes, I take it, and there's no car following on the private road leading to my sprawling home. I don't bother with the garage. Instead, I pull up in front of the big wrap-around porch with its welcoming light that automatically comes on.

After I turn the car off, I sit for a minute and think about getting my gun, but I don't. There's one inside too. More than one, and they're hidden in the open-plan mansion where I can get them if I need to.

But to carry when I enter?

That's letting my demons win. Letting the real-life monsters, where they

burn in hell, add to their scoreboard.

I'm not giving them a thing.

Maybe I can't help the dreams, the nightmares from coming, but I sure as hell can help keep my waking life in my control.

This is my home, and I bought it with the money I earn and a portion of my inheritance. The De Lucas own properties all over, especially in Dallas and other areas across Texas, and they own my apartment in the city. But this? It's mine.

A weariness settles in my bones, along with a tingling-like anticipation. I won't ever call it fear. I get out of the car, taking my bag, and holding my keys in my hand. Apart from my father, maybe my brother, no one really knows about this place. At least, I haven't told them.

It's not until I climb the three steps to the porch and cross to the front door, that my heart starts to pick up pace. Like I'm not alone.

In my head, I tell myself as I reach for the door that I am and always will be.

It swings open, and I almost scream at the sight of the man towering there. My heart lurches and then begins to hammer hard.

Even as my insides start a slow, hot melt.

"You."

Christian grins. "Me."

"Get the fuck from my house."

"Aww, sweetness, that's no fucking way to greet the man waiting patiently for you."

He lifts his gaze from me as gravel crunches. Someone speaks from the drive. "All clear, boss."

I narrow my eyes at the gorgeous man with amber eyes in front of me. "An entourage?"

"Yeah, well, I was going to get you a Macy's Thanksgiving Day style parade, but while I could, I didn't think you'd appreciate it."

I push past him. "Go away."

"You bet." He takes one step to the doorway but doesn't cross the threshold. "You can go now," he calls out to whatever goon he has.

I don't even ask where his car is or the goons.

Whoever it is doesn't answer, but Christian closes the door on us. From somewhere around the back, I can hear the faint sound of a car. It stops close, then revs and takes off.

“Oh,” he says, heavy on the sarcasm, “you meant me. Not on your sweet life, Mia.”

“I’ve had enough tonight, and hasn’t the thrill of having the damaged woman worn off yet?”

The cold amusement fades, and something savage takes its place. He crosses to me in sharp, biting steps, grabbing my arms tight like he wants to shake me apart.

Too late, I want to say. Because he’s already gone and done that.

Even when I wanted to go away and let the pleasure passively come over me, he refused to let me do that. He made me present, and he tore me apart.

I think I just might hate him after all.

“Let me go.”

“No.”

“Christian, it’s late and—”

“You don’t get to talk like that.”

I try and pull free, but he holds me tighter. “Like what?”

“Like you’re less. Like you’re some kind of fucking pity project. You want to know why I fucked you? Why I fingered you?”

Yes. “No. But I’m sure you’re going to tell me.”

I try for disinterest and fail.

“Because,” he says, bringing his mouth close to mine, “I wanted you. I wanted to do it. I get hard when you’re near. You make filthy thoughts grow like wildflowers in my head. I want to fuck you until we pass out, and then I want to do it again. And it has nothing to do with what happened. Or your face, Mia. I want you for you. I’m attracted to you because I am. So shut the fuck up or I’ll make you.”

“Threats. You’re a real charmer.”

“And you test the patience of a saint.” His mouth skims my ear. “I’m no fucking saint, so watch your step.”

I shiver from anticipation. I want to test that. I—

“Don’t threaten me.”

“Don’t act like a brat.”

“You come into my life, you push me around, and you tell me what to do.”

“To keep you safe.”

“Bullshit.”

He lets me go but doesn’t move away. “If I can get into your place, then



anyone can. I'm going to be where you are. Shadow, remember?"

"You—" I stop and struggle to breathe in slow and steady. I'm not going to win. I'll keep fighting him, but I'm not going to win in his trying to clip my wings and tie me down to his side. At least not right now. So, I just let that go. "How did you get here before me? You were still there when I left?"

His smile is slow and smoking hot. And the flames curl low in my belly. "I don't follow the rules."

"Or obey them."

"Same thing, sweetness."

I suck in a breath. "You sped here. Where's your car?"

"In your garage."

"How? It's locked."

He holds up a device, it's the one that opens it. "And you broke into my car."

"Not me. My men, on the other hand . . ." Christian shrugs. "I do what's needed."

Everything in me is jumbled, and I'm on the edge. It's like whatever he shook apart in me won't slide back into place. I try and step back from him, but my feet wobble.

"Go home."

"Hey." He catches hold of me. "Not going to do that."

"I know. You're impossible. Maddening."

"So are you."

We stare at each other, and it's a stalemate. I can't find it in me to fight him, not right now. I look down. "I'm getting a drink, and I'm going to bed."

"I'll join you."

My gaze snaps up to his. "You can have a drink, but you're not sleeping with me."

"Who said a word about sleep?"

Before I know what he's doing, he pulls me into his arms and catches my mouth with his.

The kiss is a slow deep one, and it's like drowning in his world. In the night, in sex, in him. And I kiss him back because I can't help myself. This man is gifted, and he's like nothing I've ever experienced before. He can make worlds disappear. Make things twist and morph so everything is just him and the pleasure he holds if I reach out and take it.

But I don't.

Somehow, I find the strength to pull free. “Don’t.”

“No?”

“No.”

He lets me go and steps back. “So, let’s have that drink, and you can tell me all about the drug situation.”



Christian just listens. He is standing in my open plan living room, in front of the floor-to-ceiling fireplace that’s not lit because it’s warm out. He holds his drink and listens.

I tell him about Ellie, about how some of the other girls have whispered about drugs. I tell him how there’s a no drug or booze or sex policy, how I have in their contracts random drug testing.

Now I know I’m going to have to invoke it soon.

It all sounds like I’m trying to find trouble.

But his face doesn’t say that.

It tells me he’s taking me seriously, the way Angel and Reaper did today. And it tells me there’s more to it all, just like he said.

Maybe not with Frank, but . . . something.

“You’re not going to ask why I don’t fire him?”

Christian shrugs. “I know why. You want the right evidence for it, so you can take him down. I’m just gonna say we can handle this shit better than the cops, and if he dares touch you, then he’s not living long, but you have to do what you have to do.”

I stare at him and shift on the couch, sipping my drink. “No, you think he might have something to do with the reason you’re here.”

“You’re the reason.”

“Bullshit. You already said you had another one.”

“Maybe I lied” he says.

“And maybe you’re full of shit.”

“Maybe, but we both know I’m not.”

I sigh. “I’m going to bed.”

Christian comes over as I stand. “Invite me up, Mia.”

“No.”

It’s the hardest word I’ve ever uttered. No.

Because I want to say yes.  
And maybe in a different life, another Mia says yes.  
He just nods. "I'll take the room across from yours."  
"Of course, you've been through my place."  
"Lead the way."



I wake, screaming from a nightmare, and it's real. My demon is there, pinning me down, saying my name, and I fight him. How he followed me from that world into this, I don't know, but I scratch, claw, hit, and try to break free.

But he won't let me go.

"Mia, sweetness, it's Christian. You were having a nightmare."

Finally, a voice penetrates, and I calm. It's him. Smelling good, feeling like safety and the right sort of danger. He's strong and surprisingly gentle and warm.

I don't care if it's a warm night, I'm cold, and his brand of fire is what I need, what can make me feel safe and whole and—

"Let me go."

"Don't be stupid, sweetness. I'm going to stay here with you."

But humiliation washes over me. Not because I'm wearing boy shorts and a thin T-shirt, but because he witnessed this.

I push him again. "Please. Please go."

For a moment, I don't think he's going to, but he finally lets me go and gets off the bed.

But in the low light from outside spilling into my room, he crosses to the armchair and sprawls out, in boxer briefs and nothing else.

He finds and meets my gaze. "What? I'm not fucking leaving you alone, Mia. I'll give you the space you just asked for, but I'm staying right here. Now go back to fucking sleep."

And with that, Christian folds his hands over his abs and closes his eyes.

I turn and curl up into a miserable ball because even though I pushed him away, I want him. Here. Holding me.

But I can't have that. Because if I do, if I let him hold me now, like this, I'll be lost.

Sleep comes in waves before pulling me in, and it's like no time passes. But the next moment I open my eyes from a beautiful dreamless nothing, light is bright and spilling over me from the window, and I'm feeling good, warm.

And I'm wrapped in Christian's arms.

He's on the covers, fast asleep, holding me. I bite my lip and close my eyes, pretending to go back to sleep.

Pretending that this, whatever it is, is real.

# *Chapter Eight*

## CHRISTIAN

Fucking hell, am I an idiot for giving in and getting back on that bed?

It's not like I wanted to sleep on her supremely uncomfortable chair. But she didn't have another nightmare, and still, I went to her.

She's not ready.

Not for the level of intimacy I pushed on her. She'll probably fuck me over and over but let me in to give her the comfort she desperately needs? No.

Right now, she's locked in her bathroom.

I knew the moment she woke, the moment she snuggled back down. When I moved, she made a strangled little sound and took off.

The Mia I know is not a scared rabbit.

So, her nightmares stripped her so bare, she must have felt like one.

Fuck.

I shower and dress from my meager selection of clothes I have with me. There's a suit somewhere, still in my car, probably, in case I need it, but for now, some underwear, socks, jeans, pants, tees and button-downs are all I really need. And a casual jacket to hide the holster when I choose to wear it.

Christ almighty. I sound like a fucking girl.

I head down the stairs. Mia's still in her room or her bathroom. I don't stop to find out. She's still here because her car's been disabled. Done last night on my preordered command.

I want her as mine. I want her to be reliant on me for everything. Making coffee in her spacious, bright kitchen, I make calls and search her cupboards and fridge for food as I do so.

Everything is good. No one came out here. No one went to her apartment.

When I'm off the phone, I pull out eggs, butter, and some chives. Scrambled eggs, I can do.

I shove some bread in her toaster, and when she finally appears, everything is ready.

"Breakfast, sweetness."

She's in jeans and an oversized long-sleeved top. And I still really want to see her tits. I guess that's a given.

A look of hunger crosses her face, but then she starts to turn. "Not

hungry.”

“Sit.”

She turns back to me. “Don’t start, Christian. It’s too early.”

“Never too early to get the juices flowing.”

“Gross.”

“You didn’t think so when I was inside you. When I fingered you.”

Mia glares. “Not breakfast conversation.”

“I thought you weren’t hungry.”

“Asshole—”

“I said fucking sit down. Now.” I keep my voice soft, but the command in it is anything but.

Mia is in full brat mode as she sighs dramatically and drops into the seat. She forks the world’s smallest bite into her mouth. She chews and swallows.

“I ate. See?” And she opens her mouth.

I come in close and say into her ear, “Keep that pretty mouth open, and I’ll find something really interesting to put in there.”

Her head jerks, and there’s a flare of fire in her gaze as it meets mine.

“I don’t like you, Christian.”

“Right now, I’m not a fucking fan of yours.” I straighten and point at her plate. “Eat.”

“No.”

I shrug, pick mine up, lean against the counter, and start to eat. “Fine by me. We can sit here all day long until you do. I don’t mind.”

“I’ve got things to do.”

“Tough. I will say, though, hot eggs are better than cold ones.” I take a bite of my toast. “I’m speaking from experience, just so you know. But hot, cold, straight from the fridge, you’re gonna be eating those fucking eggs.”

She points a fork at me. “I’m not a child.”

“Don’t act like one.”

“Stop being a massive bully.”

“Stop being a brat.” I pause. “I can do this all day, Mia, so you keep going.”

She’s silent for about a minute, then she forks up some more egg and eats it. “But only because I’m busy, and I want you off my back for the day.”

“I’ll stay off your back, but you’ll be in my sight.”

“No way.”

“Yes,” I say. “Where you go, I go. Got it?”

“Fuck you, Christian.”

I offer her a grin as she picks up her coffee cup. “You know my answer. It’s a double yes, please. I got a taste, I want more. So, you wanna fuck me here? Or take it up to the bedroom? Or are you thinking somewhere public? Now you’ve gotten a little taste.”

“You’re such a pig.” She takes a sip of the coffee and almost spits it out. Her face twists in disgust. “What the actual fuck is wrong with you?”

“I might get some soap, or come up with something more interesting to straighten out your potty mouth.”

“Right after I do the same to yours.”

“Really? In that case, I’m thinking some good old fashioned sixty-nine action could work.”

She shoves the cup away. “Is there any coffee in with all that cream and sugar? And I like my coffee black. Unsweetened.”

“To go with your heart?”

“Is that why you do that to your coffee? To pretend you have a heart?”

I start laughing. “Probably. And you’re way too thin. Don’t get me wrong, I like every version of Mia I’ve seen. But you’re like a twiglet.”

“I really hate you.”

“No, you don’t. You just wish you did.”

She goes still, and I know I’ve hit a nerve.

My little bundle of prickly sweetness here is great at staying in her self-built cage she thinks is an armor, but when I poke inside, she’s scared.

I want to poke.

Comforting her is poking. That startles me. I mean, I knew it, but it sort of just slapped me in the face right then. I’m not offering comfort right now, far from it, but I hit the same nerve, something that gets to her truth, and that makes her vulnerable and exposed.

I file it away to explore properly later.

Mia reaches for her phone as it buzzes and what she sees makes her turn pasty white.

I’m at her side so fast the plate is still clattering on the bench when I sit next to her at the breakfast bar, a hand on her lower back to steady her.

Without asking, I take the phone.

“Fuck.”

She’s paler than even before, but she just gives me a shove.

“I’m okay. I just . . . I just need space. I need to breathe.”



Nodding, I sit back and drop my hand, prepared to move if she even looks like she's thinking of fainting.

But Mia's made of stronger stuff than that, and she grips the edge of the breakfast bar as I shift her almost finished plate and coffee out of the way. In their place, I pull the glass of water I poured for her in reach.

Right now, I'm more helpless than if I was Rocco, my baby nephew. I'm not sure what to do, and it's new, that feeling. New and unpleasant.

"She's alive."

"Ellie's unconscious. We need to go."

She starts to rise, and I put my hand on her thigh. "No. We're not going anywhere."

"One of my dancers was beaten unconscious and left to die in an alley, and you're saying we're not going anywhere? Bullshit." The anger is sharp, jagged-edged. "Why hasn't someone called? Reaper? Angel? Fucking Lisa from Hellfire? Don't they think I can handle it?"

I don't say probably not. I really don't know. I didn't know until I saw her fucking phone. It's a news alert, but as I pull her phone to me, I see it's an app about violent crime in the area.

Of course, she'd have something like that.

"Maybe they don't know. This is an alert."

"It says it's bad. She's in a medically induced coma. I have to go."

"Mia, I'm going to make some calls, okay? We'll send flowers—"

"She has a child, Christian." The savagery grows. Her hands are tight, white fists on the island.

"So, we'll have someone check on them today. You can't go."

"Don't tell me what I can do."

"I just did," I say. I get up and retrieve my phone, scrolling through for the numbers I need. "Look, you can't do anything if she's in a coma. She wasn't working last night, right? This isn't your fault."

She shakes her head, staring at the island. "It is."

Her words are so soft I almost don't hear them.

"Mia."

"My fault. I should have—"

"What? Locked her in a basement? Had that asshole taken out back and shot? Doesn't work that way. You don't even know if it had to do with drugs."

She sucks in a breath. "It says . . . there, where she was found. It's an

alley near the club. Not next door, but in the vicinity. And why would she be so close if it wasn't to score?"

I do not want this conversation with her. We have a policy not to mess with the merchandise, and drugs have never appealed to me. But I know how a lot of things work. "This isn't how it happens. Maybe with some levels of drugs, but dealers have clients. Clients make calls or text a number, and then they get a delivery. Unless she was into real bad shit, then she's not leaving her kid at home to get some dirty drugs. You would know if it's meth or something like that."

"I don't do drugs, Christian," she says, standing abruptly like she wants to go somewhere, but she takes three steps and stops. "I don't know."

"You probably don't. But you're smart. Come on, sweetness. Maybe she met with one of her clients from Hellfire Dancers?"

She's breathing unevenly. "Ellie doesn't live near the bar. And I told you, there are rules."

"People break them all the fucking time."

"It was early hours, near enough, but Hellfire was still open, so maybe . . ."

She doesn't finish.

"Maybe she met with Frank?"

Mia nods, it's small, but it's a nod.

I cross to her, but I don't touch because I don't want her to lose it right now. She needs a moment, and she can't go anywhere. Her car won't be starting until I have the tiny piece removed put back, and I'm not doing that. And my car is smart locked, smart activated. She can't drive that, either.

So, I give her the space she needs.

"A client. Come on. I know you say you don't want the girls fucking clients, but I'm betting it happens."

"They all know what will happen if they do. They're fired."

"Like with the drugs."

Mia glares like I'm the monster here. "She has a kid, and I'm trying to get the evidence, okay? She hasn't shown any interest in that stuff."

Christ, she can be fucking naïve.

"And before you say it, I'd have known by now. My policy is the girls, the staff, they're all escorted to and from the club. I don't want any of them hurt."

"So maybe she's making extra with someone. A deal?"

“She strips, she doesn’t work the strip, Christian. If she’s sleeping with someone, it’s not for money, and I don’t think she’s meeting that person near the club. This is drugs. Or are you that much of a whore you think that’s what everyone does?”

“Careful, Mia,” I say. “I give you leeway with your name calling, but only so much. Don’t cross the line here. I’m not your enemy.”

“Aren’t you?”

“No, sweetness. I’m fucking not, and you know it. And no blame, I’m just asking. Trying to understand.” I pause. “Why don’t you let them fuck guys who come in?”

“I’m not running a whorehouse. And I told you, I don’t need the drama. It used to happen, girls would do that, and it got messy. I stopped it when I took over. I cleaned up the place, turned it really legit, and anyone who didn’t want to play was out. I need it clean. I want to build something good and safe for the girls, and they understand. Ellie . . . Someone got her hooked on doing drugs, but I don’t think she was there to fuck someone.”

I look at her, like I’m seeing another part of her, and I think I am. Mia, the businesswoman. She’s fucking hot.

And I’m a bastard for going there right now.

“Look, I’m going to make some calls, send flowers and Reaper or whoever to the hospital. I’m going to see what they know, and what Leo can find out.”

“No. I don’t want him involved.”

“He’s gonna find out, sweetness. But okay, I’ll pull favors. And then we’ll go and see her in a few days.”

But Mia’s revitalized. “Fine. I’ll lay low a few days.”

“Why do I sense there’s a catch.”

Her smile is pale but there. “Because there is. Come on, Christian. We have work to do. Now.”

Feeling like I’ll end up regretting it, I agree, and we set out.

# *Chapter Nine*

MIA

The look on Christian's face as I make him pull up at the small home would be delightful if circumstances were different.

But they're not. Story of my life.

The place is small, run down through lack of money, but neat and clean, even on the outside. Not an old toy or even overlong grass in the postage stamp yard. There are flowers and some shrubs along the edges that hide and soften the old chain link fence.

The scent of food lingers in the air, masking the smell of a clean car as we sit.

"Wait here."

Christian, the bossiest asshole I've ever had the pleasure to meet. Or is that displeasure? I'm not sure when it comes to him.

I flick a glance at him, push open the door of his fancy car, and slide out.

"Do you even listen to a word I say?" He says this across the shining dark cobalt blue of his car's roof.

"Not really."

"You need to be spanked."

"And you need to get it together, there, Slick."

He grins, even though his eyes are still stormy, and my heart misses about three beats. I know what he looks like with his dark hair, high cheekbones, dimple in his chin, and those killer amber eyes, but he still takes me by surprise.

Christian is the hottest, most beautiful man I've ever seen, and he knows it. That's in everything he does, the way he takes having sex with me as no big deal. It's in how he just acts like we'll be doing it again, and I'm going to beg for his gorgeous, thick cock.

And worst of all? He's right.

I really, really hate him.

He makes me feel almost normal at times.

Like a woman desired.

Like I'm beautiful.

I turn from him, knees a little wobbly as I open the back door and pull out a couple of the bags. He's on the other side, getting the ones there.

“A nice, sexy little spanking, sweetness. You’ll love it.”

My cheeks burn, and I don’t denigrate myself with an answer. Just slam the door with my ass, right on his words of “yeah, that fucking hot ass, baby.”

I’m not going to let myself laugh. I bite down on my lip.

The door bursts open, and a little towheaded rocket speeds down the path and attaches itself to my leg, and now I’m going to cry.

Pete’s grip is hard, desperate, his little skinny body shaking. “Mommy’s sick, Mia.”

“I know, Sweetie. She’ll get better,” I say to Ellie’s young son. “Come on, my friend and I have some gifts.”

“Is one a toy?”

I laugh softly. “One’s a toy.”

We start walking, and he still clings to my leg, making it hard to do that. He’s silent a moment.

Then he says, “I’d rather have Mommy.”

“Pete! Stop that.” A tired voice calls from the step, and I look up at Ellie’s mom, Jayne.

The kid peels away and takes off up the path as Christian joins me. “Jesus,” he says, clearly doing some mental math in his head, “just how old was she when she had him?”

“Old enough to get pregnant.”

He doesn’t say anything else. Pete’s seven, and Ellie’s mother isn’t that old, even though life hasn’t exactly been kind to her, she’s still a pretty woman. And her eyes, when they latch on to Christian, light up.

Just like pretty much every other breathing woman not related to him on the planet does.

And he just takes it as normal.

I mutter some unkind things under my breath as we go up. “I’m sorry, I \_\_\_”

“Did you do it?”

“No, Jayne, of course not.”

She takes the bags from me. “Then you have nothing to apologize for. They say she’ll heal and come through fine. I-I don’t know what happened. Bring your man inside, please.”



Pete's dragged Christian off to show him his room. He's clearly a kid in love and Christian, for a hard man, one who really doesn't show much emotion except anger and lust and a terrifying hardness when it comes to most, smiles and ruffles the kid's hair and is happy to listen to the constant chatting.

I help Jayne put away food. I give her the flowers and the card with the money and when she sees that, her mouth sets.

"To make up for the hours Ellie will miss."

I know she's got pride, and I appreciate it. She won't like handouts.

She nods. "Thanks."

"And you can blame Christian for all the food and the grocery delivery vouchers. Just go online, use the card and place the orders," I say as I accept the cup of coffee from her. I turn the ceramic mug in my hands.

"Christian . . . he's a good man, handsome too."

I can feel my cheeks start to burn. Good is the last word I'd use for him. But I'm blushing over the meaning in her words, that he's mine. And I can't go and explain my way out of that one. "Family friend."

"Uh huh." She sighs. "This will help, thank you. I've arranged to take a little time off where I can, and we have good neighbors who can help with Petey." Her gaze lifts to mine. "I don't know what's going on."

