



Saving
THE NANNY

Darcy Rose
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SAVING THE NANNY

DARCY ROSE

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SAVING THE NANNY

Taking this job as a nanny was my last hope of getting off the streets. Even if my new employer is one of the most feared men in the city. Everyone knows his name. Matteo Bianchi. They whisper it in fear. Some even say he is the reason his daughter is without a mother. Let's just hope he never finds out that I lied on my application.

SARAH

I'm probably crazy for doing this.

My palms are sweating. I rub them against my jeans and know somehow, instinctively, that I can't appear afraid. Even if the man I'm about to meet is supposed to be one of the most violent, brutal, notorious men in the city—maybe the country. I'm well aware. His name is the sort of name you know from hearing it on the news. Whenever there's a story about the city's underworld and all the shady, ugly dealings going on there, he somehow comes into it.

And here I am, applying for a job with him. No, more than that. I'm applying for a live-in position as his daughter's nanny. His daughter, who I'm sure he loves. His daughter, whose life would be in my hands. And if anything happened to her?

I can't think about that right now. Some things are more important. Some situations make the unthinkable become necessary.

"Sarah?" A tall, bulky man who looks like he should be playing football sticks his head out of the room and crooks a finger at me. Here goes nothing. I've been sitting outside Matteo Bianchi's office for the past twenty minutes, surrounded by evidence of his money and privilege. Occasionally, a member of his staff hurried past, and every once in a while, I heard him raise his voice behind that heavy oak door. Now, I get to see him face-to-face.

My legs are shaking, but I somehow push through the fear and force myself

to walk through the door into a huge, fancy office full of books and art. The huge windows behind the long, carved desk turn the man sitting behind it into nothing more than a silhouette. A shape. “Well? I don’t have all day.”

Neither do I. Yet there I was, waiting for twenty minutes. This is not the sort of man you smart off to—even if I wasn’t afraid he would, like, kill me. I need the job too badly to risk upsetting him. That’s what gives me a burst of speed as I cross the room and stand in front of his desk, absorbing his scrutiny.

I expected him to be older. A man with this kind of money and power should be older, shouldn’t he? Supposedly, he sits at the top of the local underworld, the boss of bosses. But he can’t be more than thirty, if that. Once I’m able to get a look at him, I find a pair of hard, dark brown eyes staring at me with an intensity that makes my skin erupt in goosebumps. His sharp jaw ticks before those eyes narrow. “It says here you’ve got experience with kids, but you look like a kid yourself.”

“I’m nineteen, like it says on the application.”

“And you’ve been babysitting since...”

“Since I was ten. I helped raise my siblings.” I’ve rehearsed the story so many times, it’s like second nature. “They are eight, ten, and eleven years younger than me.”

He’s unimpressed. “So, you, what? Changed diapers, fed them?”

“I did everything with them. My mom... she worked two jobs, and after school, it was my responsibility to make sure everybody did their homework and had dinner, got their baths, all of that. On weekends and over holidays, I was with them all day.”

“That sounds like a lot of responsibility for a little girl.”

“It was.” I want more than anything to look away from him. There is an energy radiating from him, cold and fierce. I’m sure he’ll see through me. He’ll see that my story is just that: a made-up fairytale about a family I never had. Not for long, anyway.

“And you think that qualifies you to take care of my little girl?” He leans

back in the chair, his hands folded over his flat stomach and the charcoal gray suit that covers it. “Because you fed some kids microwave dinners and made sure they got their homework done? Do you have any idea what this job will entail?”

“I would love to hear about it.”

Something about my response makes him laugh. Not the way you laugh when something is funny, more like when you’re surprised or even irritated. It’s like a dog’s bark. I wonder how long it will be before he decides to bite. “Do you know who I am?”

“Yes.”

“Do you? Or do you only think you know?”

“I recognized your name right away. I’m sure you live a very... busy life. But a five-year-old is a five-year-old, and she is the person I’ll be taking care of. So you can take care of everything you need to do.”

He tips his head to the side. “Well. Aren’t you a modern-day *Mary Poppins*?”

I’m not sure what he wants from me. I’m trying to be as respectful and professional as I can because I’ve never needed anything the way I need this job. It’s my only hope of survival at this point. No way will I make it on the street much longer.

For one crazy second, I want to tell him about that. How he’ll be saving my life by giving me a place to live. But people get weird about things like that. He might blame it on me or think my homelessness has something to do with a mistake I made, rather than fate being a cruel bitch.