"We'll find out," I say. "I promise."

"She gets lost, but she's been a little . . . distracted lately."

Behind me, Christian asks, "Has Ellie been seeing someone?"

I didn't hear him approach, and I turn, shooting him a filthy look, one he calmly ignores. Good man, my ass.

Jayne shakes her head. "No. And I would know." She offers a tired smile. "I'm not in her business, but we live here together, and it's hard to miss if an adult is out longer than they should be. She's been trying to get her life back together. And until the last few weeks was doing well."

"What happened?" I ask.

"Her ex. He called. Something about how he's taking Pete. He does this from time to time, and no one's going to give that drunk woman beater Petey. But Ellie gets down. She puts on a good show. She started spending more time by herself. Here. Not with men. She wants out of this place, this life, and Mia took her from a path that wasn't leading anywhere good to one that gives Ellie a chance. And now . . . this . . ."

Christian comes close to me, brushing against me, his hand fleeting on my arm, and with that touch, the vice in my chest at her words about how

Ellie has been treated, her fucking ex, it stops tightening.

But the burst of guilt that I was going to fire her? That's still there.

He veers the chat to the hospital bill and says the De Luca family will take care of it as she's an employee of mine and how it's policy.

It isn't. He just made that up.

When we leave, I'm silent, staring unseeingly out the window at the scenery flashing by.

Christian doesn't say a word, and one glance at him shows his hard, set profile. Like he's been carved from rock. And I don't know what's going on inside him.

But the car is so full of him, his presence, a latent heat in the air that somehow wraps about me, bringing both a strange comfort and a slightly unsettled feeling.

As we pull up in my drive, next to my car, he just says, "Not your fault, Mia, so cut the fucking bullshit roundabout of guilt going on inside your pretty head."

And with that, he gets out and shuts his door.

I sit for a moment, breathing in, trying to get my emotions, and my thoughts in order. That little burst of guilt flares into anger, and I jump out of the car and stomp up to my porch, just as he comes out with a bottle and glasses. Bourbon.

"Sit." He gestures at my wicker lounge chairs with the little table to the left as he sets down the glasses and fills them. "Now."

I ignore him. It doesn't help I love sitting out here when the weather is nice. It doesn't help he seems to think he knows me. I throw myself down. "How dare you think you can read my mind."

He sighs and sits, too, taking a sip of his drink. I snatch up the other one. "It's not hard, Mia. You were quivering with guilt that doesn't belong to you. What happened is not your fault. None of it."

I get the strangest feeling he's not just talking about back at Ellie's place.

"I was going to fire her."

"You're a good businesswoman. You warned her, I think you said to me. Not fired her. And that's fair."

I take a deep swallow of the bourbon, liking the dark honey of its taste, the burn. The heated trail it leaves reminds me of him.

"But I should have asked. I know her, I know the girls, and yet, I didn't."

"What? Pry? You're not their friend. You employ them. You're friendly,



you're there, and you are an ear they can talk to, but you have to be above them. There's a hierarchy."

"Are you a guru of the employment system, Christian?"

He smiles slowly. "It's my Superman identity, but more boring."

"And this," I point with my glass, "is your Clark Kent?" I shake my head. "A little backward."

"Be still, this shriveled thing in my chest I hear they call a heart. Did you just compliment me?"

I snort out a laugh of derision. "You're delusional."

"Don't tell anyone that, either."

We sit in comfortable silence as the sun starts to descend, and it's nice. I never thought I'd say that about him, but it's nice, and he has more sides than manwhore and hard-nosed killer.

Of course, being Christian, he tries to ruin it with his next words. "You need some time off, sweetness."

"No."

"Yes."

It's a command cloaked in softness.

"Christian, I have to be there, and you know it. And I can handle all this. I'm strong."

"Maybe too strong. But that's not what I mean. This is a good opportunity."

"Yeah?" I take a sip of my drink. "And how's that?"

"The ship will run. And maybe with you not there, your little rat will scurry out."

I want to say no, but I stop myself, because while I hate him bossing me about and using any opportunity to tie me down, it makes sense.

"You have others who can watch over things. I can have someone there to step in for a couple of days. To report in. We'll work something out, but with you not there, maybe he'll fuck up, or move on to someone else. Or the girls will talk. If this guy got Ellie hooked, you bet he's trying it with others."

"Fine," I say. "I'll take a couple of days off."

"And I didn't even have to use my evil mind powers."

"You have no power."

"I do."

"You," I say, turning on my side to look at him, "let a little kid drag you around. I heard you playing with the Lego."

He grins. “In my defense, he’s a very persuasive kid. And Lego is always fun.”

I start laughing. “I wish I had pictures.”

“For blackmail?”

“Prosperity.”

“Definitely blackmail,” he says. “Note to self, never let Blake show Mia childhood photos.”

I roll my eyes, finding him funny, liking this strange slice of self-deprecation that I haven’t really let myself notice. “Please. Are you trying to tell me you were a geek? Or ugly.”

“I was the epitome of the Ugly Duckling. Have you seen the ballet? It was that, but I also couldn’t dance.”

“Isn’t that a children’s ballet? Or a kid’s book?”

“Maybe I meant Swan Pond.”

His face is straight as he says that.

“The ugly swan version of *Swan Lake*?”

“Yes.”

I just start to laugh again. “You like ballet?”

His cheeks turn red as he blushes. “Blake danced as a kid. It’s her fault.”

“Uh huh. Totally her fault.”

“Totally.”

“You know the swan dies in *Swan Lake*.”

“Does it?”

“Maybe I mean something else. *Godfather on Ice*?”

“That’s not a thing, and you’re saying he was ugly as a kid? Marlon Brando?”

“He’s an actor, and it’s an untold story. The Mafia ice capades. It’s very deep.”

“You have the weirdest references, and you’re an idiot.”

“Tell people that, and I’m gonna have to kill you.”

He says this in some kind of gruff voice that he clearly thinks is a dead-on perfect imitation of something. I don’t know what, but it’s terrible, and I’m grinning, I can’t help it. He looks so pleased with himself, and he’s worlds away from the Christian who’s hard as nails and takes what he wants.

And God help me, but I like him.

Maybe there’s more to him than I ever thought. Maybe he’s different from my notions and I misjudged.

Finishing my drink, I stand. I need to get the hell out of here.

Because he's dangerous.

He always has been. But like this, Christian is deadly because he's accessible, and if I was stupid, I'd think . . .

I'd think there could be a chance.

There isn't.

Because a man like him, a man who just might contain happiness, is not for me.

So, I make my goodnights and go inside.

Before I do something stupid.

Like invite him in.

# *Chapter Ten*

## CHRISTIAN

“Where the fuck do you think you’re going?”

I’m not sure why I’m angry, but I am. Mia drives me fucking insane. It ticks, like a clock or bomb, inside me. Pressure builds.

We were on the porch, having a nice time, all relaxed. And then, boom. She ran like I wanted to stab her. I’d been talking shit about things I’d never say to anyone else, stupid, meaningless things that made her laugh. And it was good.

If I live to a thousand, I’ll never understand this woman.

Every time I think I have a grip on her and who she is, she shifts on me. Morphs.

She’s visited hell, sure, but she knows I’m never going to force myself on her, not in that way. I’ll push, I’ll test boundaries I probably fucking shouldn’t, but I’m not going to rape her.

And on the fucking porch? Right then? I didn’t even fucking touch her. Didn’t even make a move like I’d do that.

Goddamn it all.

“I asked you a fucking question,” I say.

Mia stops, her back stiff, but she doesn’t turn. “Going to bed.”

“Bed?” I almost laugh at that. Instead, I cross my arms and glare a hole in her back. “You’ve barely eaten today, sweetness. And the sun is barely down. So, what the fuck?”

“I’m tired.”

“Is that an invitation, Mia? Because all you gotta do is ask, and I’m saying yes.”

“It’s not an invitation. Jesus. Can you stop being a fuck boy for two seconds?”

“Wasn’t aware that’s what I was doing.” I take a step toward her as I drop my arms to my sides.

Then I stop and rub the back of my neck.

“Y’know, when I’m trying to get a woman to fuck me, or how do you put it? Fuck boy? When I’m being a fuck boy, I don’t tend to talk fucking nonsense. So, I ask you, since you don’t want me to take you to bed and show you more of my moves,” her spine stiffens a little at that, “and you suddenly

take offense at my humor, what is it you want?"

"Not. You."

"Really?" I clench my hands. "I think you do."

"Well, isn't that just typical asshole thinking? It's bad enough you've forced your way in here, making me pretend we're together. Fine, but I don't need to spend every second with you."

Her words are like a gut punch, and I don't know why.

Yeah, I do. She's pushing me away when she wants me. And I'm too much of a bastard to really let her. Not when I know she needs to be pushed back.

I know when someone isn't into me. And when they are. And Mia, whether she wants to admit it or not, is into me. Like I'm into her. She's in my blood, but that doesn't mean I'm blind to her.

Then something clicks.

She's running away. From me. From her own feelings. From memories.

There's no way she wasn't thinking about what happened with her at Ellie's place. No way that set off Mia's own memories of her past.

It's clear from what Ellie's mom said the girl's ex was nothing more than an abuser. And I mean girl. Her mom can't be too many years older than me, maybe pushing forty, and there's no way Ellie's gonna be older than her early twenties.

Most of the women at Hellfire are under thirty. No judgment, because I know places where the sadness and desperation and general giving up on everything pervades the grain of wooden floor, the stage. I know places that are little more than brothels dressed up as a club. Where the women are meat to be poked, prodded, holes to bury your dick in.

And the guys who go there don't give a fuck about the age, as long as they can get their rocks off. I'm gonna say as long as they can hurt the women they fuck without any recrimination.

I fucking despise those places and the men who go there. The men who run them.

A girl's gotta make a living, I get that. But I like the fact Mia is giving these girls a safer place to make the so-called easy money.

So-called, because there's nothing easy about it. Even for those who like the empowerment of showing their wares.

But from what Leo has said, Mia gives the girls a way forward.

I like that.

I like her.

Maybe way too much.

I always have. And scarred outside and in makes no difference to me except she got hurt.

I need to think this through.

“Sweetness?”

She takes her time answering. “What?”

“I’m not the bad guy. I’ll keep the bad guys from hurting you.”

Her shoulders stiffen. “Christian . . .”

My name is like a broken whisper, lost.

I cross to her, across the wide-open foyer, and take her shoulders, easing her back against me. “Don’t run. You can’t.”

“I need . . . I need space. I need to breathe.”

“You’re breathing.”

“You turn everything upside down, and I can’t take it.”

“You’re the strongest person I fucking know, Mia. Too strong, but I get it.” I trail a hand down her arm to link our fingers. She shivers beneath my caress. And she’s warm and perfect against me. A perfect fit. “I get it.”

“No.”

“Yeah, I do. I didn’t go through what you did, but I get it. I get you. Sweetness, you don’t want to bend and let anything in for fear of shattering, but if you don’t bend, you run the risk of snapping in two.”

She pulls free. “I just need a few minutes.”

“Go shower, get changed, and I’ll order us pizza.”

This time she turns and stares at me. “No one’s delivering pizza out here.”

“They will for me.”

My man’s just delivered the food, and I have security here tonight. I don’t need it, and I don’t think anyone’s gonna do anything, but after what happened to Ellie, I feel better with that extra power. Not that I’m telling Mia.

She freaked out at me putting security detail on her. She’s not that happy I’m here. Combine the two, and she just might try and murder me.

I call out to her to get her ass down here. As I retrieve the bourbon from outside and wait in the living room, I sort of wish it was cold enough to light

the fire. Instead, I just turn on the lamps, kick off my shoes and wait.

It's quiet here, not what I picture Mia wanting, a country house, as she's always been a city girl. But it suits her. And I think I see why she likes it.

She's close enough to work in town, but she can disconnect here, cocoon herself in the wide-open space. Let herself just be and heal.

When she arrives in the living room, she's dressed for bed, with tantalizing girl boxers and a big T-shirt. She also has a robe on, like that's going to stop me from lusting. But I nod to the box.

"Thanks," she says, all drawn in on herself.

But I let it go, it's been a long day for her on a lot of levels, and so we just eat, sip the bourbon, and talk about nothing. It's unexpected, weirdly domestic, and somehow seductive. I can see myself with her down the track in this moment, us doing this.

The thought is so weird, so unexpected. I don't know what to do with it, and I put my plate down and look at her.

"Invite me to bed, Mia."

Startled, she looks at me. "What? No. I . . ."

"Tell me you don't want to."

Her cheeks bloom rose, and she gets up, her plate already down, and starts to edge past me where I sit on the sofa. "I'm going to bed."

"No." I catch her hand and pull her down on me.

She's warm and soft, and I'm overcome with the urge to kiss her scars. But I don't. My sweetness is already skittish. I'll do it one day, just not now. Because I know that day will come.

Her breath is uneven, her breasts pushed against me, and her mouth so soft and inviting that I taste it. Bourbon and pizza and the sweet taste that's all her. Innocence. Sex. History. Complication.

I can taste all of those.

And they're something I can't get enough of. I want to defile her. I want to take her apart. I want to put her together again and wrap her around me to my liking.

"Invite me."

"Christian." My name is a sigh of want.

It makes me hard that desire that curls through her breath. And I kiss her again. This time she kisses me back like she can't help it, like it's all she can do. I take it slow, turn it into seduction, and take my fill.

I half pull her so she straddles me and she can feel my erection. As I kiss



her, I explore her, sliding my hand up her T-shirt to cup her breast. It's warm, soft, and full. Her nipple hard. And I tease it with my thumb, making her moan.

My hand drifts down as I start to kiss a trail down her throat, to suck on her jugular, and I'm rewarded with her sharp intake of breath, of her little sound of need.

I slide my hand into her boxers and over her smooth sex to stroke her clit. Oh, fuck, she's wet and pushing against my hand so I give her what she wants. What I want. I push two fingers inside her and start to fuck her.

Mia's hands grip my shoulders, and she rides my hand, her moans filling the air, and there's a helpless note to them that turns me on more than it should. It says she's mine. I can have her body when I want, how I want, and she can't help it because she wants it too.

We work, and she's fucking delight itself. Her heat, the tightness, the way she moves, the way she fucks my fingers. And she comes, crying out, shuddering. I bite her hard, bringing forth an extra spasm and a moaning gasp as she clamps so hard on my fingers, I know she came again.

I want to lay her down and take her now, while she's still rolling in the pleasure of her release, but she pushes off me, angry.

"I don't . . . I don't want you to do that."

"You just came, Mia."

"I know what you're doing."

"Yeah? And what's that?"

"Manipulating me."

"If you say so," I say. "Slap your fucking labels on it. Ask me, I'm gonna tell you it's more than that. It's about attraction. Sex. Need."

"You don't really want someone like me."

"Don't fucking tell me what I do and don't want."

She looks me up and down. "You're saying you want me."

"I'm pretty sure that's obvious." I grab my junk. "Not really something I can hide."

"Well, I guess there's no one else for you."

"There's a whole fucking club full of women, Mia. Not to mention the city itself. I'm not hard for them."

"I'm convenient."

I just shake my head. "Let's say you are convenient. Fine. But you can't deny there's something extra between us. A pull to each other. One that's

simmered for a long time. And now the lid is off, we bubble over. There's fire. Heat. We ignite something in each other."

She doesn't say a damn word.

"And I don't know about you, sweetness, but this thing we ignite? It's rare."

"I'm sure you say that to all your little conquests. I guess with so many, it makes it easier to remember a line than talk to the girl."

I get up and stalk over to her. "I've fucked a lot of women. So what? Doesn't mean this isn't something I want. Doesn't mean you're not different."

"Because of my brother?"

"Sweetness, my tastes don't run that way. And no, I don't give a shit who your family is, okay? If anything, it might stop me."

"A bit late for that."

"Yeah, so." In that, she's got a point. "Why are you mad?"

"Because," she says, spitting the words at me. "You're the kind of guy who just takes what he wants because he can."

"Or maybe because it's what I want."

I don't reach for her, no matter how much I want to.

"Go to hell, Christian."

"What the fuck is wrong with you? I'm not having sex with you. We kissed, it got heated." I touched. Not out of any move to claim her but because I needed to, because it happened. Because she didn't want me to fuck her, sleep with her. What does she even want from me? "And now what? You want to take out your bad day on me? Fine. Go ahead, I can take it. Just fucking admit it, and stop being a child."

"I'm not being a child. I'm saying I don't want this."

She turns and rushes out, grabbing her bag and is out the front door so fast I can't do anything but chase after her.

This isn't over.

Not by a long shot.

Not by any shot at all.

# *Chapter Eleven*

MIA

Christian leans against his car when I jump in mine. He looks at ease, like nothing can touch him.

He's furious. I can see that. It's in the stillness of him, the fact he doesn't move, and maybe he's giving me the space I need. Space so I don't go and do something stupid like getting myself into a world of hurt over him.

I know, somewhere in the back of my brain, that I'm being ridiculous. I'm not dressed to be seen in public. It's just I need to put distance between us. Because he shakes me down to my core.

And speaking of shaking, that's what my hand is doing as I try and shove the key into the ignition.

I get it on the fourth try.

And in the gathering darkness, broken by the light spilling from the porch, he's there, just waiting, watching.

Looking like something I want with a desperation that scares me.

He's lean, tall, and muscled. The man has power. Even from here, I can see that, harnessed and waiting to be unleashed.

And his face, that handsome, devastating face. It's still carved, cold rock. It's his business face, the one I've seen countless times, the one that appeared when he rescued me. The one that metes out all kinds of dark punishment. One I secretly covet.

That closely leashed violence.

The unmitigated stone-cold justice.

The seeming lack of emotion.

It's the face of a man with no fucks to give. A man who will bring down hell if and when needed. A man who will show no mercy once he's decided someone isn't worthy of breath.

This is the man who will kill for me. And somewhere inside, enjoy it.

And I want that.

I want him to slay all the demons, past, present, and future.

I want him to do the things I can't. I want him to kill.

Which is why I need to get away.

Why I need to find somewhere to breathe and put the walls back in place. Refill and strengthen their foundations.

Because right now? I'm dangerously close to losing my shit and everything crumbling.

I know he'll protect me. It's the violence, old-school biblical streak in him I want to soak in.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I breathe in, willing myself not to shake.

I also want the other Christian, the one who scares me more than this one. I want the softness, the sweetness, the humor, and the lazy times on the porch Christian. I want to explore a side I never thought was there. A side I think I might have always known existed.

I'm in knots and it's all his fault.

Snapping open my eyes, I twist the key in the ignition.

Absolutely nothing happens.

I do it again. Then again. And three more times after that.

Nothing at all.

Gulping back a cry, I fist my hands and bring them down hard on the wheel. I press the horn and it blares out, splitting the silence of the fresh night.

Christian's dark head tilts, and he raises an eyebrow.

I do it again.

This time, he drops his gaze, pulls out his phone, and starts doing something on it. The light from it hits his face, and my heart twists.

I snatch the keys and push open the door, slamming it behind me. Then I stalk up to him, rip his phone from his hands and look at it.

"A game?" I say, snarling the words and going to toss the phone. But he snatches it back. "You were playing a game?"

"You were being boring, Mia. And don't try and fuck with my phone. That shit is expensive. If you want to be a petulant brat, go break your own." He puts the damn device down on his car's roof, out of my reach.

"I don't want you here. I don't—"

"Sweetness," he puts his hands on my face, "you don't want to want me. I get it. You're what I shouldn't want. You complicate things, and here we are."

"Christian," I say, the heat of his touch sliding down and calming me a little. "It's not like this just happened. You were determined to be here and interfere with my life."

"I'm protecting you. I'd kill for you. In fact, I have."

"It's too much. I . . ." Not the death, not the killing, but how I feel, and I

can't find the words to say that to him.

But Christian sighs and brushes my temple with his lips in a kiss that's so soft and tender I want to cry.

I'm an absolute mess, bouncing around like a crazy thing.

"I know. And I'm sorry. But you get it, right? You get you wouldn't find it too much if this was just pure and unadulterated sex. There's something else, that extra dimension between us. That other pull. And that's why it's too much."

He folds me in his arms, and I push but he doesn't let me go.

I fight a little, but really, I don't want to. His arms are warm and strong, and he's not trying anything. This isn't like the whole thing on the couch.

This might be worse. It's comfort and understanding. Something I don't want to need. But he doesn't let go, doesn't do anything but hold me.

And I settle. Bit by bit. The tension begins to flow away, and while it lingers at my edges, Christian somehow gets it to stay there. Just by holding me without a demand or hidden meaning.

"I don't . . . I'm not crazy."

He laughs against my hair. "Sweetness, if you were crazy, I wouldn't blame you. But you're not. You're working through a whole lot of shit. What happened to you should never have happened to anyone. Ever. And especially not you. But we can't change the past, Mia. And you're going to yoyo as you should. Just know you can't fucking get rid of me or your family."

"You all want to lock me away."

"I want to strip you down, Mia."

I shiver at his words, at the thread of heat they hold. Oh, there's the sexual heat, but there's something else in them too. And I deliberately leave it alone.

He sighs. "We do what we do because we're built that way."

"You're all built to be overbearing assholes?"

"Yeah. That's one way of putting it."

I squeeze my eyes shut and rub my cheek against him. "You scare me. Not physically, but the rest. Emotionally." Crap. Everything is coming out wrong. "Not like in some romantic way. I mean, you make me feel when I don't want to. You push at me. I need my barriers, Christian. I need them. They keep me safe."

"You're really asking for space?"

“Yes.”

He eases me back and searches my face, and I can't read a thing in his expression. It makes my heart squeeze tight.

“Fine,” he says softly, “then I'll go.”

I swear my jaw drops as I step away, drawing my robe around me, aware of the coolness of the night air making my nipples bead and harden. Or maybe that's just from him holding me, having me against the heat and hardness that's Christian.

“Is this a trick?”

A muscle ticks in his jaw. “No. You want space. I'm giving you space. For tonight. Lock your fucking door.”

And he steps away, gets in his car, backs out, and drives away, leaving me standing, staring after him.



I sort of haunt my house after he goes. The door is locked, but I jump at every small sound, every creak and sigh and crack of the house. Those are sounds that usually I don't even notice but tonight . . .

Tonight, this place feels empty.

More than empty, I decide as I curl on the upstairs sofa in the media room, a throw rug drawn about me, some stupid movie playing on the screen about spaceships and lasers and funny-looking aliens. Some new movie one of the dancers raved about a few weeks ago. I'm not really watching it, just coasting as it plays, something to stare at and try and keep my mind occupied.

But my mind is on the house.

On Christian.

His absence.

That's what it is. This place just doesn't feel empty, there's a Christian-shaped vacuum. Hell, he was here one night, and it feels like he was here for a small forever. Like he's ingrained into the surface and soul of my house.

I want to resent him for that.

Just like I want to resent him for leaving.