“That’s what I’m here for,” I murmur, and I have to clasp my hands behind my back so he won’t see the way I fidget to calm my nerves. “And I do love kids, and I’ve always been able to get along well with them. I think we could have a lot of fun.”

“Is that what life is all about for you? Fun?”

“It should be for a five-year-old.”

At first, he only stares blankly at me, and I’m sure I’ve done it. I have

completely ruined any chance of getting this job. I may as well step out in front of a bus and get it over with.

Then, the funniest thing happens. He snorts, then inclines his head. “You know, I agree with you. And you’re the first person I’ve interviewed for this job who gets it.”

Gets what?

He sits up straighter, folding his hands on the desk this time. Hope winds itself around my heart—hope is dangerous, hope is something I can’t afford, but it’s also something I can’t hold back. “You’re the eighth person I’ve spoken to, and let me tell you, I don’t have a lot of extra time from day to day. But this matters. It matters very much. Seven of those eight women started talking about enrichment and standardized tests and transcripts in the first few minutes. I get it. I know that kind of thing is important. But Ophilia needs to be a kid, too. You’re the first person who gets that.”

I’ve passed a test. Probably the first of many, but it gives me confidence. “I would love to meet her.”

“Don’t worry. You will.” I haven’t had the chance to process this before there’s a quick knock at the door behind me. I hear it open, and the sound turns me around to find the same burly man I’ve already met, and he’s not alone.

“Daddy!” A curly-headed bundle of energy races into the room, totally blowing past me so she can get to her father.

A change comes over him. Those hard eyes soften along with his entire face. He’s not the stern, cold, calculating mafia boss. Not when she’s around.

Still, he shoots a glance my way, like he has to remind himself I’m still here. He can’t let his guard down. “I have somebody who would like to meet you. Her name is Sarah.”

Ophilia’s dark eyes meet mine, and I don’t know what it is, but I feel an immediate connection. Maybe it’s her playful little grin—she’s shy. Sweet. “Hi,” she whispers.

“Hi. It’s nice to meet you. That’s a pretty dress you have on.”

Her father doesn't seem to agree. "The housekeeper. I keep telling her Ophilia has regular, everyday clothes. But she thinks little girls should wear dresses."

I tip my head to the side, looking at her. "What do you think about it?" I ask. "What do you like to wear?"

"I like to look pretty." She flounces her skirt a little and does a twirl. "Do I?"

"You look very pretty."

Matteo laughs softly before shrugging. "What do I know? This is why I need help. And my housekeeper already has more than enough to keep her busy on any given day."

"You want to see my room?" Ophilia bounces her way around the desk, coming to a stop at my side. "I just got a new playhouse for my birthday. You can see it if you want." Her tiny hand closes around mine, and that's it. That's when she takes ownership of my heart.

I look at him. He looks at me. He lifts a shoulder, the international symbol of a father who knows the decision has been made for him. "Go ahead. You're her nanny, after all."

And just like that, I have a job and a place to live.

I can only hope as I leave the office with Ophilia leading the way that he never finds out about the lies I've told.

Something tells me he wouldn't be very forgiving.

MATTEO

“*W*hat have you found out about her? Anything new?”

Bruno shakes his head before shrugging his wide shoulders. “She’s like a ghost or something. I can’t even find her on Facebook or anything like that. It’s like she doesn’t exist.”

“But there is a record of her under this name, right? It’s not an alias.”

“No, there’s a girl with her name born nineteen years ago. That much is true. But after that?” He shrugs again.

“Unacceptable.”

“So tell her to leave. I’ll see her out. I’ll take her wherever you want me to take her.”

That’s the thing. I could get rid of her without any trouble... if it wasn’t for Ophilia. “I’ve never seen her take to somebody the way she took to that girl.” Staring at the wall, I weigh my options. There’s always the chance of an outsider having the wrong intentions. You don’t get as far as I have without being aware of that. There are very few people in this world I trust, and that’s why I’m still alive and still in control.

Then, in walks this girl. She wouldn’t be the first girl to walk into my life out of nowhere. And look what happened after that.

“Boss? What’s the move? What can I do?”

“Let it go for now,” I decide, waving off the situation. “Just keep an eye out. I’ll be doing the same. The girl doesn’t have any sort of record or any obvious ties to any of the other families, but let’s monitor her communications just in case.”

The truth is, she’s interesting. She didn’t do the whole bowing and scraping thing when she came in. She was nervous, but she pretended not to be. She’s obviously hiding something, lying through her teeth—that story about having a single mother and helping raise her three siblings was just that. A story. Something vague and impossible to prove, which she picked up in a movie or on TV. I should’ve asked her for their names just to watch her stumble and sputter.