Unreasonable, I call my reactions. My therapist would say I'm testing ground and spout a whole lot of things. She'd warn me against starting a

relationship because often, people like me dive headfirst into unhealthy involvement and call it intimacy when it's just getting naked.

Or she would say maybe I'm not ready for something I'm trying to rush into.

But I don't really want to be naked.

Not in that way. Not in the down to the bone and bare the soul naked.

I sigh and hug a cushion tight.

Why am I even here? Knocking at a door in my head when that's not on the agenda. Christian is here for a job. Most likely one my brother and father have given him. Protect me.

He keeps on about our connection, that thing that's deeper than mere physical attraction. I don't even know what that is. What he means.

Sex is sex. Intimacy is something different and maybe I could handle it. But Christian, he doesn't want sex or intimacy. Well, he does. But he wants something more, something my therapist doesn't talk about, something that might have been damaged by what happened to me; he wants a piece of my soul.

This isn't love.

And no matter what he says, I've been damaged. I wear it daily. I got used to the looks, but after the kidnapping, the rapes, and the abuse, I see through the haze of drugs, of the things I did because I was out of my head and sometimes just not able to react, and sometimes . . .

I take in a sharp, deep breath. Sometimes I felt things when they used me that makes me so dirty, so horrible, I can't face it.

I don't deserve a man to look at me like I'm good and whole.

My phone buzzes, and I reach for it because I need something, anything to distract me. Maybe it's him.

The call isn't from Christian. It's from an unknown number. I set it down again. When it starts again. This time the call states blocked number. Shit. I don't want to talk to anyone, but what if it's about Ellie?

I have her mom's number in my phone, and there's no reason the hospital would call. Anyone calling me about her is going to be someone I know, and whoever this is . . . they can leave a damn message.

Turning off my phone, I sit up and switch off the TV. Maybe I'm such a mess because of the nightmares. And it was a hell of a day.

The house still mourns Christian's absence, and I want to yell at him. My stomach is in knots and my throat tight, and I hate him all over again. Not



because he touched me, or wants to take a piece of me I'm not willing to give, a piece I don't even know if I have to give. No.

No, I hate him because he left when all I really wanted, down deep, was for him to force himself in that insufferable Christian way, back here, me into his arms.

I want him to hold me. I want him not to touch me. And that's my problem, isn't it? I'm a damn mess of a person that he's probably glad to run from.

And still, against everything else I feel, I want him to hold me. Just hold me.

I head to bed, and when I finally slip between the covers and try and sleep, despite the heaviness of my eyes, sleep is hard to find.

# *Chapter Twelve*

## CHRISTIAN

Mia's softly curled hand is on my chest, and her heat reaches down and warms parts of me I don't think have ever been warm before.

The early morning sun weakly shines into her room.

I don't know what woke me because she's very easy to sleep with, easy to make me not want to get up.

It's probably years of early mornings. That, and I'm where I shouldn't be.

My sweetness shifts, her leg sliding over mine, and she utters a tiny sound.

Then she goes stiff. Her eyes open. And Mia is suddenly wide awake and not at all sleep soft and fuzzy.

"You left. You said you were giving me space."

"I did. I came back."

She frowns but doesn't pull away. This just might be progress. "You said you were gone for the night."

"I lied."

"And you're in my bed."

"You're hard to resist. Thorns and prickles and sharpened knives and all. Very hard."

She groans and buries her face in my chest for a moment.

Her muffled voice rises. "I'm still pissed with you." Mia raises her head and looks at me, her pretty eyes, half amused, half scared rabbit. Or is that all thirds? Because I see a little warrior queen in there too.

Mia is a world of fascination, and my dick is rock-hard.

I'm not even planning on trying to get up in that.

Okay, I am, just not right now. I'm not that much of a bastard.

"I know, I know. You're always fucking pissed at me. It's your thing. It's cute."

Her eyes narrow, and this time she pushes up and off me, and I silently mourn that loss. "It's too early to be weird. I'm half asleep."

"That explains why you haven't tried to castrate me."

Her mouth flickers and flirts with a smile. "Do not tempt me. Or give me ideas."

"Point taken." She's up now, standing next to the bed, and my gaze is on

her slender legs, then up to her breasts where her nipples push at the thin fabric.

Of course, she sees me look, and crosses her arms over her chest, looking like the world's most innocent woman.

With a sigh, I swing my legs off the bed and get up, heading for the door.

“Get ready for the day, plot my demise. And we can make breakfast. I'm gonna do some work, make some calls—”

Her glare is powerful.

“—check up on Ellie for you. See you downstairs.” And with that said, I go.

After a shower, shave, and change of clothes, I do as I said I would do. Head down to the small office Mia has there. I check up on Ellie. Stable, but no real change. I check in with Reaper and Angel.

They report exactly nothing.

Sitting on the little sofa in the study, I stare at the door and then at my phone.

Fuck. I know she doesn't want me to call Leo, but I'm going to have to. Because I can read between the club owners' words.

Nothing doesn't mean things are good. It means the opposite. No one is talking. No one is catching this guy, and he's still way too clean.

“Leo.”

“I swear,” he says without a hello, “if anything happens to Mia, I'll fucking kill everyone.”

“Good morning to you too.”

I quickly cut through his rampage response, which reminds me of Mia and her temper. It runs in the family. I don't know why I never noticed it before.

When I finish going over everything, including the note I found, he's silent.

“With everything that's happened, Bandoni, you leave her?”

I mutter curses under my breath. Of course, my security detail told him. He's the boss here. And this is his sister, but . . . “You really fucking think I'd do that? Mia got a bit too hot under the collar—”

“What did you do?”

I ignore him because I've done a lot that I shouldn't do to her.

“Your fucking sister, like mine, went through a lot, Leo. More than any woman should.”

The monsters that raped Mia branded my sister, had my fucking parents in to beat her, taunt her. Blake might not have been raped—I don't think so because she's her husband, Theo's, one huge vulnerability, the one thing that can bring the man they call Frozen to his knees, and I don't think he'd be able to keep that to himself—but she went through a different hell.

My sister is stronger than she looks, but she's glass compared to Mia. And my sweetness has an inner fragility that she needs to embrace and meld in with her iron strength.

I grip my phone tightly, as I keep forgetting where my damn Bluetooth earbuds are. And I don't want this on speaker.

“Your sister is . . . complicated. And she's dealing, but sometimes she needs space.”

Leo snorts. “You? Giving space? Gone a little weak in the knees over her?”

“I'm trying not to be an asshole, you asshole. And for your fucking information, I drove to the road outside her property, had the guys on alert, and when her lights were off, I went back. So no, I gave her space for a little while, but not too much. Nothing is going to fucking happen to her again. Not on my watch. Not ever.”

“Careful, you might sound like a man who has the hots for her.”

“She's hot.”

“She's not for you to fuck with, Christian.”

“I think she'd be the first in line to say that.” I shift on the stupid sofa, which is way too girly for my liking, even though it isn't, not really. It's just a pale peach fabric-covered sofa that's small and plain and somehow is more than it is. Something that reminds me of Mia.

If you dump the plain thing.

Mia, in no way at all, is plain.

I say to Leo, “I'm just concerned because of the note, the guy, the girl who's in hospital, and the fact Mia isn't a woman given to fancy or dramatics.”

“No, that's what worries me too. Tell her she's coming home. Now.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose with my thumb and forefinger. “And how do you think that's going to go over?”

Leo lets out a rush of breath sighing through the phone. “You got a fucking point. But I don't like this.”

“I'd bring her home to the house in a heartbeat.” The estate where we live

is big and sprawling and can house probably four or five families, complete with kids, and no one would hear the other. But getting Mia to move there? Pipe fucking dream. “If I could.”

“This security company we have are top-notch, but this is my sister.”

“The main reason I’m calling.” I sit up straight on the sofa. “They are that, but it isn’t enough. I want Nicolo, Tizio, and Diego here. They can help me dig into this guy. Hit the ground and ask questions I can’t if I’m sticking to Mia.”

“She’s priority.”

“You don’t have to tell me,” I say, pushing up and pacing the floor. “I know that. And trustworthy eyes will help too.”

“Got it. Consider them on their way.”

We shoot the shit for a few minutes, and I know he’s trying to find out personal information here. About Mia and me. But I’m not going there.

When he hangs up, I continue my pacing.

There’s an unease in my gut. Like we’re missing something. But what? I fucking don’t know. Instinct says this is about more than drugs. But even if I got talking to the guy, this Frank isn’t about to talk. And I could have him taken, beaten, and threatened, but that isn’t the answer, either.

Because if there’s something bigger behind this, we’ve just played a hand we didn’t want to.

I want to keep Mia safe, no matter the cost. I’d fucking take a bullet for her. It won’t come to that because I’m top of my game. But if she thinks me sticking to her side like we’re some dumb newlyweds is gonna end in a couple of days when she returns to work, she’s going to have to think real hard again.

Who cares if she’s happy or not about this arrangement? I don’t. And we’re already in it.

I more than intend to end whatever bullshit is going on at Hellfire Dancers. And I’m in complete agreement with Leo. I’d love for Mia just to come back to the estate and wait it out until all trouble has passed.

She loves Blake, they’re close, and she loves baby Rocco too. But Mia is more stubborn than Leo. And she drives me crazy with it. She’s one hell of a woman, and her job is everything. She’s got a vision when it comes to the club.

Any fool can see that.

The way the Mia handled the meeting with Reaper and Angel is truly

remarkable. I didn't think she had it in her. But the way she dealt with it has her practically shining with pride. There's one thing I've learned about my sweetness is that she loves what she does and it shows in how she takes care of business. I personally think she has plans because that's Mia. And the places she went to visit? The burlesque places, the more upscale joints? Yeah, she's got plans.

And her passion and drive for her job is something that she can safely hold.

I'm not taking it from her, even if I could, even if it was the safest option.

It is the safest option, but one, I think, that just might break her the wrong way.

Take her from that, and she'll feel she has nothing. She'll think she failed. The light in her will go, and I can't stand that thought.

"Christian?"

I whirl around at the sound of her voice. She's in the doorway, and I didn't notice her even open it. That's how caught up I was.

"You look, um, worried."

"Just talking to your brother. Upping security."

Her mouth thins. "You promised."

"I know, but it's that or . . ."

I don't finish, and her mouth thins more. "Or he's going to try and pull the no work card on me? Is that what you mean? Over some guy who's dealing drugs on my watch? Things happened to me. But I'm still standing." She has her phone in her hands.

I cross to her and take it. "He's your brother. I told him that."

"You didn't tell him about the note, right?"

"Breakfast?"

"Christian."

"I'm betting we can make pancakes," I say. "Are you in the mood for pancakes?"

She sighs. "I don't have all the supplies."

"How about this? We go into town—"

"You did something to my car, remember?"

I ignore that. "We'll take my car, get the supplies, and I don't know, you can do woman things."

"Oh, my God." But her mouth turns soft again and way too inviting as it twitches up a little into an almost smile. "You're like some walking

mansplainer cliché.”

“Well, it’s better than being a manwhore.”

“Please,” she says, “I didn’t finish. You’re a walking mansplainer cliché manwhore.”

“That’s better.”

She rolls her eyes at me. “Fine. We’ll go into town and get groceries.”

“Maybe I’ll buy you lunch.”

Or turn her into lunch.

“Maybe you’re pushing it. We’ll go, but only because you won’t stop being a pain in my ass, and I’m hungry. Maybe if you’re a good boy, I’ll cook you dinner.”

“You cannot cook, Mia.” I’m fairly confident of this, just like I’m sure I got away with not lying to her about the note. “I’ve never seen you cook.”

“I’ve never invited you for a meal, Christian. But, since you insist on being here, I’m not going to subsist on eggs, cereal, or take out. Or, God forbid, frozen dinners.”

“You’re being anti-American.”

“No,” she says, the smile beaming on her lips shines brightly. “I’m being healthy. You should try it.”

The damn woman has the nerve to pat my flat abs.

“There are cans.”

“No. I’m cooking. Come on, if we’re shopping.”

It’s a bizarrely domestic thing to do. There’s always food at Leo’s. A chef. A housekeeper. He likes the fine life, and even my monster parents had someone cook for them.

Speaking of, though they’ve disappeared, I’ll take them out just as soon as I sort this out.

On the way back from the supermarket, Mia is quiet, and I leave her be. It’s not until we’re in her kitchen, unstocking, she turns to me.

“You never answered me.”

“About whether I wanted Japanese or Italian eggplant?” I shrug. “I don’t care.”

“Not that. About the note. Did you tell Leo?”

She’s staring at me, and I can’t help it.

I lie.

“No.”

After all, it’s not like she’s ever going to find out the truth.



Is she?

# *Chapter Thirteen*

MIA

He's probably lying. I keep thinking that, and mentally kicking myself because it's like I'm looking for an issue.

Every time we get close and things feel good, I fight.

After breakfast of really terrible pancakes Christian insists on making, which kind of pleases me because him not being good at something makes him a little more human, and accessible, I take off to work in my room.

I say kind of pleases me, because human and accessible are dangerous, and Christian is already beyond dangerous to me.

From the small touches as he cooks, touches that sizzle and take my breath, to his smile and the tiny frown and narrow-eyed stare where he also bites a corner of his bottom lip when concentrating, do a number on me.

Like him flipping the pancakes, my stomach does the same. My pulse swoops, and my blood surges hard and fast against the surface of my skin.

He makes me hot, like there's a slow burn building inside me. And yet he doesn't try anything. There's nothing calculated about those touches.

Sometimes they're brushes against me as we reach for the same thing. Other times he's just moving me out of the way. But by the time breakfast is done and eaten, my stomach is in so many knots that I have to leave.

He waves me away with a warning to not even think about attempting to sneak off, and then he commandeers my office.

I'm okay with that. Christian out of the way means I can breathe.

And I do all the things I need to do. With my laptop, I call in with Angel and Reaper, I set up and go over that evening's performances, and after a moment, I switch out the girls who are meant to be in the VIP room.

In there, they dance on tables and give the elite members special dances that flirt with the concept of lap dances if they choose. I say flirt because there's no contact, and I don't want it like that. But the guys in there have big meetings or celebrations, and they like the girls topless at all times.

So, I have a selection of them who are good with that.

There are always two bouncers in there, and tonight, although I usually have Andrew at the front door, I put him in there.

And I ask him to let me know if there are any behavioral changes with the girls.

He's trustworthy. He's the one who quietly told me about Ellie, even though I'd noticed myself. And more than that, he doesn't ask questions, and he's the right side of discreet.

When I'm done with my calls, both online and on my phone, I check in with Ellie's mom. She's still unconscious, but there's improvement, and for that I give a small sigh and silent words of thanks to whatever Gods might be listening.

The sun has dipped low when it hits me that it's been hours. After all the calls, I've been planning my proposal that I want to hit Angel and Reaper with when the time comes.

I want to take Hellfire in another direction, or failing that, start something new, hopefully with their backing.

But my stomach growls, so I head downstairs.

Christian's standing in the kitchen, looking into the fridge, and my heart flips and flops at the sight of him.

How can he take my breath away every single time?

He turns, and the harsh light catches his face, illuminating his hard male beauty, and my mouth goes utterly dry. "Nice dress."

"I was wearing this earlier." I smooth my fingers down over the front of the floral-printed cotton.

The dress isn't anything to write home about. It's just above the knee, loose fit, and comfortable. He's looking at me like I'm in lingerie.

I go to the cupboard and start pulling out some things. Canned Italian tomatoes, spaghetti, and my secret ingredient, star anise.

"Are they mini throw stars?" He's staring at the jar.

I laugh. "A spice." Then I gesture for him to get out of the way. "No eating before dinner."

"Fuck, you're a pain. I forgot lunch."

"So, eat extra."

And my skin heats as his gaze slides over me. "I just might."

Oh, Lord. I suck in a shaky breath and start pulling out onions, garlic, a block of parmesan, the mix of ground pork and veal, the bay leaves, and the fresh basil. I put it all down. "Get the bottle of red we got."

"Ma'am."

He's such a jerk. But I'm smiling as I get out the red pepper and salad ingredients.

Dragging out the pots and pans would keep me from looking at him, but

he takes them from me each time. And each time, he brushes my fingers with his. Deliberately, and my engine revs a little higher.

We prep together, Christian is good with a knife. Then again, of course, he is. After all, his line of work . . . I take a breath as I watch. His movements are smooth and almost sensual, the knife like an extension of him.

He makes quick work of the onion and garlic, only a muttered swear word giving away the fact the onion affects him.

“Why are you smiling like an evil demon there, sweetness?”

“You, the onion.”

He narrows his eyes. “They’re evil too. With their damn juices.”

“Not the juices,” I say, lighting the pan on the stove and adding the olive oil. Then I grab the board from him and hand him the pepper along with a fresh one. “It’s gas. Some kind of acid and an enzyme that gets in the air and irritates the eyes.”

“And here I thought it was just the onion getting revenge.”

I laugh and scrape the chopped pieces into the pan with the wooden spoon. He starts in on the pepper. “That’s one way of putting it.”

He pauses as I add ground pepper and a pinch of salt, along with the tiniest amount of baking soda and three-star anise. “What’s all that for?”

“The star anise brings out the meat flavor and deepens it. And the baking soda brings on a higher pH, which speeds up the onions, so they brown faster and break down more quickly. It’s like a cooking hack. Instead of spending three hours slowly cooking them to bring out the depths and sweetness, this does it in a fifth of the time.”

Christian stares at me. “And you know this how?”

“The chef at my brother’s place taught me, and so did the one we had growing up. I like it. I find it soothing. But it’s not as much fun for one.”

“You can cook for me anytime, sweetness.”

“That wasn’t an invitation.”

“It was.”

“In Christian-speak, maybe.”

He just laughs and hands me the second board, and I point to the cans of tomatoes. When the meat has browned, and the tomatoes added, I lower the heat, and he takes the spoon, sliding his fingers slowly along mine as he does so.

My breath skitters.

Our gazes meet, and there’s a heartbeat where neither of us moves, before

I turn away to get the other things prepped. “I thought we could have some toasted ciabatta and a simple salad with a lemon vinaigrette. It’s really easy —”

“Mia.”

The soft, deep, dark velvet of his voice wraps around me, and I shiver. “What?”

“You’re babbling.”

“You keep touching me.”

His smile is slow, and it hits me low in the stomach, spreading heat and that tingle of arousal. “You’re very touchable.”

Flustered, I wave a tomato at him. “Are you flirting?”

“With you? It’s not so much flirting as mating.”

He steps closer, the sauce a low simmer behind him, and he smooths a strand of my hair from my face, the side where my scar is. His fingers brush the flesh there, and a jolt races through me.

“Christian . . .”

“I’m not going to pretend I don’t want to fuck you every which way I can. And I’m definitely not going to pretend it won’t happen. It will. Again and again and again.”

I try and form words, but none come.

“We’re going to get to the bottom of all this shit at Hellfire, and I’ll keep you safe, and after everything is sorted, you and I are going to talk.” His amber gaze dips to my mouth. “I say talk . . .”

He gives me time. Christian’s move is slow and deliberate, his fingers lingering on my hair, but there’s no pinning me to him, no boxing me in. He more than gives me time to run, to stop the moment.

But I can’t.

I raise my chin, and my eyes flutter shut as his lips brush mine, a slow kiss that’s almost air. Then he kisses me again, this time deepening it, his mouth on mine, and I part my lips, and it’s like an invitation. He’s so warm and delicious and there. And I crave the sensations he brings, the way it becomes just him and me, and the promise of pleasure.

All my fight, my fear, and my anger, fizzles in that moment. There’s a part of me that knows it hasn’t gone forever, but for now, it isn’t in the way. I’ve been fighting, I’m tired, and he’s the rock I suddenly need.

Christian picks up on something because there’s a shift, and his arms come around me, his mouth hard, our tongues dancing, and I don’t think I can

feel my feet.

He kisses me like I'm the only thing in the world. He kisses me like I'm a treasure he's coveted and found. And he kisses dark and dirty and wild.

Christian is hard against me as his hands move over me, pulling at my skirt, and his fingers slide up my thighs. I part them for him, and he hisses his approval. It's such a sound of male need and satisfaction that I think I could come from just that, but he has other plans, and as I tug at his T-shirt to slip my hands up against the smooth, hot muscle of his abs and chest, he breaks the kiss to tease me with more on my face, to my ear, and down along my throat.

When he reaches the juncture of my thighs, fingers teasing, it's pure lightning that shoots through me, and I drop my hands and start at his belt.

With that, everything shifts.

There's a desperation, a flood of need that crushes whatever walls held it in. We tug and pull at each other's clothes, things crashing to the ground, and we're like teenagers who can't control themselves.

I release him as he lifts me and plants me on the kitchen island. My fingers wrap around his thick girth. His cock is something I want in my mouth, deep inside me and—

"I'm gonna fuck you right now. There are things I need to do to you, but right now, it's been too long." Christian rips my underwear to one side, his fingers plunging into my wetness.

"It was the other day."

He takes his cock, my hand still around it, and he lines up, then pulling my hand away with his, thrusts into me. So deep, I cry out. He stretches me, fills me, and he feels so unbelievably good.

"An hour ago," he mutters, mouth at my throat as he sets up a hard, deep pace. It's not too fast, but it hits every spot that needs it, and I'm almost out of my mind. "An hour ago would've been too long ago, sweetness."

His fingers dig into my hips, and we stare at each other as he fucks me. My legs come up around his waist, and I grip the edge of the bench. I'm going to come. Oh, God. Everything builds fast, almost overwhelming, and I shatter, flying everywhere in that sea of pleasure he sets off. Wave after wave after wave.

Suddenly, he goes still and starts swearing, pulling out of me, dragging up his pants, and flipping my dress down, right as I hear what he hears.

Voices.

My brother.

“What,” says Leo, “the actual fuck is going on?”

I want to die. I don’t know what he saw. If he caught us actually having sex, but the way we are, my legs splayed, Christian between them, you bet he knows something’s going on. He starts yelling. Then Christian does.

And it’s not just them.

There are other voices.

Shouting. Yelling. Arguing.

Blood roars hard in my ears, and Christian’s arms surround me, burying my face in against his chest, where his heart beats fast. “It’s okay, sweetness. I’ll handle it.”

“Seriously? My sister, man. I have a fucking gun. So does Tizio, Nicolo, and Diego here.”

Oh. God. I bite my lip and squeeze my eyes shut.

“Bandoni, tell me why we shouldn’t all use you as target practice.”

“Quit it with the crap, De Luca. We’re grown-ups and—”

“Stop it,” I say, lifting my head, and pushing Christian away. One thing about being caught in the act is his erection is gone. “All of you.”

“Mia—”

“No, Christian, I’ll deal with my dumbass brother.”

“Mia—”

“You’re the dumbass brother I’m dealing with, Leo, so shut your mouth.”

I jump off the counter and smooth my clothes before spinning to face him. At least the three men with him have the decency to look like they’re hoping the floor will open up and are glancing at anything but me. My brother?

He lacks the manners.

He might make grown men cry, but I can take him. And I’m so mad I could pistol whip him myself.

“I want to know what this asshole’s intentions are.”

“Intentions? What? Are we in a previous century?” I don’t even pretend to misunderstand his meaning as I cross my arms and glare.

If my face is a little heated and my hair a tangle, Leo doesn’t say anything.

“You’re my sister,” he says, pointing at me.

“Not your daughter. I’m also a grown-up, so mind your own damned business, Leo.”



“You are my business.”

“No, I’m my own business. And . . .” I raise my face with dignity. “We’re having dinner.”

“That didn’t look like dinner.”

“If you want to keep your balls, I suggest you rethink your attitude.” I breathe in as I tap my foot on the floor.

“I have every right to—”

“Barge into my home without an invitation? I don’t think so.”

Leo narrows his eyes.

“Sweetness,” Christian says in a voice so low no one else hears.

I ignore him.

Leo says, “You’re my sister, I do have a right.”

“No,” I say, “You don’t. And I have a doorbell for a reason. “Now, are you going to tell me why you’re here, or am I going to have to shoot you?”

# *Chapter Fourteen*

## CHRISTIAN

Oh, fuck, I'd be laughing if I could. This is funny. It's also horrible because being caught almost in the act—thank Christ, I heard voices and stopped before they reached the kitchen—isn't something I want for Mia.

Me? I don't care if I'm caught. But her?

More humiliation and indignity she doesn't need, and Leo's too pigheaded to see that. He's all about fucking honor. I get it, this is his sister, but doing his bullshit in front of her isn't going to win him any awards in the brotherly arena.

She has an air of misery, and I send a glance at Leo, who's ready to spit fire. With a sigh, I turn to her. "I'm going to go talk with your brother. You okay?"

"I'm fine."

The clipped note to her words tells me to let her the fuck go, and I do.

"Come on, Leo, let's go talk."



I can still feel the tightness of Mia. The wetness. The heat. And my fucking balls hurt from being so close but not winning the prize.

Thinking about this isn't really something I want to do with Leo glowering at me. The other three have wisely found other things to do outside Mia's study, like pretend they're not there. And, from the kitchen comes the banging and clanking of an angry female making her displeasure known.

"You got news?"

Leo's gaze flicks over me as he leans on the desk. "What I have, are questions."

"About what's going on." I sit on her little sofa. "Here with the club, at home." Something comes to me, and I look at him sharply. "My parents?"

"Blake would have told you if we had that last piece of news because I'm not sure Theo's going to let them breathe if they come to light."

"Him and me both." But he's got a point. I've told Theo while I'd prefer to be there, he can wipe them out if he has a chance.

"Tell me more about the note."

I tell him what I know, which is pretty much nothing.

“So, she just found it and threw it away?”

“It’s Mia.”

He breathes out, frustration vibrating through him. “I should fucking force her to come home.”

“Kidnap? Because that’s about the only way. We tried to strong-arm her before, and I think that’s why she tossed the note. She’s beyond not pleased I’m here again. But I’ve let her know I’m not going anywhere. And the only reason we got that far is that girl in the hospital and me being there when she brought it all up to Angel and Reaper. If she thinks this bouncer, Frank, is the one—”

“Then we remove him. Rough him up. Cut pieces off him until he talks.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “And if this guy has connections that are deeper than a little drug dealing on the side?”

“It’s cut—”

“Someone’s selling shit cut with other dangerous shit. Addictive shit. Will get you dead if you do too much shit. That’s happened. And we can’t stop that. The only people we can stop are the ones we have distributing and dealing, and they don’t go near there.”

“Nothing big is going through, not at a different rate.” Leo looks at me. “Doesn’t mean someone isn’t doing some side work with what we have.”

“Too localized, Leo.” I sigh. “I’m not fucking happy, especially with it being the place your sister works. A place that we have connections to via association. And that guy, if he’s just who he is on paper, then taking him out still means there’s another problem.”

“We take him, make him talk.”

“And if he’s bigger? If the connections are big enough? He’s the sort that just might be waiting for that.”

“A willing sacrifice?” Leo frowns, and he straightens up. “In connection to the rat?”

“We caught the rat, or at least part of the operation. Or what we were meant to.”

I don’t finish what I’m saying. I don’t have to.

“Or the expendable part of something bigger. And expendable, as in they didn’t know.”

“Yeah.”

“Fuck.”

I shrug. “We could be wrong here, and he’s just small, or small and good at hiding his past and whoever he works for. But it’s worth finding out before we bring him in, Leo. If he’s working for someone small and not connected to any other troubles, we can take it all out.”

“Mia’s coming back with me.”

“Fine.” I look at him. “I’ll wait while she says no and either shoots you or rips you a brand new, shiny asshole. I’m here. Protecting her. The idea is it looks like we’re a couple.”

“And are you?”

I don’t answer.

Leo stalks up to me and stares down. He’s formidable. So am I. I stay where I fucking am. “What are your intentions?”

“My intentions are to make sure Mia doesn’t get harmed again. Same as yours.”

“No, see, I don’t want to fuck my sister.”

“Good to know.”

“You’re a smartass, Christian. Smartasses sometimes have a very short shelf life.”

“Are we done?”

“No. What are your intentions? Because that was pretty fucking intimate what I walked in on, and—”

“Careful. I know you’re the boss, but I’ll punch you if needed.”

“Intentions, Christian?”

“None of your fucking business.” I get up then. But only because there are some fucking delicious aromas hitting the air. Yep, that’s the only reason. Leo smiles.

I glare and point savagely at him. “Wipe that smile off your face.”

“What smile?” Now he’s grinning.

“You know what your problem is—” I stop, angle my head, and look out the open door. The three guys aren’t there. “Is that . . . are they laughing?”

“Holy shit. I didn’t even know Tizio knew what that was.” Then Leo slides a sharp glance at me. “This isn’t done.”

Together we head out to the kitchen, where the four of them are eating.

Diego looks up, a forkful of spaghetti halfway to his mouth. “Boss, have you tried this? Mia can cook.”

Mia doesn’t speak to her brother the rest of the night and barely speaks to me. Instead, she’s sweet and friendly to the other three. Typical.

When the dishes are done and praises are sung, she announces she's going to bed. I let her go and at the front door, Leo turns. "Fucking Mia is stubborn as hell."

"Wonder where she gets that from."

The look he sends would make dirt blush. "I'm going to think about all this. I've got to take care of this guy sooner or later, and sooner might be better. We'll meet in the morning."

I lock the door and place a call, upping the ante on the dig into Frank's ties. This time I get them just to use a description and cast a net wide. Through so-called family friends, neutral parties, and big and small enemies.

In short, everyone.

Then I go in search of Mia.

She's upstairs in her room, with her door ajar. I'm not sure if that's an invitation or an oversight, but I'll take what I can get. For a moment, I drink her in as she lies there on her bed on her stomach. She's in her oversized T-shirt, boy shorts, and some kind of bright cartoony socks. She's hot as fuck there, like that, the lamp on and a book in her hands.

I knock.

She doesn't stiffen, she just puts the book down. Mia knows I'm there, knew before I knocked.

Guess we both have that in common. That almost preternatural awareness of the other.

As always, she reaches into me and squeezes hard on something in my chest that just might be my heart.

"Go away, Christian. Or do you want me on your knees sucking you off?"

I wince and cross her room, sitting on her bed. My hands coil on the covers to stop myself from touching her like I want.

If I start, I'm not sure I'll be able to stop.

"I'll gladly have your pretty lips—either set—wrapped around my cock. But somehow, I don't think you mean that." I pause. "At least not right at this second."

She sighs. "We shouldn't have done that."

"Bad idea? Maybe, but it was a wild fucking time. Literally."

"I'm tired," Mia says, still not looking at me. No, she's studying the cover of the book like she's got an exam on it the next day. "And I'm humiliated."

"Your brother loves you."

"He loves lording it over me. This is why I don't want him interfering. He

already has.” Deep rose stains her cheeks. “You’re here.”

“Actually,” I say, my voice dry, “That was my idea. He wants you back at the estate. He’s not wrong, but this is the next best thing, me being here. Shit’s happening, Mia, and the last thing in this world we want is for you to get hurt again.”

This time, she looks at me, and there’s a vulnerability in her eyes that takes my breath. “And who’s going to protect me from you, Christian?”

The words are a sucker punch.

“I’d never fucking hurt you, sweetness.”

“Not intentionally, but you’ll go. You’ll take your fill, and you’ll go.”

I don’t answer because I don’t know how. Instead, I stroke my hand over her cheek, kiss it, and then I get to my feet. “I won’t hurt you, Mia. I’ll see you in the morning. And sweetness?”

“Yes?”

“Thanks for dinner. Best ever.”

“Go away, Christian,” she says with a ghost of a smile.

This time, I go downstairs, kick off my shoes, and sleep on the sofa.



Sleep is not my friend. Every single noise wakes me when I do manage it, and by the time morning comes, I’m fucking exhausted.

I’m on my fourth cup of coffee when Mia comes down, dressed in black pants, a black top, and her hair pinned back. She eyes me as I pour her a cup and hold it out.

“You look like hell, Christian.”

The moment she says it, her cheeks stain red, and I know she’s thinking of the unfinished business between us.

“Restless night.”

She sips her coffee. “Well, I’m ready to go into the club when you are.”

“I’d love to think you’ve come around to my way of thinking.”

“No.” She narrows her eyes, wrapping her hands around the mug. “You did something to my car.”

“That works too. We don’t need to go in so early.”

“I do.”

“Not without breakfast.”

Now Mia looks at me with dislike. It's kind of hot. "I'm not hungry."

"Fine by me. Then we stay in."

I set down my mug and grab the weird breakfast grain bowl she has. It looks healthy. I dump that on the table along with the milk.

She mutters something but sits and sets about eating when my phone buzzes.

Diego doesn't bother with any formalities. "Got some information on Frank, boss. We know who he works for."

I grip the phone tight. "Who?"

"It's a small operation. Two-bit. The Riva gang. They're into hooking anyone they can on drugs by cutting them. They don't really come near any of our territories, or anything to do with the MC club."

"Go on," I say.

"But, see, about a couple of months before Frank got hired, they made a backdoor alliance. Took some uncovering, but they're working for someone Leo knows."

I run through names in my head. "Who?"

"Russo."



# *Chapter Fifteen*

MIA

I'm not sure what irks me most, that therapy today left me more tied up in knots inside, or Christian insisting on waiting for me on the entirely—according to him—premise my car isn't working.

The car he did something to.

Or, let's face it, he had one of the family goons do something.

And my brother turning up unannounced?

I can't even with that.

With a sigh, I look at the papers and receipts next to my computer at work and pick one up, trying to concentrate. But I just crumpled the top one in my hand. Damn it.

Everything is a mess.

The girls are jittery over what's happened to Ellie, and I don't blame them. With the attack happening so close to here, of course, they are. I know they're all thinking it could be them.

But I made sure that even during daylight hours, they're escorted here. And extended the escorting after their shifts not to cars but home.

It's small, but the least I could do. At least I got that set up with Reaper and Angel today. I should have done it the moment Ellie got hurt.

He doesn't knock, but I look up as Christian comes into my office. He leans against the wall, looking at me from behind low-lidded eyes. "Should you look so tense after your therapy?"

I try and control the twitch that runs like a live wire through me, lighting up at his words. "Should you be standing about when you have a job?"

"Sweetness." He smiles. "You're my job."

Those words don't make me feel better. Just like him knowing I was at therapy makes me angry. I don't know why it angers me, because he knows I go. It's just . . . I guess . . . him waiting for me.

That and the fact therapy doesn't seem to have any answer for a question in the shape of a man like Christian.

Or, as my therapist put it, maybe I don't know exactly what the question is that makes me struggle for an answer.

I glare at him. "I hear the local Burger King is hiring."

Christian laughs. I do not.

He's too close. Too far away. He can reach inside me and touch places no one should be able to. He can see me. All of me. And we haven't even been naked together.

We've had sex, and it's the most exposed sex. Hard and fast and deep and everywhere. And all my clothes are on. Yet I was so naked.

It doesn't make sense.

Sleeping with him, or should I say, having sex with Christian is a mistake. It was a mistake I can't let happen again. I'm a job. He just said so.

More than that, I shouldn't want to fuck him. And I don't know why he wants to have sex with me. I get the first time. He's a manwhore. But more than that? The things he said? Is that pity?

And why the hell do I feel guilty over the manwhore accusation? He's fucked his way through countless women. He doesn't have a history of relationships, either.

I breathe out, struggling to hold myself together.

Hell, I can hear my therapist in my head, telling me just to step back from it all and work on myself. Heal.

Yeah, right. With this man here? He rips things open, not suture them up. He's there when I don't want him to be. The man is a pain in my ass, and I need him gone.

"Nice try, but you're not going to get rid of me that quickly. Not even with such an enticing fucking offer." Christian folds his arms but otherwise doesn't move.

My mouth twitches, but I somehow control the smile. He's not funny.

"What do you want?"

"That's a loaded question. I want a lot of things. But right now, I'm going to settle on keeping you safe."

"I'm surrounded—"

"After all risks are neutralized, we'll talk about the other things that I want."

His words, the meaning, almost take my breath away. But I ignore them. "You know I'm surrounded by a whole lot of burly men with guns who'll keep me safe, right?"

"One of those men is the one you think is trying to push drugs."

I narrow my eyes. "Not think, know."

"Sweetness." It's a warning, and I rise.

"You need to get out of my office."

“Or what?” His gaze skims over me as I come out from behind my desk. “You gonna make me?”

“I don’t need this.” I rub a hand over my face.

“You’re shaking.”

I stare at my hand as I pull it away. Then quickly drop it to my side, bunching it in a fist. “Because this is all my fault.”

The words are out before I know it. Before I realize I’m thinking them.

He frowns, all amusement gone. “Why the fuck would you say that?”

“Ellie. I should have . . .”

“What? Tried to develop magic powers to stop it from happening? Fire the guy without evidence?”

“Maybe to the last one.”

“Because you keep saying you know?”

“I do.” I breathe out heavily. “So . . .”

Christian drops his arms, straightens from the wall, and takes a couple of steps toward me. “What? So, you should have fired him without knowing one hundred percent?” He moves closer. “Because even though I want to crush him for this, you’re right. If it is the wrong person, then you’re giving the game away to the right one to push it further underground.”

I frown. “What do you know?”

The innocence on his face is suspicious, just like his soothing and solicitous words. And he’s so close now I’m vibrating for a different reason. “Just what you’ve said.”

“Right, and you’re not looking into things. My brother being here, that’s not suspicious, either.”

Christian takes hold of my shoulders and his touch, hot and moreish, slides down into my bones. “He’s your brother. He cares.”

“I don’t trust either of you.”

“Yeah? Well, that’s just too bad,” he murmurs, his mouth skimming close to mine, making me melt inside. “This is what you’ve got.”

“A pain in my ass. Two of them.”

“Aww, sweetness, you don’t mean that about me.”

“Yes,” I say, my voice no more than a breath, as I arch my neck, his mouth sliding along the line of it, not quite touching. “I do.”

I hate myself for caving, for craving him.

“Yeah, but you fucking want me.”

“Christian,” I say, his mouth back at mine. “You’re the worst.”

“Flattery,” he whispers, “will get you everywhere.”

And he kisses me, his lips feathering against mine, a slow and sweet slide, and I moan, I can’t help it. His mouth is the most decadent thing I’ve ever had the pleasure to taste. And I want it.

I start to open for him as his lips come down harder, but something pierces the roaring in my ears, the seductive little cocoon he’s built.

Jerking away, I grab his arms, digging my fingers into the flesh beneath his shirt. “What the . . .”

Outside, in the rest of the office, is the rise of angry female voices and the music suddenly being silenced.

“Leave it.”

I let him go and step around him, going for the door. “Not on your life.”

“Fuck, Mia. They’re arguing, nothing else.”

“And you know this how?”

I pull open the door and start down the hall, Christian keeping up with me easily. “Because our men are here. And—”

“Leo.” I stop and shoot a glare at my brother who’s at the bar with a drink and chatting to or chatting up Lisa, who’s eyeing him like he’s Thanksgiving dinner.

“Just let it go,” says Christian. “Let the girls have it out, and we can get back to it.”

I whirl to face him. He’s so close it’s a wonder I don’t bump into him. “Not on your life. And are you giving me advice?”

“Maybe.”

“Go fuck yourself. They don’t fight like this, it’s something else.”

And with that, I spin away and go up to the stage area where the fighting continues, right until they see me.

“What is going on?” I look at them all.

Julia gives Annabeth a push. “She’s in my way.

Annabeth shoves back. “Am not. You just want the best spot.”

“Stop it.”

These are the headliners and they’re acting like schoolchildren. And . . . are Annabeth’s eyes glassy? I can’t tell under the lights. But I know what I have to do.

“Ladies,” I say, “congratulations. Do you know what today is? Drug testing day.”

No one dares make a complaint, but there are a few hunching in on

themselves in a self-defense move.

“Random day is today. You know the drill.” I turn to the bar. “Lisa?”

She looks up, straightening and flinging a bar rag over her shoulder. It’s early for her to be here, but maybe she’s trying to get things in order for a big weekend we have as the VIP room is booked out, or maybe she’s here because she’s involved in the drugs.

But the minute I think that, I dismiss it. I’m angry, I’m jittery, and it doesn’t help that Christian sets off all kinds of things inside me I don’t want touched. I trust her, always have, and she’s been exemplary.

She often comes in early. And always when we have deliveries or are approaching a big weekend or night. She runs the tests for me. And she submits to regular ones too.

I’m just looking for a punching bag, and I know it.

Nodding at her, I say, “Drug test.”

“Got it,” she says, coming out from behind the bar and approaching the girls.

My brother’s gaze follows her every move, and Christian— My heart swoops. Christian doesn’t even look at her. His gaze is on me.

And it makes me angry all over again.

“Don’t you all have something better to do?” I ask.

Leo smiles, lifting his drink. Probably bourbon, and from the looks, he’s barely touched it. Then again, he could drink half a bottle and not have it really affect him. I suspect the same for Christian too.

I need to stop thinking about that man.

Which is hard as he’s standing, looking at me.

“No,” Leo says. “I’m enjoying the view.”

Christian speaks. His voice is so low I think I’m the only one who can hear him. “Me too.”

“Maybe,” Leo says, “you shouldn’t hand out those tests right about now.”

“He’s got a point.” Christian then nods toward Andrew. “Where’s your friend?”

“He’s . . .” I frown.

Where is Frank?

“I don’t know. Maybe he switched shifts with someone.” He was here when I arrived, but now, he isn’t. He’d be with Andrew, so where . . .

Leo says, “He did switch. That’s what I heard. About . . . when was it? Oh, a few minutes after I arrived.”

“That seems strange,” says Christian. “Don’t you think?”

I glare at him and then at my brother. “People have things happen.” And now, they’re making me defend someone I don’t want to defend.

Leo nods. “And the test?”

“It’s in all their contracts. Random tests. No sex with the customers, no touching. No special favors for them. I don’t want drugs, and I don’t let them drink on the job either. Anything else you want there, Leo? Blood?”

He downs his drink and holds up his hands. “Calm down there, Mia.”

Christian winces. “Did you just tell her to calm down?”

“My sister, my rules.”

Christian shakes his head. “Your sister, your life in fucking danger.”

I look at them both. “I can do what I want. When I want. How I want here. I run this place, not you two. I don’t know where Frank is, and I don’t trust either one of you. If you will excuse me.”

Stalking off, I wave Andrew over. He hurries to my side. “Where’s Frank?”

“Said he wasn’t feeling good, boss. Switched with Mike, who’s been looking for some extra hours. Got a kid on the way.” Andrew blushes hard. “Mike. Not me.”

“Thanks.”

But he doesn’t go.

“Uh, look, I’m stepping out of line, but . . .”

He pauses, looks up to the ceiling, then over at my brother and Christian and back at me.

“I know I’m stepping out of line, but I don’t like him.”

“Christian? Not a fan either.”

“You’re not a fan of your boyfriend?”

“He’s not—” I stop myself. I’m not discussing my personal life or lack of one. “Or did you mean my brother? Because he’s not high on my list either.”

“Frank. I don’t like him.”

All my senses surge to life. “Why?”

Andrew shifts. “It’s not anything he’s done. I’ve been keeping a real good eye on him. It’s just something about him that doesn’t sit right with me. He doesn’t ogle or anything, and I haven’t seen him do anything wrong. I just get a feeling.”

“Thanks,” I say. “Keep an eye on him when he’s here.”

I turn, saunter past my brother and Christian, and go into my office.

They both burst in before I could even get halfway across the room.

Leo points at me. “We weren’t done.”

“We were,” I say.

“I just think,” says Christian. “That—”

“Enough.” I hold up my hands. “Frank apparently says he wasn’t feeling well. And I don’t need either of you giving me pointers on how to do my job, so get out. I’ve had enough.”

“Fine.” Leo walks out the door a little too readily.

I grab Christian’s shirt.

He grins, and I know I made a mistake. He’s way too close, and I’m touching him.

“I knew you liked it rough, sweetness. But your brother just left.”

“Go to hell, Christian.”

He grabs me and kisses me hard, fast, and deep. My head is spinning, my feet not steady as he releases me.

“Get out,” I say. “We’re done.”

Christian smiles as he goes to the door. He stops, turns, and looks at me.

“You’re wrong, sweetness. We’re not done. Not by a long shot.”



# *Chapter Sixteen*

## CHRISTIAN

“She’s gonna be fucking pissed as hell when she finds out,” I say to Leo as Nicolo drives.

“Mia’s always pissed off recently. I blame you.”

I ignore him and his little barb. I know what he wants. For me to step aside or ask for her hand. But it’s not that simple. I don’t know how I feel about Mia. I know I’ve never liked anyone like her, but it’s not as simple as my emotions.

It’s her.

Everything in her life is soaked in pain and the recriminations of her family. I’m part of that family. I can keep her safe, but Mia . . . doesn’t she deserve someone or something far away from this world?

She will always be a De Luca, but she could choose to go far away. She could—

Mia’s not about to go anywhere but where she wants to go. She’s a fucking pain in the ass, but honestly, I wouldn’t like her any other way. I just wish in this she’d back down.

Then again, it’s not like we’re telling her much. We don’t know much.

“I’m not sure this is a fucking good idea.” It’s a cloudless day, the sun beating down and the sky an endless blue as we move down the road and into the heart of the city. “Leaving Mia . . .”

Leo glances at me, drumming his fingers against the door where we sit in the back seat. “Mia’s fine. That guy Andrew? Reaper and Angel vouch for him. And we’ve got Tizio and Diego there to keep an eye on things. She’s in fucking cotton wool.”

“Yeah.” He’s got a point, but as Nicolo starts turning down streets toward the address we have for Frank, my stomach is lead. “This doesn’t feel right.”

“It’s a talk.”