Not that it really matters. She could have raised a thousand kids and be fucking terrible at it. It’s Ophilia’s reaction that matters, and she didn’t take to a single one of the other applicants the way she did to Sarah.

It’s unusual for me to leave my office in the middle of the day, but that’s what I do since what matters more than work just now is making sure my little girl is all right. And if there’s one lesson I learned, it’s how what really matters should never be ignored. That’s the worst mistake a man can make, especially one whose rivals tend to express their unhappiness with weapons rather than words.

My shoes tap against the floor as I walk down the hall, and the sound has an almost magical effect. It makes the staff scurry around, either hurrying to remove themselves from my presence or hurrying to make themselves look like they’re working hard. It’s a smaller crew than the one I grew up with—with only Ophilia and myself to look after. I don’t require a household full of staff the way my father did in his day. It’s better this way. The more people around you, the more risk of there being a traitor in the mix.

My father learned that one the hard way. I don’t intend to make the same mistake.

It isn’t my father or his untimely death or the loss I’ve known in my three decades of life that’s at the forefront of my mind as I travel the length of the hall to where Ophilia’s bedroom sits. As much as I would like to have her near me all the time, she doesn’t need to be within earshot of the

conversations that take place in my office. I want her as far away from all of that as possible. I want to keep her innocent as long as possible. I want her to have a childhood. And someone young, fresh, and bright like Sarah could be what she needs.

What we both need. I shake my head a little at my dark, needful thoughts before coming to a stop just before reaching the open doorway. I can't quite place the perfume Sarah wears; it's something light, floral, and generic but also pleasant. I smell it now, wafting gently from the inside of the room, and need stirs again in my core. When was the last time I let myself bury my face in a woman's hair? To let go for once? Not since I lost Nina.

"You are a lucky little girl to have such a beautiful playhouse." Sincerity rings out in Sarah's voice. "Do you ever have friends come over to play with you?"

"Not really." If that bothers my daughter, she doesn't show it. I suppose it wouldn't bother her since this is how her life has always been. It isn't that I deliberately keep her sheltered from the world. But I have to be careful. I can't allow any random stranger off the street into my home.

"Sometimes it's fun to play alone," Sarah muses. I can't tell what they're doing in there, but it involves a lot of activity. "That way, you can do just what you want. You don't have to take turns doing what somebody else wants."

"How old are you?" I have to stifle a laugh at Ophelia's frank question.

"I'm nineteen."

"Is that old?"

Sarah's laughter drowns out my own. "Not very old. But I guess to you, it seems that way."

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

I hold my breath, waiting for the answer. What is wrong with me? I met the girl fifteen minutes ago, and suddenly, everything hinges on her response.

"No, I don't." Sarah giggles. "What do you know about boyfriends and stuff

like that? You've got lots of time before you have to think about it." Never. She will never think about it. I'll kill any boy that even looks at her.

"Are you gonna live here with us?"

The child knows how to bounce from one topic to the other without hardly taking a breath, but Sarah follows along without skipping a beat. "It looks that way. I think I'm going to be your nanny. We'll get to play like this every day. Would you like that?"

"Yeah! Sometimes, I miss not having anybody to play with."

Such an innocent, honest statement from such an innocent, honest girl. It has the power to steal the breath from my lungs. I want to go in there and apologize and offer her the entire world so long as she'll be happy.

"Don't worry. And you know, I understand how you feel. Not having anybody to play with. I used to feel that way a lot when I was little."

"Do you have a lot of friends?"

"Not really."

"Do you have brothers and sisters?"

It's the way she pauses that confirms for me that I was right—her hesitation. "Yes, I do," she finally murmurs. "Anyway, I want to know more about you. What's your favorite color?"

"Pink," my daughter proudly tells her.

"You know, that was going to be my guess." Because the playhouse, the curtains, and the very dress Ophelia wears right now feature her favorite color. "And what's your favorite food?"

Finally, I can't take the suspense any longer. I peer around the edge of the carved doorframe and into the room, where Sarah now wears a crown and a cape. In one hand, she holds a scepter with a large, plastic jewel on the end. Ophelia is busy tucking fake flowers into Sarah's long, dark blonde braid.

And they both look like they are in utter heaven. That's what matters. That's what helps me breathe a little easier before I back away from the door, more

certain than ever that I've made the right decision.

Though she did lie. Someone should tell her if she plans on lying, she had better get more practice with it.

SARAH

“One more story?”