The way he says it has the same connotations as him saying gun to head. Which is fucking fair enough. We’ll do what we need to do. I’m not normally feeling on edge, but I am now, and it makes my adrenaline rush a little higher inside. “What if a talk, as you put it, is the wrong move?”

“Fuck’s sake, Christian.” Leo glares at me. “Do I tell you how to do your job?”

“Depends. Like this one time, you were all up my ass about getting info out of Mizzoni, and—”

“I know you care about Mia.”

“She’s family.”

“Uh-fucking-huh. I know you care, but she’s my sister. I know what I’m doing, and I don’t feel good in any way about this whole thing. Not the fact this dude’s dealing, not the fact that girl’s in the hospital, not that note, and definitely not the fact Frank’s got ties with Russo people.”

“You think they’re making a move?”

He sighs. “They’ve wanted to for years.”

“By dealing a few drugs outta Hellfire?”

“Could just be this guy on his own. As I said, a talk’s in order.”

I nod. “We can do what we did with Smithson and friends a number of years back. Go in friendly-like, pretend we’re concerned about someone.”

“No one’s pretending,” he says in a quiet and deadly tone. “This is Mia. But smart idea.”

Finally, we pull up. This isn’t the nicest part of town. But it’s not the worst. A squat gray apartment building with some sickly-looking trees out front. I stare at it from the car, taking in the entrance, the surroundings, and whether or not this fuckface Frank will be able to make a quick getaway.

“I’m not sure we should do this, Leo. Feels wrong.”

He’s got his hand on the handle. “This guy goes home sick. I don’t give a shit about feeling right or wrong. I don’t trust the situation. And Russo’s name?”

The thing is, Russo hasn’t done much in years, and my feeling is if he’s going to make a move, this isn’t it. More a testing of the waters.

But I don’t need to say that to Leo. He knows. So, we get out of the car, head up to the building’s front door, and ring the buzzer.

We wait.



Three hours later and we’re back at Hellfire. Mia’s in her office, word is for her not to be disturbed, and none of us are happy.

Least of all me.

The whole fucking trip was a bust.

Not only was Frank the weasel not there, but the apartment was empty. As in vacated. As in the place served either as a front or he was only there for now.

My money's on the whole 'for now' bullshit. 'For now' could have been a year or a few months or whatever. But it was clear someone had been there. Just as clear whoever it was left in a hurry, like they'd done it before.

The fridge had food and beer, and the bed had been slept in. A few things remained in the bathroom. There were linens, towels, and some pieces of junk mail that told us nothing. But no clothes. No personal items.

I've been in places set to look like that, but no one had been there except to set the stage and maybe freshen it up.

But this didn't feel like that. It felt like whoever had been there lived there but disappeared quickly, professionally.

It doesn't bode well.

Mia doesn't know. And I'm not sure how to tell her. She'll be pissed off, but she's not going to take it as any warning.

Me? I'm no fucking closer to working out if this guy was doing the drugs thing on his own or for Russo. But Leo looks like a whole hurricane has settled on him. He hates the Russo family, and I don't pry. Maybe there's something to tell, or maybe it's just they had someone close to his sister.

That's not my concern unless he makes it my concern.

Mia is my concern. End of story.

Leo peels away from the corner of the bar he's haunting and presses something on his phone. He comes over to where I stand near the hall. We have every exit covered, but I don't like being too far from Mia. Something sits wrong in me and doesn't improve with age.

"Not a fucking thing," Leo says.

I glance at him. "No one's seen him or his car?"

"His car's three streets over from where he has his apartment. It's definitely in his name, there's a lease, and it's paid until the end of the year. But Frank has completely disappeared."

"Russo?"

They're very good at disappearing. But why make a move now is the million-dollar question. I need to get home and get working on this. You and Mia are not staying until closing tonight."

I huff out a breath. “Your sister will want to stay.”

“She got your fucking balls in her handbag, Christian?”

I eye him with sudden dislike. “No. I’m pointing out that she won’t like it.”

“I don’t care. You’re both coming to dinner tonight. Got it?”

“Hey,” I say, “you’re the boss.”



“What do you mean?”

“Sweetness, what I just said. We’re heading out that door.”

Her frown is full of fire, and it makes me hard. Pretty much everything about her makes me hard if I don’t keep myself reined in tight. “You might be my brother’s whipping boy, but—”

“What is wrong with your family? Just keeping the peace here, sweetness.”

She laughs. “No, you’re doing what you’re told.”

I narrow my eyes. There’s that, but Leo’s got a point. I know why he wants us to come for dinner. Considering he knows I can more than take care of myself, he wants Mia there to protect her.

And Mia knows it too.

I come up to her in her office and smooth my hands over her shoulders where we stand. The problem with wanting to placate her through touch is the world starts to melt and burn with awareness and a need that we both feel. I say both, because it’s there, lighting her eyes.

And her breath comes in short, uneven gasps.

“I’m doing what I need to do. Feed you, keep you safe. Or, you know, if you want to stay here, I can lock this door, strip you down, and fuck you all night long.”

Mia moans but shakes me off. “Fine, dinner it is.”



She’s quiet as I drive to the estate, and the more silence she gives me, the heavier and thicker the air grows with her fury.

“C’mon, sweetness,” I say, keeping my tone light. “Might as well get it

over and done with now.”

“What’s that, Christian? I’m not in the mood to murder you while you drive. I don’t feel like dying.”

“There’s a plus. Remind me to drive you around every time you feel like murdering me.”

She snorts. “That’s only going to ever work for a short while. One day I’ll come at you away from the car.”

“Anywhere, anytime, sweetness,” I say softly, fingers flexing on the wheel. “I’ll turn your murderous ways to my advantage. Use that anger for some really great—”

“Do you only think about sex?”

I laugh. “Around you? It’s a safe bet. But I was going to say exercise.”

“I’m not amused, Christian. I’m pissed off. In all ways. You lot don’t listen to me. You don’t think I can take care of myself. And you end up treating me like I’m a caged animal.”

“I’d lock you up if it would keep you safe.”

“You’d lock me up if you thought you could get away with it.” She crosses her arms, keeping the scarred side of her face averted from me. “And we both know it.”

Fucking hell, I’m a killer, a dangerous man, and she sits there, snubbing her nose at that and my authority like I’m nothing. Never in my life have I met a woman like her.

And maybe I just don’t want ever to let her go. She’s mine. I don’t know if it’s a forever thing, or a for-now thing, but I know I want to spend a small forever exploring her. Both body and mind.

Then again, maybe I’m losing my mind.

Who the fuck knows?

All I know is she ties me into knots I don’t know how to undo.

I check the rearview. Diego and Tizio are there, I recognize the car. They keep a respectful distance, but they don’t let a car between us.

“Mia, this is for your own good. The whole deal with this Frank stinks.”

“I know and I was handling it. I don’t need you guys involved.”

“Well, sweetheart, we are and this goes deeper.”

“Like how deep.”

“Like I’m not telling you.”

“I hate you, Christian.”

I laugh again at the loathing layering of her words. “No, you don’t,

sweetness. You loathe the fact you get wet around me.”

“And we’re back to sex.”

“Hey, I’ve yet to see you all naked and moaning for me.”

There’s a silence between us that lasts a beat because I’m pretty damn sure her sudden stillness is her going back to when she and my sister were taken. I don’t want her lingering at how she’d been kept naked and ready for those monsters, how I’m in fucking awe of her every second I even allow myself to go there.

But I don’t want her there.

I want her here and now.

“Moaning, begging for me, maybe—”

“It’s a wonder you’re not a walking dictionary of disease.”

“Not fair. I’m clean.”

“Uh huh.”

I don’t tell her I haven’t banged anyone since we found her. And no one’s come even close to catching my eye, especially after tasting her.

“You know, I think maybe I will get those chains for you.”

“You wish you could tie me down.”

“Now who’s on about sex?”

She turns and glares, and for a moment, our eyes meet before I force mine back to the road. “I wasn’t talking about anything sexual.”

“You were and you know it. Me tying you down is gonna be real, hot sex, Mia.”

“Does my brother know you talk to me this way?”

“Gross. Don’t drag your brother into this conversation.”

Something explodes, and Mia screams. I turn.

Fuck. Someone’s shot out the back window. “Get the fuck down, Mia,” I say as I hit the accelerator, changing lanes, a black car veering toward us. “Now.”

Whoever it is, a man hangs out the passenger window, my focus on the gun as I weave through the damn light traffic, flooring it.

My heart is slamming against my ribs. Not for me. I don’t give a fuck about me. But Mia. I need to keep her safe.

“You okay? Mia? Mia?”

“Yes.”

Another shot rips apart the world, and I swerve again, desperate to get more road between us and the fucking shooter. And where the fuck is Diego?

My phone in its holder starts to ring.

I don't need to look to see it's Diego. I recognize the tone.

"Answer it. Ask him what the fuck is going on."

She reaches up and grabs the phone, then after a few seconds, says, "Someone shot out their back tire, and Tizio says Diego swerved off the road and landed in a ditch."

Fuck. "Stay down." My hands tighten on the wheel. "It's going to get rough."

I throw myself into defensive driving mode.

I'll keep her safe, even if it kills me.

Because Mia is all that matters.



# *Chapter Seventeen*

MIA

I swallow a scream as the world explodes into noise around us. The broken glass, the gun, the squeal of tires, Christian's calming and hard voice.

Bile rises in my throat as I'm thrown against the seatbelt, staying down as far as I can, his phone gripped in my hand.

If I were with anyone else, I'd lose my shit completely, and even now, there are wild flashes of horror that hit my brain hard like bursts of light. Memories that sear my flesh like a flame.

Being taken from the club that time, the whole ordeal with Blake.

Christian's muttering words to try and explain what we're doing are punched with curses.

"I'm fine," I say because I don't know what else to say.

We're careening fast, high speed down the highway, and without him asking, I lift a shaking finger to his phone and hit Leo's name.

He answers on the fourth ring. "Chri—"

"It's me."

I quickly relay the information to him, what Tizio said and what Christian is doing."

"I'll send someone immediately."

The phone goes dead as I'm thrown hard against the seatbelt. "Leo—  
ow!"

"You good?"

"Leo's sending someone now. And I'm good." I suck in a sharp breath. "It's just a little bumpy."

"Fuck me, Princess Mia, next time we get fucking shot at, I'll ensure your delicate skin is wrapped first."

"See that you do."

"They don't call me Prince fucking Charming for nothing."

"No one calls you—oh!—that, Christian."

He laughs, but it's a harsh sound as he presses harder, and the car veers forward and to the left, around another vehicle, I assume.

I stay down, not that I think we'll get shot at again; Christian's too good at his job to let that happen. No, I stay down because I don't want him distracted at such a high velocity, and that's what will happen. He's too

preternaturally aware of me not to notice if I raise my head.

He keeps his foot down, and the lurch of us weaving in and out of traffic almost becomes hypnotic, until finally, he slows.

“L-Leo—”

“Mia, he’s already sent someone to cover us, and they passed us a couple of minutes ago. We’re almost at the estate. I think we’re good.”

But his hands don’t loosen on the wheel.

I start to raise my head.

“Stay fucking down. I said think, not know. And if anyone’s putting a bullet in your fine ass, it’s going to be me.”

“Sweet talker, asshole.”

“You bet. That’s me. You know, this is why you should be staying at the house here, or at the fucking apartment you insist on having. That’s closer, easier for us, harder for goons.”

“I’m not letting anyone control me.”

“Yeah? Looked at your life lately?” He mutters something else. “And what if we were going to your isolated come and murder me style country estate, sweetness? That’s an hour away. Lonely fuckin’ roads. I should pull over and spank the living daylights out of you.”

“Try it, and I’ll shoot you.”

“You don’t have your gun, and even if you did, I’d have it off you so fast your pretty head will spin.”

My chest tightens, and I sit up.

“Mia, get down.”

“Bite me.”

“Bite you?” he says, anger snapping through his tone. “Is that an invitation? Because I have to say, I’ve every intention of biting you and more.”

We’re at the estate for a dinner I most definitely do not want. The gates open, and Christian drives in.

When he pulls up, he turns and grabs my face and kisses me hard. I can’t stop myself from falling into him and kissing him back. It’s violent, a meeting of tongues and wills and passion. Of darkness, need, anger, and relief.

He releases me but pulls back only a bit. “You test the living daylights out of me, sweetness. I’m going to have you again. And I’m going to make sure you know who you serve.”

“Serve? I don’t serve anyone, you bastard, and least of all you.”

He traces my kiss-swollen lips with his fingers. “We’re going to have a lot of fun fighting this out, Mia.”

“No one’s fighting anything. I’m not yours, I don’t serve anyone, and this is lasting until Frank’s gone. Got it?”

“I hear words.” He kisses me again. “But you and me? This goes on beyond the reasons that brought me here.”

“Annoyance.”

His grin is swift, but it doesn’t come anywhere near reaching his eyes. “Protection, sweetness. Now, move.”

We get out of the car, and I grip the top of the door as my feet nearly give away. Thank goodness he’s too preoccupied to notice.

Christian walks around his car, muttering in disgust. He stops near me and shakes his head. “Motherfuckers. This car. I love this fucking car.”

“You’ll survive.” I go to take a step, but his hands stop me. “Let go. I want this night over and done with.”

“Don’t tell me what to fucking do, Mia.” His hand slides about my upper arm as he slams the door shut and pulls me toward the door. “And don’t think I didn’t see that. You know? The little wobble thing you did. This shit affects you more than you let on. You’re so strong you refuse to admit you can take bending a little, accepting help. It doesn’t make you weak. It shows your other strengths, and that you’re capable of asking for help.”

“Don’t lecture me.” I pull my arm free and stomp up to the door, pressing the buzzer.

Christian is right there, not letting me go more than a few inches away from him.

I press the buzzer again.

“I have keys.”

“I’m making a point.”

“That you don’t listen to a fucking word I say?” Christian asks.

It’s then my brother opens the door, face stony. Behind him is my father, who looks like he’s ready to unleash a thunderstorm on the world.

At least I’ll have Blake here, an ally. But Leo is blocking the way.

He says, “She never listens.”

Blake pushes past him just then, small, pretty, and glowing. Love, marriage, and motherhood suit her, and she pushes Christian away, wrapping me in a hug. “Thank goodness you’re all right.”

The air gets even heavier and tenser instead of lighter as Theo appears, that frozen demeanor of his dark and deadly. “Russo?”

“Shop talk later,” Blake says.

Theo melts. “Sure thing, Snowflake.”

“Are you okay?” My father looks from me to Christian, his gaze turning hard.

“I’m fine,” I say as Blake releases me, and my father hugs me. It’s a gruff hug, like he’s not sure what to do at that moment.

It drives me insane and makes me want to smile. He’s always a little at a loss when he isn’t sure if a female he loves is going to break or not.

Like the asshole Christian says, I’m strong. I’m not about to break. If I do, it’s letting the wrong people win, and dead or alive, they’re never winning. Ever.

My father looks at me and then at Christian, and his eyes narrow. “What’s this about you living with my daughter?”

“Protection,” I say. “Not that I need it.”

Blake rolls her eyes and grabs my hand, hauling me out of the foyer to her study. When we’re in the pretty room in blues and whites, she pours me a glass of wine and one for herself from the bottle on the desk, and we sit on the chaise longue.

Clinking her glass to mine, she says, “I prepared.”

“Thank goodness you’re here, or heads would roll.”

She laughs and takes a sip, flipping her long dark hair over one shoulder. “Rocco is sleeping and his nanny is upstairs, so I figured we could catch up.” Her eyes are kind but knowing. “How are you? Really?”

We have a shared past, from the kidnapping, and we both went through different nightmares. We’ve spent hours on the phone, and yeah, there were tears. But I’m past that now. I have therapy. She . . . she has my cousin, Theo, who is so in love with her. She and their son are the only things that can truly melt him. Who’s adorable.

“I’m good. I’d be better if everyone kept out of my life.”

Blake turns her glass between her hands. “They’re men. Big, strong men who don’t know what to do when someone they love gets hurt.”

I snort and take a swallow of the red wine. We don’t tend to drink white anymore when we’re together. That’s what we drank when they drugged us in the restaurant, but I don’t want to go there.

I’m so sick and tired of going there. Sick and tired of going to all those

bad places.

“My brother and father can take their love and apply it to me living my life.”

“And Christian?”

“He doesn’t love me,” I say sharply.

“If you say so.”

“Blake, he’s your brother, but he likes to sleep around. If they’re worried about my so-called virtue, they’re too late.” I stop, heat streaking through me as the unintended meaning of my words rings out.

I meant I’m no virgin, but I know how it sounded.

Blake, bless her, doesn’t tease, but she does hide a smile behind her glass. “You know, Christian . . . I’ve never seen him like he is around you. The first time he insisted on staying with you, that made sense, but this is the second time, and he got his way. And you two?”

“I’m an idiot, but I’m aware of his reputation.” I breathe in. “And I’m not looking for anything.”

“Not looking or don’t think you deserve it?”

I give her a sharp look. “I have enough therapy and opinions thrown at me.”

“I know.” She touches my knee. “I don’t mean . . . just, I see how Christian looks at you, even if you don’t. And he has since I’ve known you. It’s not sex.”

“Show me my nephew or second cousin, please?”

She smiles, and it’s stunning. “Always, but we can’t wake him!” Blake gets up, and I follow. At the door, she stops and says, “But don’t think this is over, Mia. It isn’t, not by a long shot.”

It isn’t. Not in the way Blake meant, either. But the men. My father and Leo somehow manage to hold off until after dinner drinks before the barrage starts, and it’s utterly humiliating.

The questions, the looks, the way Christian stands near me looking like I’m the prize.

I want to smack them all.

Blake isn’t there to save the day, either. She’s gone up to Rocco, and Theo wasn’t far behind. I’m wondering if, in this instant, Rocco isn’t a code word for sex because, as usual they were touchy-feely toward the end.

“Mia, your room is made up,” my brother says, “ready for you to move back in.”

“I’m not doing anything of the sort.”

But his gaze isn’t on me. It’s on Christian, who’s cool as anything and completely unreadable.

“Or are you staying with Christian?” My father is not subtle. “Because whether you are or aren’t, I have things I need to know.”

“You don’t need to know anything about my life,” I say.

“Mia.” My father’s tone is all imperious, and his gaze is on Christian. “What are your intentions, young man?”

“Young man?” I ask. “You’ve known him for a long time, and—”

My father glares at me for half a second. “Mia. Enough.”

I almost crush the glass in my hand.

“What,” my father says to him, “are your intentions with her, and are you going to marry her since everyone now knows you’ve moved in and are together.”

Oh. God. I shoot a look at Christian, who’s still standing there, like nothing in the world bothers him.

“Tell them it’s an act, Christian. We’re not together.” My face is burning. My father’s speaking both like I’m not there and he’s from some old film. It’s horrible. Embarrassing.

The Earth needs to open up and swallow these men.

Including my brother, who stands there, grinning, like this is the best entertainment he’s ever seen.

“Christian,” I say. “Please.”

Christian ignores me.

“Of course, I’m going to marry her.”

I’m up so fast I spill my drink, and I don’t care. Anger and horror streak through me. I look at them all and the grin falls away from Leo.

“If you think I’m marrying him, think again. I’m not. And how dare you all treat me like some maiden from yesteryear? I’m not your property, not Christian’s, and not yours, Dad. Or yours, Leo. So, you can all stick it where the sun doesn’t shine.”

My father spreads his arms. “Mia, I’m looking out for your future.”

“I can do that,” I snap. “And look at me. Look at me, because this is what some man will get. I don’t intend to be a pity prize. I’m not getting married. Not to Christian and not to anyone. Ever. In fact, I intend to be single for the rest of my life.”

And with that, I turn and spin on my heel, stalking up to my room.

# *Chapter Eighteen*



## CHRISTIAN

I catch Mia's arms as she reaches the top of the stairs.

"Let go," she says, trying to shake me off.

There's a hot fury moving through me, and her words, the meanings beneath them, are in my head. I meet her gaze, and it's as hot and stormy as I feel. But I narrow my eyes and shake my head. "Not on your life, Mia."

With that, I drag her with me, down the hall, past the guest quarters, and to where my rooms are.

She protests the entire way, and I ignore her as I kick open my bedroom door and pull her into my quarters with me.

Letting her go, I turn and push her against the wall, hand on either side of her head, not touching now, but holding her there anyway.

She's breathing hard, and so am I. The air cracks and sings around us, tight with the electric tension. "What the actual fuck was that about?"

"Me not wanting to marry you?" She angles her head up to me. "You don't want to marry me. Don't pretend you do."

I take a breath. "Don't put words in my mouth."

Her mouth curves in a vicious little smile. "So, you do want to marry me? And here I thought I was doing you a favor, helping you out of the embarrassing situation my family put you in." She considers me. "You don't want to marry someone like me, do you?"

Yeah, those fucking words and their meaning. Trust this woman to twist things around, to make it about how she's somehow lacking. And I'm sick of it. Her pain hurts me.

"I knew it—"

"Mia, what the fuck?" I shift closer as she makes to move away. I'm not letting her. Maybe not ever again. "You stood there and said you were never getting married. Not me."

"You were put on the spot. And for your information, why do I need to get married to you or anyone? Having a husband is not the ultimate goal. I have a career and I don't need a man."

"I'm not saying you have to get a picket fence and pop out kids and have a man, but that's not what that was about." I pause, take in her gorgeous face with the scar and the attitude she wears like the thickest makeup, or maybe

armor. “Was it?”

Mia closes her eyes. “Leave me alone.”

“Not on your life, Mia.” I keep my voice soft, the core solid steel. “And open your fucking eyes.”

“I’m just going to say your feminism that’s made of tissue paper.”

She shoves me, and I take a step back, but then she tries to dart away from me.

I’m sick to death of her running when she crumbles. I’m sick of her fighting me. I’m sick of the walls and the hurt she inflicts on herself. But most of all, I’m fucking sick of her thinking she’s not worth anything when she’s worth the entire world.

I push her into the door and come right up against her. This time, I pin her there.

“Mia. You never have to get married. Fuck, don’t have a boyfriend if you honestly don’t ever want one.” I ignore the knife edge those words have when I say them. A knife’s edge that slices into me. “But that wasn’t about you wanting to live life your way. That was you running away.”

She tries to turn away, but I take her face and keep her head there, her gaze on me. “You don’t know me.”

“I know you a lot better than you give me credit for.” I let her go, but my hand is right there, on the wall next to her scar. “So cut that bullshit.”

“Stop.”

“Mia, sweetness, come on. If you can tell me that wasn’t you thinking you’re not good enough, then I’m fucking gay.”

“I’ll buy you your first Barbra album, hon.” Her eyes flash pure fire.

I laugh. “We both know I’m not fucking gay.” I touch her face again, this time sliding my finger lightly along her scar. “Is it this,” I trace it down her body, sliding it between her legs, “or is it this that makes you think that?”

“Stop.” Her voice is barely a whisper.

“No.”

“Mia, you ran off like the devil was nipping. You really think you’re not good enough?”