I take a look at the little clock on her nightstand that doubles as a night light, then shake my head with a regretful frown. “I don’t think so, kiddo. I’ll read you another one first thing in the morning, I promise.”

She snuggles deep under her pink blankets while her chocolate brown curls fan across her pink pillowcase. “I’m going to remind you.”

“I’m sure you will.” If there’s anything I’ve learned in the past several hours with this child, it’s how focused she is on justice. I guess kids her age are like that. You make them a promise, and they intend to make sure you see it through. They have to trust, right? They have to believe that even though they’re powerless, even though there’s always somebody telling them what to do because they’re too young to make decisions for themselves, there’s still a sense of control.

I should know since I was that kind of kid. Only I wasn’t nearly as lucky as this little girl in her gorgeous room with every toy and every costume imaginable at her fingertips.

“You sleep tight.” We haven’t known each other long enough yet for a kiss on the forehead to feel right, so I settle for stroking her hair before standing.

“Hug, please?” I lean down for a quick hug, and she’s smiling in satisfaction when I straighten up and return the book to its shelf. “And you’re going to be here in the morning?”

“I’ll be here in the morning,” I promise before blowing her a kiss and closing the door. All in all, not a bad first day.

Actually, it was a very good one. I smile to myself in satisfaction and relief before remembering I still have a lot more to do tonight. I need to get set up in my new room, and it would be nice to get an idea of the house layout before tomorrow. I would love nothing more than to tour this enormous castle—at least, that’s how it seems to me—but one thing makes me pause. How do I avoid Matteo?

As it turns out, it’s already too late for that. “She tucked in?”

My heart threatens to lodge itself in my throat since I didn’t hear Matteo approach. Now, after I whirl around, he’s standing in front of me wearing the same dark gray suit that looked so good on him earlier. I don’t know whether I’m more afraid or impressed. All I know for sure is that I’m overwhelmed by his nearness.

“All tucked in,” I croak before clearing my throat. “I was going to go to my room now, get myself set up. I only have that one small bag I brought with me, and your housekeeper was nice enough to take it to my room.”

“Grace is very helpful.” His lips twitch, and I can’t quite tell if that was a joke or not. “I was about to go down for dinner. Come with me.”

It’s funny how two completely opposite reactions can take place at the same time. The thought of food makes my stomach contract painfully. I was hoping to sneak down to the kitchen and grab something from the fridge when nobody was looking, since I can’t remember the last time I had a decent meal. I didn’t think it would be appropriate to share Ophelia’s dinner, either.

But sitting down with him? I can barely breathe right now as it is. Sitting through an entire meal might kill me. “I had a little something to eat earlier,” I tell him. “But thank you.”

“There’s always room for dessert.” He narrows his eyes, searching my face. “You can go to your room, freshen up if you need to, then meet me in the dining room in half an hour. I’ll be ready for dessert by then.” He holds my gaze a bit longer than necessary before turning away and sauntering down the hall. My chest is so tight, I can barely draw a breath, and my head is

spinning; I know he won't take no for an answer. Not a man like him.

My room is just across the hall from Ophelia's, which I guess is a deliberate move, so we're never very far from each other. It only takes me a few minutes to hang a few things and slide a few more things into the drawers of a beautiful antique dresser. The room is stunning, but then, so is the entire house. It does seem awfully big for a father and daughter, though. I guess there's other staff living here as well. Still, it's not the same as a family.

He said something about freshening up, didn't he? I don't want to disappoint him, so I change into the only nice sweater I own, then unwind my braid and brush it out, letting the waves hang well past my shoulders. I can't do much else since I don't have much else to work with. The salary offered during the application process will be more than enough for me to start working on a decent wardrobe and basic beauty products.

Just the idea of finally having everything I need makes me tingle down to my fingertips. I don't think anybody who hasn't gone through the sort of shit I've endured could fully understand what security will mean.

But first things first. If I want security, I've got to keep the boss happy, which means wandering around the house before arriving at my destination. Thankfully, I gave myself plenty of time, so I'm actually a few minutes early when I stride into a formal dining room with much more confidence than I feel inside.

"I appreciate punctuality." Matteo sets aside the tablet he was reading from before pushing his plate back to signal he's finished his meal. There is still plenty of chicken and roast potato on that plate, so I have to settle for studying the room rather than looking like a pathetic loser and drooling over his leftovers.

He catches me, of course, and is smirking when I look his way again. "This is a beautiful home. I am really thrilled to be here."

"Thank you. It's good that you're here."