“I never said that.”

“You didn’t have to.”

I move my hand against the heat there, and there’s too much denim, too many clothes. Way too many defenses in place.

She brings her face close. “Stop that.”

“Make me.”

She puts her hand on my chest like she wants to push me away. But her hand curls there, not pushing, like she’s waiting and in her eyes there’s a struggle. Silent, real.

I’m probably a sick fuck, because it turns me on. Not the why, but the fact there’s a struggle. The fact she wants me. I’m probably a real sick fuck because I want to break her down and rebuild. I want to take what’s mine and damn everything else, even though I’m trying to make her see exactly what and who she is.

A woman any man would want.

But I push my mind back to the issue at hand.

“Mia, your father is old-fashioned, like your brother. Me? I don’t give a fuck about a ring.” But I’m starting to wonder if that’s true. Because Mia would look sensational in nothing but a diamond ring. “I give a fuck about you.”

Her fingers bite into me. “You just want to fuck me.”

“Been there, done that.”

“But you don’t want me.”

“Don’t put words in my mouth.”

She tilts her head to one side, eyebrow rising in a dare. “You don’t want to fuck me?”

I skim my lips close to her ear. “I’ve fucked you hard, Mia, and I want to do it again and again and again. So, do I want to fuck you? Yeah, I do, we both know it. But we’re not talking about sex. We’re talking about you and what happened out there.”

Her breath is uneven. “I put a stop to you all talking like I was brainless chattel.”

I trace the curve of her ear with my tongue. “You ran.” I pause. “From me.”

“I’m not here for you to pity fuck or to be a notch on your bedpost.”

I could break her pretty neck for that.

She said as much back there, in the library. But I need her to fucking stop. I need her to see.

“You test my last nerve. You’re none of those things and you have to stop with that bullshit. I told you the only reason I give a fuck about anything that happened to you, or anything done to you, or you did to stay alive is you never wanted it. You were forced against your will and desires and wants.

You were hurt. That's what I care about. Not a scar, not any of that."

Her eyes glitter. "Not that I was raped?"

I close my eyes and lean my forehead against hers. "I would bring them back and kill them over and over for you and you know it."

Raising my head, I look at her again.

My words don't seem to have penetrated because that glitter has turned to desperate flame.

"I'm a notch. You'll get sick of me."

"Bullshit. We have something."

Her mouth thins. "And what's that?"

There's something in her eyes, down in the depths that I can't grasp, or maybe, I don't want to. It's a loaded question. I'm not sure I have anywhere near the answer she seems to be searching for.

"I don't know," I say. "But I know you belong to me, with me, and you deserve to be shown who and what you are. Starting now."

I slide my hand around her throat, and I lower my mouth to hers, taking. She opens. A flower. Pure sweet decadent heat and there's something in there, a dark bite, a slight bitter edge that makes her addictive. She's the kind of complexity a man could lose himself in. She gives and pulls away and gives again, and it's so intoxicating my head spins.

The kiss deepens and grows carnal, but I break it. Her uneven breathing music to my ears.

"Kiss me back, Mia, like you mean it."

"I don't—"

"Here's the deal. You lie to me. You hide behind those lies, pull them around you like some kind of cloak. You say stop and no, so I do. But not tonight. Tonight, when you say that, I'm going to keep going. So, if you want me not to, if you want me to stop, we're going to use another word. Banana."

She sucks in a breath and her fingers on my shirt coil hard. "Banana?"

"Yes."

"Are you planning on getting kinky?"

I laugh, sliding my hand down, deliberately over her breast, thumbing her nipple that hides behind the layers of material—thin cotton and what feels like lace. Then, I shift downward again, over her ribs, to her hip, and around to the front of her jeans, where I pop the button and slide down the zipper.

"No. Not tonight. But tonight," I say, slipping my hand into her panties to toy with her clit, to whisper a finger down along her hot, wet snatch, "tonight

I'm going to show you who you belong to. Just remember that word, if you say it, I'll stop, no questions asked. I'll stop if I'm fucking you. I'll stop if I'm going down on you. I'll stop if I'm about to enter you or come. But only with that word. You got that?"

I'm playing a very dangerous game here, it's borderline wrong, but I know it's right.

"Mia?"

"What?"

"You got that, sweetness?"

"Banana."

And with that, it's all go.

Until of course, she uses it.

"Take off your fucking clothes, sweetness. Slow. For me."

I'm slipping my finger back and forth on her wet pussy, keeping the pressure light, moving up to her clit and not quite touching. I do this over and over. And fuck, I don't know if she realizes, but she's pushing into my hand with subtle shifts of her hips.

"No."

"Do it, sweetness."

I come in, pushing one finger into her as I bite down on her throat and suck her soft, tender flesh.

She moans, spasming.

Fuck, she's so responsive. And I get the feeling with the helpless little opening and closing of her hand on my chest, that this is new for her. This loss of control, this hyper responsiveness.

Not ego talking. Just naked truth.

Because it goes both ways.

She makes me so fucking sensitive, so aroused all the time.

"Do it, Mia."

This time I pull back, taking my hand. And she glares at me, but with shaking fingers, pulls off her T-shirt, fast, throwing it down. Then she shoves down her jeans.

"I said slow."

"I don't care."

"Now the panties and the bra."

It's utter loathing and need and fear and lust that's in her glittering eyes as she unhooks her bra and drops it, then slides off her panties.

Now, it's my turn not to be able to breathe properly.

Like this, I know she's mine. And she's glorious.

I don't think, I drop to my knees, hands on her hips as I push her thighs apart with my head, and then I lick her cunt, savoring the taste, the ripple of desire that passes through her.

I start to lick, bite, kiss, and suck. All soft and gentle, learning her, listening to what her body tells me. The tenseness that makes me back off. The melt and sigh that makes me keep something up just so.

I delve into her with my tongue, then I slip my hand from her hip, keeping the other there, her moans music as I push one then two, then three fingers into her.

And she's trembling now, grabbing me. Pushing, pulling. "No, stop. Please."

I almost do, but she doesn't use the word, so I keep it up.

"Fuck." I suck her clit, laving it with my tongue, the little nub swollen, as I finger her in time with each stroke. "No, please. No. Christian."

This time, I stop and raise my head.

The violence in her eyes makes my cock so fucking hard I might come in my pants.

"I didn't say it, you asshole. You bastard. Fuck. I hate you. Please, please, Christian."

Laughing against her sweet and glorious pussy I go back to town, licking and sucking and fucking her harder until she shatters.

Her orgasm rips through her, and she clenches down on my fingers, her pussy so fucking tight in its convulsions. She's rubbing and pushing into my face, riding the wave, her moans turning into cries, and then she tenses and goes almost boneless. I lick her, making her moan and try and pull away.

I'd love to push her past that too-sensitive moment. But I don't. I have one barrier down, so many more to go.

Rising, take her mouth in a deep and hungry kiss and she's flowing into me, all hot softness and she kisses me back.

A man could fucking come from that kiss.

But I turn us, pulling her into me, wrapping her around me, her nakedness erotic against my clothes. That's all going to be explored another day. There will definitely be other days. A lot of them. A taste of her leads to more hunger. More itches, and more avenues to explore.

"Get on the bed, Mia. Spread your legs for me."

“Fuck you.”

“That’s the idea.”

She hesitates. She wants to say no. To say stop. But she doesn’t want to use the word, banana. I can see that. It’s easy to say the others. But the one I gave her? She knows I’ll walk away and she wants this as much as I do.

Even if she’s fighting herself about admitting it.

“On. The. Fucking. Bed.”

She does it, and parts her thighs, laying back. But she’s watching me as I strip. Then I crawl up over her and begin the worship of her all over again. I kiss and taste her skin. I love her soft breasts with those gorgeous hard pink nipples. I suck, bite, kiss, and lick them, and then I move down lower, all the way down to her feet and back up.

I’m hard. I want her with a desperation I can’t even describe.

But I know they violated her. And I want to wipe them out. From every part of her.

“Do you trust me, Mia?”

“No.”

“Remember your word?”

She glares. “Yes.”

“Good.” I come down and kiss her softly. “Do you trust me, sweetness?”

“Christian . . .”

It’s enough.

“Turn over. On your knees.”

She does and I kiss my way over her body, along her spine, her ass, and then I slip my fingers down, dipping into her pussy. Fuck she’s so wet.

I know what I’m going to do.

Pulling my fingers from her, I play with her asshole. Her little moans, protests, and sighs whisper over me as I ease a finger into her, then two, stretching her open.

“Christian. No!”

I pause. “No? Or banana?”

She’s silent. “No, I . . . oh, God . . . please . . .”

I go back to what I’m doing. I start to move my fingers in her, back and forth, savoring that different tightness. “You belong to me.”

“Stop.”

“You’re mine. You belong to me. Every fucking part of you, even this.”

“Christian . . .” She’s slowly pushing back against my fingers, and it’s

like a vice tight around my cock the give of her will. The crumble of her wall.

“Sweetness . . .”

I pull my fingers out of her and line up my cock and ease into her so slowly, giving her time, giving her every chance to say banana. She doesn't. She doesn't speak, just those sharp, short breaths. I slip my other hand around to the front and start to tease and play with her clit, her pussy, and she moans, pushing back and then I'm in. All the fucking way.

Mia is mine. Completely and totally.

I need her to say it.

“Tell me you belong to me, sweetness.”

“No, don't make me say that. Just . . .”

I pull back and then push in. I fuck her long and slow and deep. I can feel her start to come and I say it again as I start to drive home into her. “Tell me you're mine.”

“I'm yours.”

With that, she comes and I unleash inside her, marking her as mine. There's still one more to go. I need to own her mouth. But she's mine.

And all is good in the world.



# *Chapter Nineteen*

MIA

Things are shifting out of my reach, way out of my comfort zone.

I want to say he violated me physically, and mentally last night, but he didn't. Christian gave me an out. An easy one. But to say it would have meant . . .

I don't know what it would have meant except I wouldn't have had such pleasure.

But I'm pinned in and fear licks at me. Fear I'll lose myself. Fear he'll see the scarred, used woman who isn't worth it.

Christ, I let him fuck me every single way he could think off. Every single hole I have.

And every second of it was a pleasure unlike any other.

After anal sex, he held me, kissed me, made me melt, and stirred, and stoked the embers inside into a small fire for him.

Christian knows what to do. He held me like I was some prize and the world knows I'm anything but.

Hell, I've slipped down to the bottom again. I'm questioning and self-blaming like I did when all that bad shit happened to me. And now I sound like I'm my own therapist.

I sit in the living room, the one that's tucked away in the back with the big bay windows, and watch the dogs jump and play on the grass in the early morning sun. Christian was sleeping when I snuck out and to my room to shower and throw on a dress from the clothes I keep here.

If my closet held an old-fashioned suit of armor, I'd be wearing it.

Not that it would stop Christian.

He made me say I'm his.

I close my eyes and pull my knees up and drop my head against them.

After that intimate sex, he took me into the shower and washed me, and then we kissed and he had me again against the shower wall, my legs wrapped high around his narrow hips, my fingers buried in his wet hair, pulling as he pushed me over the edge again.

And made me say I'm his.

Again.

Then, later, he told me to get down on my knees and blow him.

I did it because I wanted to taste him with a desperation I've never felt before. My safe word never came out. I didn't want it to. I said no. I said stop. I fought him. I pleaded. I begged him to take me. I devoured his cock as best I could because the man is big, thick, and the control I had when I was on my knees made my entire body sing.

I was electric.

I can still feel little shimmers of it now.

When he was in my mouth, my throat, I controlled that tiny piece of his fate. Whether he came or not right then was my power. How he came, when he came, that was mine too.

And in that moment, I was his. He was mine. I could pretend the world was a different place.

He came in my mouth with such a helpless, violent unleashing that it rocked me to my foundations.

I did that.

To Christian Bandoni.

He wanted me so much he let me do what I wanted to him.

After that, I took it. My protests were a thing that belonged to another world. And I rode him. I made him eat me out.

Then we fucked again. This time it was slow and deep and like souls coming together.

That's all in my head, of course, because that shit belongs to other people and he's just trying to force me into saying I'm his because he likes control. And . . .

I'm scared.

He stripped me so naked, there was nothing much except the ugliness, the bones and flesh, the imperfections.

He stripped everything from me and made me admit I wanted to be his.

But I'm not.

I can't be.

Right?

Before I can even begin to try and formulate any kind of answer, there's a knock on the door. My skin pricks before Christian walks in.

Heat burns in my cheeks as he does, he's even more devastating to look at. Heartbreakingly gorgeous and dressed all in black.

I expect him to be gloating, an air of confidence like he won. But instead, his gaze is unreadable beneath the worry, and in his hand is a phone.

“You okay?”

“I don’t know.” I stare at him for another second before looking away to study my feet in their red DC sneakers. “I feel . . .”

“Like you’re mine?”

“Violated.”

There’s the smallest smile that whispers over his mouth. “No, sweetness. It’s why we had the safe word.”

“Christian.”

For a second, when he sighs, I think he’s paying heed to my warning, but he’s not. He comes over and holds out my phone.

“I’m sorry, Mia. I answered your phone.”

“You have no right—”

“Mine, sweetness, remember?” He sits next to me and I sigh now, starting to lean and melt into him against my will. “You’re mine.” Christian bites my shoulder. Then he rubs his cheek there.

“Who rang?”

He straightens and I drop my legs and turn. “The security company. Reaper. Seems there was a fire in the early hours.”

My heart is now slamming hard against my ribs as my stomach turns to lead.

“At Hellfire.”



It takes forever to get there. I sit in the seat of the borrowed car, Christian behind the wheel.

“Mia, talk to me.”

“What do you want me to talk about? How you forced me? How my life just literally went up in flames?”

Christian thumps the dash so hard I jump. “I didn’t fucking force you and you know it. Safe word? Remember? You wouldn’t use it.”

“You violated me.”

“Bullshit.”

“It’s not.” I try and find the words, but my mind is in a million pieces, stretched in so many directions. “Not physically, but you took advantage.”

“Of what, Mia? The fact asshole monsters raped you?” He pushes the

words through clenched teeth, like he doesn't want to say the words, like it makes him dirty.

And that's everything I fear.

That I dragged him down into the muck with me. Where it's okay to play but not to live.

"If I thought anything we did last night and this morning would be like that I would never, ever have touched you. You're mine and you know it. You could have used the word and I'd have walked away. You know that."

I want a fight. "Do I?"

"Yes."

He's right, and I hate that. I practice breathing slow and steady and calming, but I'm a mess inside. I feel that chaos rushing in my veins. "Christian . . ."

"We'll talk about this later, sweetness. Take your time."

And now, he's being understanding? Sweet? Patient? Who is this man? I'm glad I'm sitting because the ground beneath my feet isn't solid anymore and it keeps moving about. I curl my toes in my shoes.

"You want to call Angel or Reaper?" he asks.

"They know we're coming."

"Yep. At least no one was hurt. The fire was after hours."

I don't tell him after hours when I'm sometimes there, working until almost daylight and then going to the apartment to sleep or out to my property if I'm not coming in that day. Working until then to keep the demons at bay. Working when no one knows I am.

It's a stupid game, apparently dangerous because while I thought no one knew I did that, someone did.

Or else they didn't and I'm jumping to conclusions.

When we pull up there are some motorcycles there and a car. The gravel crunches beneath my feet as Christian leads me in. Smoke hangs heavy in the air, and the back half of the place is blackened, but Hellfire is still standing.

"Talk about an appropriate name," I mutter.

Christian's hand is warm and comforting on my upper arm. I don't even try and untangle the conflicting emotions of that with the need I had to get away, to strike out and push.

Seeing this is real.

"Boss." Andrew is there, worry etched on his face.

"Andrew," I say. "Did anyone see anything?"

“No, I wasn’t on yesterday.” He says this like the fire is his fault and I pat his arm as we go in.

Water puddles the floor and voices ring out from my office. As we go past the bar, and down the hall, Christian greets the guys in there.

Angel is sitting on my desk and Reaper stands, legs apart, arms crossed and glowering. I know the three others who are going over a report. They step out, clearly there to make sure I’m okay, wanting to see that with their own eyes.

I know what a lot of people think about the men in a motorcycle club, but this lot are cubs. To me, anyway. Like Christian, Leo and Theo, they will all kill with their bare hands if they have to and if their property is threatened.

This is their property and I’m considered a sister to them all.

Christian looks completely relaxed, but there’s something in him he’s keeping on a tight leash, something that prowls and bristles with dark power. It isn’t aimed at them. It’s aimed at who did this.

“Thank fuck you’re okay.” Reaper says this to me but his gaze is hard on Christian. “This was arson, pure and simple.”

Angel raises a brow. “He means hello. But yeah, whoever did this didn’t try and hide it. Arson.”

Christian gives my arm a squeeze before letting go. “Let me fucking guess. Fucking Frank.”

Reaper is still looking at him. “He didn’t sign the note, but we think so. And it was aimed at Mia.”

“I’m here, you morons,” I say. “It’s bad enough the entire De Luca clan have lost their minds and turned into a bunch of raging Neanderthals, I don’t need the lot of you doing the same.”

“Mia . . .” Reaper drops his arms and comes over, touching my scarred face lightly. “We’re exactly that. But we’re not failing you again.”

“Give me the note.” Christian takes it when Reaper holds it out. His gaze scans it. “Fucking hell. ‘Cunt, because you didn’t stay out of it.’”

My cheeks burn. “Give me a weapon and I’ll take him out myself.”

“You think,” Christian says turning to me, “you can find if when we can’t?”

“Stop underestimating me.”

“Invite me to the wedding,” says Angel, earning my scowl, “we’ve got other things to deal with.”

Reaper blows out a breath. “Christian told us your plans for what you

want to do.”

“What I . . .” I stare at them all. “Burlesque? One day. Down the road. I like working here, and I love working for you.”

“We were planning,” Reaper continues, “to hand this over to you. Had the paperwork ready. We figured you could turn this into your dream or do what you want with it and we can have another strip club. Upscale, like this.” He shakes his head. “It’s going to take a lot to rebuild. Christian, whatever you need, we’ll be there for back up.”

“Thanks,” he says to Reaper and Angel. “I’m going to be killing this bastard for this, and whoever helped him. I know what this means to Mia.”

The other two look at each other and excuse themselves and Christian draws me into his arms. “I know, sweetness. The fact your cousins were gonna give this to you, it means something. You did good. And you will keep doing that. I’ll help you fix this and make it better than before.”

He says this like he’ll be hanging around. It’s a lie. But right then, I hold it tight. I’m reeling from what happened here. The sex? I’ll have to face it and my emotions soon, but right now, this is something I can do, something I can handle.

“You told them.”

“I followed you, and running burlesque? Not gonna lie. I’d love to see it.” A wry smile breaks through the hard shell of his anger and heat licks in my belly. “See you run it, see what you do, not the girls. Maybe if you gave me a private show—”

“Christian,” I say quietly. “I’m not ready. I’m barely hanging on to things.”

“I know.”

“Not . . .” I close my eyes. “Not like that. It’s this. The place was everything. It got me through. This place which sounds strange, but it’s true, this place and Blake and therapy, and now someone tried to kill it. And I have to take care of the girls, my staff—”

“You will. Everyone will help, Mia. But first, I have a man to find and kill. If you’d been here.”

“I wasn’t.”

He just looks at me. “Mia, I’m going to take to you Leo’s. And then, when this is done, we talk.”



I curl up in the car on the ride back. Christian is on the phone to his men. Orders fly, cold threats are passed along. Plans are made. I tune out.

That look he gave me? I don't know what it meant when I said I wasn't there. Like he knew. But I don't know how, so I shift my head to the thoughts of a new future.

It's weird, but the blessing from Reaper and Angel, the fact they trust me enough to give me the place means it all lies ahead.

Or did.

No, this fire is a setback. And Christian—I can't go there. But as I cast him a look, I wonder if I've been wrong, if it's not just owning me or a big notch, but something more.

Again, I can't go there. Instead, I think about the future, a work future, one where I turn the place into my ultimate dream. I can see a string of burlesque clubs, old school style. Feathers and sensuality and people dressed up to see.

When we pull up my brother is waiting, my father, too. I just leave them to it, and Christian haunts my thoughts.

I grab a soda and head back, hand on the door when I hear my name. I pause.

"Two notes?" My father says. "Leo told me about the first, but the second?"

"Good thing I stepped in when I did," says Christian. "I've been having her watched since she refused to let me stay first time and she used to stay after hours."

Something slams. And then Leo speaks. "She could have been there."

"No," says Christian, "she never knew I had her tailed to an inch of her life. I told you I'd keep her safe, by any means possible."

My father growls. "You should have married her."

I've heard enough. Tears burn in my throat as I turn and stalk off.

All a game, I think. All a fucking game.

To keep me safe.

I hate Christian.

With everything I am.



## *Chapter Twenty*

Christian

I talk more with Leo and his father, talking them down from coming with me. My fight, my woman. I don't add the last part.

No. Instead, I just say we need to make sure Mia doesn't do something stupid and since it's fucking Mia, it'll take the small army that's them to keep her safe and in one place when I'm gone.

"I should go," says Leo.

Raising my brows, I look at him. "I didn't tell Mia, but Reaper and Angel have a lead, and I've got Diego and Tizio out on it."

Someone opens the door, but I keep my gaze on Leo.

"I'm joining with Nicolo, Leo, and you can't stop me. We're going to get him, bring him down. We know it's this fucking Frank." And I want to kill him.

"You need someone to keep you in line," says Theo, who came in a few minutes ago. He leans against the wall, face ice. "Like me."

I shake my head. "I can do this."

Leo glares. "Take Theo."

"Fine." I know when I'm beaten, and the longer we argue, the more time is wasted. "Let's go."

We head out the door of the room and down the hall to the foyer. I come to a stop. Mia is sitting on the third step leading upstairs, can of soda by her side and her phone in her hands.

"Sweetness?"

"Ellie's mom called. She's awake. I want . . . I want to see her." She's looking at me like I betrayed her.

This woman drives me fucking out of my mind. “No.”

“I’m not asking permission.”

“Too bad. You need it.” I stalk over to her. “You can go, just not now.”

She looks past me to Theo. “Blake and I can go to the hospital send someone with us if you must, but I’m going.”

“No,” he says. “You’re not going alone and I sure as fuck am not about to put my woman in danger. Or you. Listen to Christian, Mia. We’ll let you know when it’s safe.”

She looks back at me like I’m the spawn of Satan. Like I made Theo say this. And she knows, she fucking knows he isn’t about to let Blake go. Not if there’s the slightest chance of danger.

Mia presses her lips together. “Asshole.”

“Message received, sweetness. We’re going to take care of that that fucking piece of trash,” I say. “And then, when I come back, we’ll talk.”



“Okay, why is Mia so fucking pissed at you?” Theo asks, after waiting until we hit the road.

With a sigh, I switch gears. “Ask your damned cousin,” I say.

He laughs and shakes his head. “I’m asking you.”

“It’s complicated.” I narrow my eyes.

“Love then?”

“Fuck off Theo. Or I’ll find my sister another husband.”

Now he really laughs. “She loves me.”

“She’s young, she’ll get over it.” I grip the wheel tight, and my chest is tight, too.

I’m not worried about the whole Frank shit. We’ll get him, we’ll find out what the fuck he’s been up to and why he’s targeting Mia. And if he’s working for others? Fuck that. We’ll find that, too.

Time has come and gone for us to play the waiting game.

Anyone in our world would see the fire as an act of war.

Perhaps the first steps into the battleground, but an act of war. And I intend to take this guy out and enjoy myself for Mia. For all she’s had to endure.

God forbid if I find out he had anything to do with her rape.

“Where was he seen?” I ask Theo.

“Someone saw him going coming from a seedy hotel just out of town. With his ugly ass photo circulating, he either left and came back or I figure laid low until now. He thought Mia was gonna be there. I’m guessing from the note, he didn’t care which. It was sent to Reaper.”

I nod. “Ballsy.”

“Fucking stupid.”

“That, too,” I say.

“But yeah, this fucker was spotted heading out to the gas station near the hotel for cigarettes, malt liquor and snacks—”

“A real upscale dude.”

“He was seen, caught on the security, and spotted heading back. The place is surrounded. He’s on MC territory. And ours.” With those words from Theo, we fall silent.

We arrive at the hotel and I park, closing my door, gun at the ready. Theo is at my side and another car pulls up with Diego and crew.

The group of us head in, right to the room.

I kick open the door.

Frank is in his underwear and I’m about to take him down when Diego bursts in and barrels past me. He knocks Frank flat on his ass with a punch to the face.

“Really?” I ask as the other men drag him away.

Theo is still next to me, gun lowered and we both look at Diego.

Diego shrugs. “He hurt my car.” He shrugs again, “So I hurt him. A little.”

Okay, yeah, I get that. With a signal, we all roll out. The men and Theo with Frank and I go with Tizio via the front desk, and Tizio drops the manager some cash to have not seen anything.

It’s easy enough, this kind of place will see or not see anything for the right amount, and from the look on the guy’s face, it’s definitely the right amount.

Our package bundled, we head to our building, the one with our offices and a bunch of legit businesses.

Bypassing the security and front desk of legit people, Diego clears the way for us, and we take Frank down to the basement.

The men chain him up and Theo starts to peruse his weapons of choice.

I slide on my special studded leather gloves and lay into him, making

Frank groan and cry out. Then he passes out  
Theo and I exchange glances.

“Weak,” I say.

“This isn’t going to be as much fun as I’d like,” says Theo as he dumps ice water over Frank, then sets to him with a hose of cold water in the face until he wakes.

I grab his head and make him look at me. “Real nice,” I say, “going after a girl. Real fucking manly.”

“You think this is gonna be a cake walk?” asks Theo, “think again, mother fucker.”

“Frank? You like selling drugs to girls? I punctuate each word with a punch, making him howl. “Beating them?”

I’m guessing he was behind Ellie’s hospitalization. It doesn’t take him long to answer.

“That little whore, Ellie?” Frank shakes his head as Theo hones a knife in front of him. Frank’s eye is swollen shut, and he’s bleeding from where I’ve punctured the skin with my gloves and we haven’t even really started.

This is just a burst of adrenaline talking. I’ve seen it before in men. And I don’t think this one is going to last.

“Ellie.” I hurl a right hook into his face, ripping into his cheek with my glove, knocking his head back against the wall he’s chained to with a sickening crack, and knocking out a tooth.

The ricochet of the punch’s force rolls up my arm. Damn it feels good.

He spits out blood, voice slurred. “She was gonna tell.”

“So, you hurt her?” I ask.

“Big man,” says Theo.

“Real big,” I say, pulling the gloves off and looking at the gleaming array of instruments laid out.

I let Theo carve a little with his knife and Frank screams out a small whine. I pick up pliers.

“So, big man, why target Mia?” I ask, my voice even and cold.

Through the bubble of blood in his mouth and the meaty cheek and the bleeding wounds placed just so by Theo, he laughs. The fucker actually laughs. And that tells me everything.

He knows he’s not getting out.

And he has a message.

But here’s the thing, we’re gonna listen and get him to talk and then?

He's going to beg for death. Pray for it. And maybe, just maybe we'll keep him here to play with.

I haven't decided. It's going to depend on what he has in him to hold out.

This man didn't rape Mia, didn't touch my sister, or carve up my sweetness. But he dared to try and hurt her. To burn her. He hurt her by hurting one of her girls. And that wrapped up with the fact I can't punish the dead means I'm going to really make him pay.

Yeah, I can be a sadistic son of a bitch when I choose.

And I fucking choose.

How much he suffers and for how long will depend on how easily he talks. How long he can last.

Because while I want revenge on a different level to the crime, this man might not last when he gives the message. I hope so. But some just don't. Still, early days.

I take the pliers and pull out another tooth, and then I toss it. This time, I remove two fingernails and then I stop.

He's whining again, and I need him to talk.

"Mia," I say.

"That cunt," he manages to push out, "got served because of a broken deal. "

I exchange a look with Theo. He shakes his head.

"What deal?" I ask.

But the man has passed out.

Fuck. We slap him awake, but all he does is moan and make wordless sounds and suddenly the need to be the one to kill him goes. He's gone and given up. And in that second, I know no matter how long I torture him or keep alive, it won't turn back time, it won't stop my sister being hurt. Won't stop Mia's rape.

I'm utterly disgusted in this guy. "Christ, thought the fucker would have more in him."

I punch Frank, then I take the knife from Theo and slice off a finger.

The man howls and his head slumps.

Theo dumps more ice water on him. "He's not going to be fun."

"Who?" I smack the man. His one good eye flutters open. But it's unfocused, the pupil blown. "Who the fuck do you work for?"

"Russo." And then he's gone again.

"All yours," I say to Theo.

Theo grins and preps his tank of liquid nitrogen. “I was hoping we could spend hours, but this guy’s gone. So, might as well finish him off.”

We can always tell when they let go. And this one? I could wait and bring him back and torture him over and over and spend days and weeks doing it, but he’s not those monsters. Just a lackey who fucked with the wrong person.

It’s not going to be a nice death, but he’s not going to beg for his life. Guess he’s not as tough as he thought.

As for me?

I’d rather be with Mia than down here.

And if this came from Russo, then I need to know what this fucking deal is. So, this isn’t done. We need to get back and work out the next move.

I glance at Theo and nod. “Do it.”



When we’re back at the estate, we relay the info, and there’s a restlessness inside me, because all I want is Mia. I want to see her. I—

I need to get my fucking shit together. We’ve showered and cleaned up and our crew is removing the remains of Frank.

“We ended him,” I say, “or rather, Theo finished him off. He was just a cog.”

“Yeah.” Theo looks at his cousin and uncle. “Russo.”

De Luca rubs his face, looking old as his son, nephew and I look at him.

“What?” I say, voice hard. “What is it?”

I’m walking a fine line and I don’t give a fuck I’m speaking to the old head of the clan. This is my sweetness this fool put in danger. Or, at least, I think he did.

He shakes his head. “It’s my fault.”

“Dad?” Leo’s frowning.

De Luca raises his head. “There was a deal, and arranged marriage made for Mia with the Russo family. It was a long time ago, before the heinous things they did came to light, before I realized what it was they wanted; not an alliance, but our business.”

I can read between the lines. He doesn’t think she’d have survived the marriage.

Curling my hands into fists I wait for him to continue.

“She was just a child and it wasn’t set in stone. Not in my mind,” the old man says. “They saw it differently and I broke ties, ended that deal. I will not and would not allow a Russo, especially Micah Russo to overthrow my son. To hurt my daughter. That was the plan, take you out, and take your place, Leo. I couldn’t allow it. A De Luca will always run this family. It’s why Christian marrying Mia—”

“What the fuck?” Mia says behind us and everything goes stark white and cold.

Everyone turns. I breathe slowly, then finally, I turn, too.

Mia stare at me, like I tried to cut out her heart. Like I betrayed her soul. She’s standing there, in the door. “You knew this? Christian, is that why . . .”

I take half a step toward her. “Mia, listen.”

“I’m done listening.” She raises her hands like she’s warding us off. Me, she’s warding me off, because her eyes are all hurt and locked on me. “Fuck you all.”

And Mia turns and runs off.

# *Chapter Twenty-One*



MIA

Those utter sons of bitches. All of them. My father, brother, Christian. I'll throw Theo in, too, for good measure.

I storm down the hall to the kitchen where blessedly no one, not even the chef, is there.

Theo's car keys are sitting on the island, and I snatch them up and stalk off to my bag which is in the foyer where I dumped it, or Christian dumped it. I don't remember.

Right now, I'm buzzing with hurt and fury.

I know one thing. I can't stay here. I have to go. Get away, be anywhere but here with these men.

Any other circumstances I'd go to Hellfire, but I bet they have that place being watched. Home is the only place I can think of. I'm about to head out when my phone rings and I toss the keys in my bag and set it near the door, and even though I don't recognize the number, I press answer.

"Is this Mia?"

"Yes, who's this?"

"My name's John, I'm a friend of Ellie's. She worked for you until the place—Hellfire—burned, right?"

Down the hall, I hear raised voices, and I try and block them out as the man talks.

"Hold on," I say.

I cut him off because I want to get away from this place, away from everyone. If only escaping the pain inside me was possible by running away, I'd go to the other end of the Earth, but I've been running already and it hasn't helped. How can you run from yourself?

There's another reason I can't run.

Christian.

Because no matter where I go, Christian will still be there. Inside me, lodged deep where I can't get him out.

I force my head to the call and ask, "Is she all right?"

"Doing much better, but she's been asking about you."

And that's what I'm going to do. I'm going to visit her. Then I'm . . . I don't know what I'm going to do. Steal my cousin's car and get out of town?

Even for a few days? It's not running, as it won't be forever, but I need some space to think and breathe and be.

But that's a pipe dream. They've been following me, these assholes. No. One asshole, I amend.

Christian.

At least, he has people following me and my car. Which I don't have and I'm sure they're following me when I'm with Christian as added security.

But you know who they aren't following?

Theo.

If they see Theo's car, then no one's going to follow, right? They'll think it's him.

My therapist would tell me I'm not facing the inner demons I create. But right now, she can go fuck herself.

"I'll be at the hospital," I say, "before visiting hours end."

The man laughs heartily. "When I say better, I mean better."

Behind me Christian calls out my name, snagging my attention along with all the wrath and anger and pain I have.

"Where is she?" I ask the man calling.

Christian calls out, "Mia."

"Who's that," the man asks.

"Some idiot who thinks I'm going to marry him. Look, text me the address. I'll come see her." And I hang up.

"Goddamn it, Mia, stop ignoring me." Christian says as the phone lights up.

The address is a building near Hellfire and I toss my phone at my bag before whipping about to glare at Christian.

"Me ignoring you should be a sign."

"Sweetness." He comes to a stop right in front of me.

I don't look at him and he just stands there, me staring at his feet.

"Mia." His voice is soft, beguiling and it starts to wrap about me.

I push the words out, "Go away."

"No." He pauses and his voice becomes harsh. "And fucking look at me."

I raise my head and glare at him. "What do you want me to say?"

"Anything. Talk. If we're going to get through this you need to talk to me."

Get through this? A fake marriage where I'll be beyond miserable because I'll have a taste of him and not all? I'm greedy. I'm a De Luca. I

want it all or nothing. There's no middle, no settling. I'm not built that way.

"There's nothing to talk about."

"Bullshit."

"I don't—"

"I don't care, Mia." He glares at me, all angry flame, and I want to burn in it. What the hell is wrong with me? "I don't care what you're thinking or twisting to fit your little narrative. We have things to talk about and you know it."

He takes my arm and leads me away and fool I am, I let him. We go to one of the rooms, his study he has down on this floor. Study? Office? I don't know or care what they call it, but I go with him and he shuts the door and then he releases me, leaning against it.

I glare at him. "I only came with you to stop them from interfering. So don't think I want to actually spend time with you."

He shakes his head, laughing, the sound bitter. "Sweetness, you're mine. We established that. And now we can talk. Without interruptions."

"You think you can manipulate me."

"We need to talk, Mia."

"No, we don't. I heard that. All of it. Down to you being with me for their sake."

He swears. "No. You heard your father. No one makes me do a fucking thing, Mia. Except maybe you. Christ, you drive me crazy."

"You told them about the note." I throw my hands in the air. "You told them when you promised you didn't."

"A small lie. They have a right. Family? That's who they are. This family which I'm part of, we protect ours, and you know it. But this is different, you and I."

I laugh. "Is it?"

"You're so hell bent on proving you don't need me or anything, you throw yourself needlessly in the path of danger." Christian looks like he wants to spill blood.

I bristle, my skin cold. "It's all my fault, is it?"

His hands fist at his sides and he comes at me, stopping short of contact, eyes flashing. "Not what I fucking said at all, Mia."

"You told them."

"About the note? So?"

We stare at each other, breathing heavily, the air laden with anger and

heat.

So, I go for him because I can feel my edges start to crumble. “A De Luca, that’s it, isn’t it? I’ve been trying to work out why you insist I’m more than just a fuck. But that’s all I am, aren’t I? A fuck?”

He winces. “Not fair, Mia. At all. I’ve spent fucking years wanting you.”

“Poor you, the only way you can get me is when I’m disfigured and broken, is that it?” Sarcasm drips. “You must really want to be a De Luca.”

“I thought I fucked that attitude and belief out of you.” He touches me now, fingers gentle under my chin as he raises my face.

The gentleness belies the anger, the rough tone, the vibrating violence.

“So, you go above and beyond, protect, report in, and betray me,” I say. “You have sex with me and make me tell you I belong to you when all you want is to marry me, marry into my family, and get everything, is that it?”

“No,” he says, voice low and dangerous. “To do that, I’d have to take Leo out of the picture, and we’re friends. He’s my boss, friend, family. I’m loyal.”

I laugh. “So loyal, you’ll marry his pathetic sister.”

“The only person who thinks you’re pathetic is you.” He stops and his words sit, weighing on me, uncomfortable and spiky edged. “I want you, Mia. I told you that. You being mine means something.”

“Like having a real place at the family table.” I can’t let this go, I can’t. Because if I give in . . . if I give in, I’m lost. He’ll know exactly how naked I am. How fragile he makes me, because . . . because . . .

Because I think I’m in love with him.

Think?

I am.

I’m so in love with Christian I can barely see straight.

And I can’t ever forgive myself for that mistake. It’s all about belonging and ownership and not love. He’s never once mentioned love.

Because a man like him will fall for someone perfect and whole and untouched by evil.

Not me.

I swallow and it’s like there’s broken glass in my throat.

“Mia—”

“You get a place? Is that why I’m yours?”

“Does it matter?” I don’t answer him and he goes on. “You are mine, sweetness, so what does it fucking matter?”

“It matters, Christian. It matters.”

“Mia . . .” he says, soft and almost broken.

But I shake my head. “I can’t trust you, Christian. Leave me the hell alone. We’re done.”

“So, you’re sick of fucking me, is that it?”

“Maybe.”

Never, not ever in a million years. I will let this man do anything and everything to me. I just want . . .

I want the impossible.

His love.

So, I can’t let him touch me.

“Two can play your game, Mia. Maybe this diatribe is because you wanted to get your rocks off with me. You wanted to feel good and you did and now you’re done and you’re walking away.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Then when are you saying? What the fuck are we doing? You’re mine, I’m yours. I claimed you, marked you. You’re my woman. That’s what I’m doing. I’m letting you know who and what you are. To me.” He pauses. “What are you doing?”

Want. Ownership. Claiming, marking.

None of that is love.

Because he hasn’t said love.

He’s not going to. For him all that is enough.

For me?

I can’t.

I pull away from him. “I’m letting you off the hook, Christian.”

“What the fuck does that even mean?”

He stands there, frustration etched in the air around him.

And I break open. It’s a flood, and I can’t stop it.

“You know what they did, Christian? They didn’t just rape me. I don’t remember a lot of that.”

“Thank God.”

“No. they made me so vile and dirty and complicit. They drugged me. All kinds of things. I’m sure you read the report. Things that made me feel more, made me not care at all, made me float and let them do the things to me. And I hated myself every time.”

I force myself to breathe. This will end it. His stomach will turn and he’ll finally walk away and not taunt me with the offer of a part of him. Because

when I'm done, he'll want nothing to do with me at all.

I look at him. "I begged them. I asked them to do it. I helped. And more than once, they held me down and used a vibrator on me until they forced me to come and it was the most disgusting thing in the world. And so am I. They made me ask for it. And they turned me into something no better than them. Something so much worse."

He breathes. "You—"

"No, I'm talking. Don't you dare makeup things to make me feel better. Don't you dare try and tell me all the things I know intellectually. I'm telling you what I feel, Christian. And I feel like a thing that is worth nothing. And you . . . you expose me and break me and make me believe it's going to be okay. But it isn't. You know why? You, there with my family? You all took the goodness away.

"I'm no better than those people who raped me. It's all a dream, all of it. I can't even claim the pain and the rest. I have humiliation, in great big warehouses. Now go away."

For the longest moment he doesn't speak, then he says, quietly, "You have nothing to feel humiliated over. Nothing at all, Mia. You're a survivor and that's what you did and—"

"Stop, Christian."

"No. You can't ever make me go."

I look up at him, helpless. If he touches me more, I'm lost. I'll take the scraps from him. And he'll take what I've said and use it to stay by my side. If he does that, I'll drag him down, too.

"Sweetness, we'll get through this, you and I. We'll make it work because we're meant to be together. You can't say anything to change that. To stop me."

And he comes in to kiss me.

So, I say it.

One word.

"Banana."

And Christian freezes, straightens. He steps back and almost stumbles. And then, wordlessly, he turns and walks away.

# *Chapter Twenty-Two*

## CHRISTIAN

I'm reeling.

She used the word on me. The only thing that could send me from her.

My chest is tight, painful and I want to crush skulls, kill. But there's no one for me to kill. No one, nothing and her torment rips into me.

"Christian?"

"If you don't want me to kill you, Leo, I suggest you get away from me."

Leo sighs and ignores my threat as I stalk away from him.

From him, my study, Mia.

If I stay where I am, I'm going back in there and I'm going to violate my word. Violate the pact between us and touch her.

Fuck.

What they did to her, that burden she's carrying, I have this horrible feeling she hasn't told anyone all of that. Maybe her therapist, but I can't exactly ask her to explain to me, to tell me that.

She spoke like she really thinks she's dirty and worse than those guys. She isn't. Mia glows. My sweetness took something that no man I know could deal with and turned it and used it to survive. They tried to take her will and she stole it back, even drugged, even when they forced her to come.

That hurts. Like someone's gutting me like a fucking fish.

Not the idea of pleasure. If I thought she got actual pleasure from it that she could hold on to and ease her own pain, there'd be a small part of me that's glad. I don't think true pleasure was part of it.

But the drugs may have made her float—yeah, I know what they gave her, all the happy time drugs, all the date rape drugs. The drugs may have freed paths in her body. But not in her brain, not deep down.

She would have been out of her mind but knowing she didn't want what they did. The forced orgasm would have been small, and something she resented. And they did that to fuck her over. But Mia? She turned it as best she could to take control of what happened and how.

And I'm in fucking awe of her.

Mia is not a woman to be used. She's not a woman who begs easily and I know I'm all kinds of bastard for not feeling guilty in breaking her down and marking her as mine. But me doing that came from a place of love, of



respect, of need and shared want. Of showing her what she's worth. I wanted to tear down the pain and lies she makes herself believe. I wanted her to trust me to care for her. Protect her.

I gave her an out, her own version of hardcore, no questions asked full stop. The no and the stop and the pull of the brakes that belonged to her in one word she would need to deliberately say. I wanted her to push her own limits, to fight herself, to indulge in no while she wanted more. I wanted her to have all the control in giving over to me.

I never thought she'd use it. Not after . . . not after that night together.

But she used it over an attempted kiss. So, I walked away.

Everything has tumbled down and tangled around me. She heard things she shouldn't have.

Heard things that came too fast on the heels of all the exposed pieces of her I dug free.

And now?

I should let her go.

She might not ever let me touch her again.

I didn't know what they'd done, not all of that.

But then again, would it have mattered?

Fuck, I don't know.

I take a breath, aware Leo is there, near me. But I don't have time for him. I need to work this out. Yeah, I think. It would have mattered in the way of how I went about it. But I know, deep inside it ultimately wouldn't have. Not at the bare bone truth of it all.

"Christian?"

"What?" I snarl the word. And I round on him.

Leo, a man scared by no one takes a small step back, probably because he doesn't want to get into a fight. But he just looks at me. "If you hurt my sister, if you do that, I will kill you."

"Hurt is part of a relationship."

He immediately lights up, and I think about clocking him. "So, we're not wrong, about you and her?"

"Go to hell." I stalk off to the kitchen because it's close enough and it's away from Mia. I don't need her overhearing another fucking conversation.

"Christian?"

"Leo, I'm not sure this is up to me." I sigh.

He shakes his head. "You don't let anyone push you around."

Pausing in the midst of making coffee I glare. “I’m not.”

“So, you lied.” He leans a hip against the island, knowing full well I’m considering hurling the empty mug in his face.

Fuck me. “This is more complicated than the simple answer.”

“Do you love her?”

Do I? It’s a place I don’t let myself go near where she’s concerned and I’m not sure why.

“Not your business.” I turn and shove the cup under the nozzle on the machine and press a button “And love isn’t enough unless she allows it.”

And maybe I think it’s not enough at all.

“There are offers for her,” Leo says.

I move before I know I’m doing it and I have my hand fisted in his shirt and him pressed against the wall in seconds flat. “She isn’t for fucking sale. She belongs to me.”

“Then—”

“It’s complicated,” I snarl.

There are confidences I will break, but what she told me, it’s not for him. Or for anyone. Not unless Mia shares and she won’t.

And it strikes me as I let him go and turn away, hands on hips, that maybe I haven’t been listening. Maybe I pushed hard instead of letting her go, letting her find her way.

I want that way to be me. But maybe I’m as bad as the monsters.

She fucking used the word banana on me.

“Excuse me.” I flicker a glance at Leo and stalk by him.

Mia is coming down the hall right as I go in search of her. I need to let her go. Make it easy. But her eyes are so fucking vulnerable when they touch mine, I almost tumble to my knees.

“Mia, you’re worth everything,” I say not realizing I’m going to say them until I do. “So much, I’m walking away. You know where I live.”

And with that, I go upstairs.

She doesn’t follow.



When I come back down, I’m more than aware I’m a fucking idiot, and what I said? Jesus Christ, idiot really doesn’t begin to describe me. I’m thinking

coward, unworthy, boneheaded. Maybe full of feelings I don't know how to deal with.

I'm gonna have to deal.

If I want her.

And where the fuck is she? I search, but Mia isn't anywhere.

Not her room, not with Blake and the baby not anywhere.

Leo is in the study with his father and they're arguing about something, I don't know what and I don't really care.

My head is still too full of her.

Yeah, I was gonna let her go, but I can't. I'm a fucking moron. I need to talk to her, even if it's just to say I'll give her space, my way and tell her I'm not actually letting her go, space isn't that, it's space. And I need to tell her . . .

Tell her how I feel.

Because in those twenty minutes in my room, I worked out why I'm feeling like this. Why I want to shred the world, why I want to kill for her. Why I want to grow old with her and spend forever laughing and loving and fighting with her. Discovering her.

Why I stupidly tried to push her away, why I'm willing to wait.

Why I would lay my life down for her.

Love.

I'm in love with Mia.

I'm so in love I didn't even see it.

But now I do, it's clear that for years I never sought out anything but sex with other women because of her. I couldn't have her. She never looked. And now I got to taste her, I can't even think about touching another woman.

There's only Mia.

And I need to set things right.

Any way I can.

No matter how long it takes.

I look at Leo. "Where is she?"

"Mia?" Leo flicks a glance at me. It's slightly wary and I guess I don't blame him. I'm a little unreasonable when it comes to his sister. "Her room."

"Not there."

"Have you seen my car?" Theo asks, appearing at the door. "My keys are gone. And my fucking car."

Things in me sink. Shit. "Mia."

Leo stares. "What?"

"Mia," I say again. "It has to be. Only your sister would steal Theo's car." Everyone looks at each other and no one needs to say a word to know it's true. Mia has nerve made from titanium. "Someone, get on tracking his car."

"Already on it," says Theo.

I glare in general. "Let me know the moment it's spotted. The moment."

I stalk out of the room, not waiting for a response.

Where the fuck would she go? I rub a hand over my face. The hospital?

I grab my phone and call the guy I have there, but while Ellie's awake, she's still there, for obvious reasons. "Call me the moment she turns up," I say, "if she turns up."

Pacing, I go to the foyer, because I'm half inclined to get after her. But I don't know where she's gone. Home?

That's my first instinct. But Mia isn't gonna just go home and hide. She's going to do something. Go through the wreckage, yell at someone, visit Ellie.

My money really is on the last one, so why is unease eating at me? It doesn't make sense.

I whirl around and almost fall over Leo. "Damn, you need a fucking cat bell."

"Christian," he says stonily, "we need to get people on everyone associated with Russo. If they were after her, we haven't got them all. This threat's going to last if we don't do something."

"Like me marry her?"

He sighs. "Do you want to? There are others—"

"If anyone touches her, I'll kill them. Like I told you."

"So, you then."

That unease turns to lead. "She won't have me. I fucked things up."

There's a buzzing sound coming from somewhere in the foyer. It starts up but I ignore it, focusing on Leo, who's looking at me like he's never seen me.

"What did you do? Tell her she's a fucking piece of ass and nothing more? If you did, I'll kill you," he says, not sounding concerned, like he's the only one in on something here, even as he hands out threats to me like candy. "Or better yet, let Mia."

"Don't talk about your sister that way. Of course, I don't think that." I rub a hand over my face. "Mia has her own mind. And . . ."

I love her.

How did this get so fucked up?

“Okay,” he says when I don’t finish my sentence. “That’s good enough for me, but break her heart and I—”

“Might be a bad time, but I have something,” Theo suddenly says, interrupting. We turn as one and he’s there, at the top of the foyer, face pure ice. “We got a call.”

The buzzing starts again, and I ignore it. “Who?”

“Russo. Seems they’re claiming they’ve got Mia. They’re going to make sure the contract goes ahead, after all.”

The bottom falls from my world. I clench my hands and switch modes. Pure, emotionless hard professional.

Never, not even when the girls were taken last time, has anything been so difficult.

“Your father is working an angle.” But Theo’s gaze is on me. “We need to split up—”

“Hold on.” The buzzing is back. I look around and that’s when I see it. Near the door. Something that resembles a cell phone.

I’m there in seconds, sweeping it up. Ellie’s been calling, but I ignore that. There’s a text still on the screen and the address . . .

Near Hellfire.

I check my gun, pulling it from the holster. Loaded, but I like to make sure.

“Christian?”

Looking up at Theo and Leo, I just say, “Do what you need. Send Nicolo after me.”

“Where the fuck are you going?”

“To get Mia.”



I’ve never been so fucking scared in my life. My hold on my famed cold and cool demeanor slips with every mile. When I pull up outside the warehouse, Nicolo is on my tail. I don’t wait. My heart is trying to escape my chest as blood roars in my ears.

Mia. My sweetness doesn’t deserve to be touched by anyone or anything she doesn’t want. Not even me.

I pull my gun, flick off the safety and kick my way in.

And I come to a stop, almost falling to my knees.

It's like I've been punched in the stomach.

Mia.

A man.

She stands, her gun in her hand, the man is on the floor. Dead.

"Sweetness?"

Turning, she looks at me, her eyes are sharp, bright, and there's a bruise on her cheek.

I look at the body, at her, and then I shoot the dead bastard. Because I need to. Because there's no one else to kill.

"He was meant to bring me to this Russo," she says, voice flat. "He touched me. Hit me. He said things. So . . . I shot him. I killed him."

"They're going to keep coming."

"Unless you go after them?"

I go to her, wanting to soothe, to comfort, to hold her, but the others come in. All of them. Nicolo, Diego, Tizio. Her father and brother. Theo. The place fucking swarms and they have her. And me?

I fucking touched her, too. I screwed things up so badly this is what happened. And she doesn't even look at me.

I just turn and leave.

# *Chapter Twenty-Three*

MIA

I don't know where Christian went after I killed that guy.

Everyone else was too in the way, dragging me out, insisting a doctor they have on staff come and see me.

I don't need a doctor. I don't need anything. I just want to go and lick my wounds and try and get over Christian.

Somehow, I doubt that's possible, but a girl can dream, right?

I'll live in my country home, surrounded by cats. I like cats. They're sort of me. Only letting in those they want in. Independent. We can be independent together, me and my million cats.

Or maybe I'll get a cow and a horse and chicken and live the country life.

Or just build my own club and fix my walls around myself, stronger and better and thicker than before.

I maybe I'll just curl up and cry until there are no more tears in the world.

Around me my family drive me insane at Theo's.

The yelled, hug, pamper—okay, that's Blake—and genuinely make everything worse.

They mean well, they love me, so I stay at Leo's until it becomes obvious why I'm doing it.

I'm a glutton for punishment. Right now, the men are plotting and I sit on the sofa, biding time to escape.

I'm here because I'm stupidly waiting for Christian, and he's clearly not coming back.

No one's mentioned him. Instead, they all talk of heads rolling, retribution, all the things I just don't want anymore.

I killed a man.

I try and fail to feel bad.

He'd have hurt me, I know that. I don't know which way, and I don't want to. I didn't give him a chance. I pulled my gun because he didn't think to take my bag and check it. He underestimated me, chalked me up as a damaged, weak woman. So, I proved him wrong and shot him.

Thing is, Christian never once called me damaged or weak. Too strong, maybe, but never anything like the things I think about myself.

Funny how it takes him not being here for me to see that.



Funny how it took me taking control of a bad situation and winning to see what he's been saying.

But it doesn't matter, he's gone and he told me he's done. He's walking away. He did say I know where he lives, but he's not here when he should be and that's a message.

He gave me what I said I wanted.

And I don't want it at all.

No, I want him to love me back.

"Mia," Blake says, breaking me from my thoughts. She smiles, all pretty and sweet and lovely. "I need to check Rocco, wanna come?"

I rise up, and she takes my hand, and I love this girl. If my life is in shreds, then I'm glad she's got everything she wants. She deserves it.

"Anything to get away from this lot," I mutter as we slip out of the living room.

Once we're alone and walking down the hall, Blake veers in the opposite direction of where she lives with Theo.

"Come on."

Wordlessly, I follow her down the hall. She stops when we reach the foyer and she turns, pressing something in my hand.

Hard metal. Keys.

I frown. "What do I need car keys for?"

"Mia." Blake reaches up and touches my cheek. "You can stay here but I get the feeling you want to go home."

"I don't have a car. And I'm not taking yours. Your brother—"

"These aren't my car keys. They're Christian's. Take his car. It came back from the shop this afternoon. Take it. I'll send someone to pick it up later."

Christian—thinking his name, how he just disappeared, hurts—loves his car with a passion. I look at the keys and bite my lip.

"Go." Blake gives me a little push.

"He'll kill me."

"Well," she says, smiling, "he'll probably deserve a maiming. He . . . no, listen, okay? Take the car. Go."

There's nothing for me here. I know that. And I need to be alone. So, I nod, hugging Blake. "Thank you."

"See you soon, Mia."



My heart is slamming hard when I pull up an hour later at my property.

The lights burn an inviting buttery gold, and on my porch . . .

“If you scratched that sweet baby, I might be inclined to punish you,” Christian says.

My knees half give way and I grasp the door. When I’m steady, I slam the door and approach. “Why are you here?”

“Been waiting for you.”

“Christian, I’m tired, and—”

“I’ve been doing some reading, Mia,” he says softly as I climb the stairs and stand there. He rises from his seat and looks down on me but makes no move to touch.

“About what?”

“You told me how dirty you felt with what happened, with what you did, what they did to you, and that’s natural. You’re not a victim, though. You’re a survivor, and one of the most awe-inspiring ones I’ve ever met or seen. Did you know men also get raped. And some of them are forced to become aroused. Others come from the stimulation and they feel like you do. Dirty, wondering if they’re to blame.”

I stare at him. “You read up on men?”

He opens my door and gestures inside, and the only reason, I tell myself, that I go in, is for the warmth. Out here, nights get cool. We go into the living room and I sit on the sofa, and he sits next to me.

“No, Mia, it was just there, about men. My point is that it’s a power move, not sex.”

“I know all this.”

“They took from you, abused you, tried to debase you, and you found your way through.” He looks at me. “Physiological reactions don’t mean you want it or you like it or you’re to blame or dirty. It means they deserved to die a thousand painful ways. The fact you took control at times is fucking amazing.

“You’ve been hurt, scarred, tortured,” he continues. “And you don’t back down. I said maybe you’re too strong, in that you don’t bend. But I’m wrong. You do, in your own way.”

I struggle for breath. “Christian . . .”

“I’m trying to say the body does things, the mind too, to get someone

through things. But nothing can ever damage your soul.” He half reaches for me but drops his hand. “And your scars, inside and out, are part of you, part of your beauty. However you are, I want that. If you’ll have me.”

I stare at him. “Christian, I don’t . . . I . . .

“Marriage. Me. Whatever you want.”

I frown. “Because of the threat.”

“Because of who you are and how I feel.”

“I . . .” I swallow. “I don’t understand.”

“Here’s the thing, Mia, I could get down on one knee and propose and pretend it isn’t a way to keep you safe, to neutralize the threat of the Russo family and the contract your father broke. A contract, I might add, that has nothing to do with you in terms of decisions. But I won’t.”

“You came here to say that?” I’m trying real hard to follow. My heart is leaping to conclusion and my head is trying to leash it in chains.

“Shut up, sweetness. No. Yes.” He shoves his hands through his hair and looks like he wants to murder someone. “I came here to say that who you marry or let touch you is your decision. But you won’t be getting rid of me. I’ll sit here and grow old next to you and not ever touch you unless you say you want that. I’ll follow you everywhere you go and make sure you’re safe. And the reason I’ll get down on one knee and propose? There’s just one.”

I stay silent, barely able to breathe.

“That one reason is simple and complicated. But really, it’s this.”

He half rises, then sits. Grasps his hands over his thighs.

“I’m in love with you, Mia. So fucking in love with you that I don’t know what to do. I screw up, I push. But I’ll be there. Loving you. Married or not. I will take out any threat and keep you safe. But I love you. I think you’re the most fascinating woman I’ve met. You drive me insane. You make me more angry than anyone I’ve ever met. And you make me vulnerable. But you make me happy. When I’m with you, I’m whole. I want to grow old, have babies if you want them.”

My head spins slow. “If I don’t want them?”

“Fuck having babies.”

He says this so emphatically, I want to laugh. Because there’s a lightness blooming in me, one that feels like hope, and it’s a balm.

“If I can’t?”

Christian shrugs. “We adopt.”

My chest is tight, but this time it feels good. “Christian . . .”

“Mia, I want you. I love you. I probably have since I first saw you and knew you were off-limits. Love is the only reason I’ll marry you. So, I’m not going to lay down an ultimatum. I’m not putting a time limit. I’m not demanding. The offer is there. To do with as you wish.”

He sounds so casual, and I know this is costing him. He’s not a man given to democracy in this way. He’s about ownership and his will and being what he is: alpha.

For me, he’s going to give me room.

And it’s hard. It’s so hard because everything I’ve held on to is not because it haunts me; I’m haunting it. Haunting the horrors is safe.

Christian isn’t safe and the safest thing in the world, all at the same time.

I put my hand to my mouth as a small sob escapes. Christian is offering me the world. He’s offering it to me to take if and when I want, and he’s placed it in the middle of us, and is stepping aside.

It’s not in him to back off completely. A man like him when he wants what’s his, when he loves, he won’t ever walk entirely away, but he’s offering me the best option he can. To give me the space, and forever if I need it.

Because he loves me, and—

I stop.

He loves me. Christian Bandoni loves me.

I can’t breathe.

Yes, he’s been saying it the entire time, but this moment is one that is burned bright inside me. It’s like a flare of light.

He loves me.

I believe it.

And when I look, all the signs are there. That’s why I fought him. Not because of the fear of being so vulnerable and naked in front of him, but the fear he’d see me and walk away.

He’s seen me and he wants to stay.

I want him, too.

“You’ll marry me?” I ask carefully, like I’m on broken glass.

He nods. “Because I love you.”

His voice is thick, full of all the will and strength it’s taking him to bend at the knee for me. And the first time in a long time, I feel beautiful. Loved. Whole.

“Christian, I love you, too.”

“You do?” He’s very still.

“And . . .” I take in a breath. Meet his dark gaze. Take in that gorgeous face. That beloved, perfect face that can be so cold and hard and deadly, but not for me. Never for me. For me, it’s a face of love, of refuge. Of my future.

“And, I belong to you, in every way there is.”

He starts to smile.

I look at him. “Just like you belong to me.”

“Like I’d have it any other fucking way.”

“Charming, to the end.” I smile, too, and hold out a trembling hand. He takes it and kisses it.

On the sofa he slides a little closer. “I came here to fix your car. And move in. You can’t get rid of me completely. I meant it about keeping you safe on your terms. And . . .”

His gaze is on my mouth and that liquid lick of heat flares in my belly.

“And?” I prod.

“I really want to fucking kiss you. Can I kiss you?”

“Banana,” I say.

His face turns bleak but he nods. And releases my hand.

“Not yet,” I add. “Because I have something to say. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“That’s the last time I say that word. To you. In that context, I mean.” I rub my fingers down my thighs. “Ask me. Please.”

I’m shaking, and he doesn’t look too steady either.

“I don’t have a ring. Yet. But Mia, sweetness, will you marry me?”

“Yes.”

And I take hold of him and draw him to me, and I kiss him.

The kiss is tender and deep and full of passion and heat and tenderness and we strip each other until we’re naked, entwined, and he keeps kissing me. I wrap my legs about his narrow hips as we lie on the sofa, him on top.

He pushes into me, deep and as we move, his cock stretching me, filling me, making me whole, I know this a different coming together.

It’s a start. A future. A contract signed with body, soul, and heart. And I move beneath him, rising to meet each thrust.

Christian is shaking as his control slips and he slams deeper and deeper into me, setting me off with ringing waves of pleasure as I come. And he pumps into me, crying out, his cock pulsating as he comes with a guttural cry.

I wrap about him. Holding him tight. Kissing him. “I love you, Christian.

I don't know why I was so scared."

"Because it's fucking scary. You're mine, I'm yours. It feels right. And it's like falling. But with you . . ."

I close my eyes as he strokes my face with loving fingers.

Then he pulls the throw over us, staying in me as he flips us so I'm sprawled on top.

"You know," he says, "this place has possibilities. We could rent it out."

I twist one of his nipples and he laughs. "I'm not moving into Leo's."

"Fine. We move here. We can get a hot tub."

"A bath of diseases, you mean?"

"Mia, you need romance in your ornery soul. It'll only be us in there, how about that?"

I laugh. "I'll think about it."

"We can get a dog."

"I like cats more." After all, I'd been thinking about an army of them, and now I feel I owe one a home. But a dog is nice, too. I don't say that. "A cat. I like them."

"You would." He kisses my ear. "How about we compromise? Get one of each?"

"It sounds like a plan I like. You me, a cat and a dog." I'm silent a long time. "Christian, Russo isn't going to stop."

He shifts, trailing his fingers down my spine. "He will with you. He can't make you marry him if you're married to me. or if I'm with you."

"But Leo—"

"Sweetness, he can take care of himself. So can I. But for now, we have a future to plan."

"And an entire future to live our lives in."

"That," he says, "is the plan."

"Thank you," I whisper.

"For what?"

"Making me see I belong."

"Sweetness, you did that to me, too."

And as I snuggle down, the future is bright. Because no matter what is thrown at me, as long as I have Christian, the love of my life, the love of my life who loves me back, I can do anything.

Because of love's heated caress.

Because of him.



Dear Readers,

Thank you for reading *Heated Caress*. If this is the first book in the series you're reading, I suggest going and getting *Frozen Kiss*. Next up for the De Luca Crime Family is none other than Leo himself!

Sincerely,  
E.C.

## *Also by E.C. Land*

### **Devil's Riot MC**

Horse's Bride

Thorn's Revenge

Twister's Survival

Reclaimed (Devil's Riot MC Boxset Bks 1 – 3)

Cleo's Rage

Connors' Devils

Hades Pain

Badger's Claim

Burner's Absolution

Redeemed (Devil's Riot MC Boxset Bks 4 – 6)

K-9's Fight

Revived Boxset (Devil's Riot MC Boxset Bks 7 — 9)

Red's Calm

### **Devil's Riot MC Originals**

Stoney's Property

Owning Victoria

Blaze's Mark

Taming Coyote

Luna's Shadow

Devil's Ride (DRMC Boxset 1 – 5)

Choosing Nerd

Stoney's Gift

Ranger's Fury

Carrying Blaze's Mark

Neo's Strength

Cane's Dominance

Venom's Prize

Protecting Blaze's Mark



Devil's Reign (DRMC Boxset 6 – 10)

Whip's Breath

Viper's Touch

**Devil's Riot MC Southeast**

Hammer's Pride

Malice's Soul

Axe's Devotion

Rebelling Rogue

Ruin Boxset 1 – 3

Remaining Gunner's

**Devil's Riot MC Tennessee**

Breaking Storm

Blow's Smoke

**Inferno's Clutch MC**

Chains' Trust

Breaker's Fuse

Ryder's Rush

Axel's Promise

Fated for Pitch Black

Their Redemption Boxset 1 - 5

Tiny's Hope

Fuse's Hold

Nora's Outrage

Tyres' Wraith

Brielle's Nightmare

Their Salvation Boxset 6 - 10

Pipe's Burn

Faith's Tears

Lyrice's Lasting

**Dark Lullabies**

A Demon's Sorrow

A Demon's Bliss

A Demon's Harmony  
A Demon's Soul  
A Demon's Song  
Dark Lullabies Boxset

**Royal Bastards MC (Elizabeth City Charter)**

Cyclone of Chaos  
Spiral into Chaos

**Aligned Hearts**

Embraced  
Entwined  
Entangled  
Crush Boxset 1-3  
Ensnared  
Entrapped

**Night's Bliss**

Finley's Adoration (Co-Write with Elizabeth Knox)  
Cedric's Ecstasy  
Arwen's Rapture  
Christmas Delight

**Satan's Keepers MC**

Keeping Reaper  
Forever Tombstone's  
Hellhound's Sacrifice  
Outrage Boxset 1 – 3  
Mercy's Angel  
Facing Daemon

**Toxic Warriors MC**

Viking  
Ice  
War  
Storm Boxset 1 – 3

**De Luca Crime Family**

Frozen Valentine (Prequel)

Frozen Kiss

Heated Caress

**Sons of Norhill Tops**

Inheriting Trouble

**Pins and Needles Series**

Blood and Agony

Blood and Torment

Blood and Betrayal

Agony Boxset 1 - 3

**DeLancy Crime Family**

Degrade

Deprave

Detest

Desire Boxset 1 - 3

Deny

Demean

Delusion

Destroy Boxset 4 - 6

**Underground Bruisers with Rae B. Lake**

Caging Dyer

Finding Reese

**Available on Audible**

Reclaimed

Cleo's Rage

Connors' Devils

Hades Pain

Badger's Claim

Cyprus's Truth

***The truth comes in many ways.***

## CYPRUS

Taking full custody of my little sister, I have a fight on my hands. Not with her. She's still a little girl. If it weren't for the club, I'd sink, but I need help and can't rely on the ol' ladies to help all the time. My Prez's woman put out an ad. I told her to handle it. She knew what she was doing, I trust her. What I didn't expect was for her to hire the woman she did or for the truths that came out along the way.

## **Dancing Struggles**

There's something about moving to a small town. I never thought of myself as a country girl, but I'm taking to it easily. It helps my best friend's from the area and has embraced living out here in the middle of nowhere. Moving to Norhill Tops was the best decision I ever made.

The only problem is I constantly see the one man I never thought I'd see again. Every time I see him, I have to bite my lip to keep from doing something else entirely. We were together for only a weekend, but it was enough to leave a lasting mark. He ruined me for anyone else and he doesn't even know it because he doesn't remember. It's in the way he looks at me. Well, more like through me.

Or so I thought.

The dance between us is a constant struggle, especially when we get thrown together. Talk about déjà vu all over again.

## **Nines's Time**

*Innocence comes in several different ways, for her and for me.*

## NINES

Accused of something so vile, I've got to find a way to prove I'm not the one they're looking for. I didn't do it, and they know it. On top of that, she steps into my life, more like stumbles. Time stops with one look at her, and I see the vulnerability in her eyes.

I don't have it in me to go for what I want, not when I've got this hanging over my head. But I can't let her go either.

She's mine for the taking. But will she believe me when it comes to the truth?



**Grimm**

*If only for one night she were mine.*

## GRIMM

I've done everything in my power to keep away from the one woman I want most. Not only because she's a brother's daughter but because she's too young. To have her, she would have to give up everything else.

Danger comes to our doorstep, not for the first time, more like a ghost from the past has come to haunt us all. And in doing so, puts her in the line of fire.

I'll do whatever it takes to keep her safe, the only question is, will it be enough?

# *Social Media*

BE SURE TO FOLLOW OR STALK ME!

[Goodreads](#)  
[Bookbub](#)  
[DRMC BABES](#)  
[Instagram](#)  
[Author Page](#)