Is it? Then why does he stare at me with what almost seems like anger? Like he resents me for some reason. Why hire me if he resents me? Maybe I'm imagining it—my imagination has been known to run away with me, and this

is a dangerous man, after all. I doubt anybody could blame me for being apprehensive. But I can't let that go too far, to where I start making things up in my head.

“How was it you were ready to move in at the drop of a hat?” He toys with a glass of wine, swirling the ruby liquid but staring at me the whole time.

I want so much to shrink under that penetrative stare, but instead, I keep my head held high. “I like to be prepared. And I had a good feeling about this.”

“Did you? So you were confident you would get the job even before we spoke?”

The hair on the back of my neck is starting to lift. “Is that wrong? I guess it sounds naïve, but I like to believe the best is going to happen.” And of all the lies I've told today, that has to be the biggest. My life has been pretty much the opposite of what I just described for years. There's been nothing for me but basic survival ever since the state came in and broke up my family and sent us all off to separate foster homes. I wouldn't recognize the babies now if they stood in front of me.

And then I aged out of the system, and it made me desperate to the point where applying for a job with a notorious crime boss seemed like a good idea.

He doesn't believe me. He won't say it—he would much rather stare at me like he's waiting for something else. Something more. But he won't come straight out and call me on it. Why? I didn't sign up to play games, yet that's exactly what it feels like I'm doing as we sit and eat ice cream together. I barely taste it. I want to get this over with, that's it. I want to retreat to my room—even if it isn't really mine.

I set the spoon aside and wipe my mouth on a silky napkin. “I should go to my room now. It's been a long day, and I'll need all my energy tomorrow.”

The first expression that even remotely looks like a smile passes over his generous mouth. “Yes, you will. She's going to put you through your paces.” To my surprise, he stands as well, and the legs of his chair scrape loudly over the floor. “I'll walk with you.”

“You don't have to. I'm sure you're busy.”

“I wouldn’t want you to get lost in this big house.” When he stares at me, I know it’s no use. He’s going to have his way. My legs tremble as he leads me from the room and down the hallway to the sweeping staircase in the entry hall. What is this all about? Is he screwing around with me? What if he wants something else from me once we’re in my room? What if that’s what all of this was about? I couldn’t possibly hope to fight off a man of his size.

By the time we reach my door, my nerves are in shreds, and I am on the verge of tears. But what’s worse, so much worse, is the way my heart threatens to burst when he leans in closer. Too close. Enough that I smell the spicy cologne he wears and the wine on his breath. His breath is hot on my face, while his seemingly black eyes stare deep into mine. “What’s...” I croak.

He doesn’t answer in words. Instead, his head darts forward like a snake’s strike, taking my breath away and pushing me against the wall while his tongue invades my mouth, pinning me in place with his body, caging me in with his arms, giving me no choice but to melt in the heat of his deep, searing kiss. My toes curl, and before I can help it, a whimper stirs in my throat. I don’t know if I should try to fight or take off my clothes. I’m so hot all of a sudden. So... *hungry*.

He pulls back, and I try to go with him, wanting more. I’m not ready to stop. And now he smiles fully, but it’s got a wicked edge to it, like he knows something I don’t. “Good night.”

I pull in a shaky breath, prepared to say the same, when a noise further down the hall steals my words. It’s Grace, the housekeeper, and from the corner of my eye, I watch her scurry down the stairs. Did she see us?

Either Matteo didn’t notice, or he doesn’t care. He only walks away while I slump against the wall and try to get a hold of myself.

This job just became so much more challenging.

MATTEO

“*B*oss? Are you okay?”

No. I’m the farthest thing from okay. I’ve been hellishly distracted all day—no, for the better part of a week, ever since Sarah showed up. Standing at the window of my office, I have a view of her and my daughter walking hand-in-hand. It’s a beautiful day, and Ophelia collects brightly colored leaves with Sarah’s assistance.

“Boss?” Bruno sounds legitimately worried when he joins me at the window. “Do you need anything?”

What a loaded question. There is something I most definitely need. “I’m fine. Is there anything else you want?”

His head snaps back a little, like he’s surprised at my abruptness. “No, I guess we have everything settled.”

“Good. Go earn your salary.” He leaves the room, and I’m not far behind. Unlike him, I head straight upstairs. She’s out of the house, which means she’s not here to catch me. Really, it wouldn’t matter if she did. This is my home, after all.

And now that she’s out of it, there’s only one place I need to go.

Right away, it strikes me that she doesn’t have much. Her closet and dresser are virtually empty except for a few basic pieces of clothing. What is it about her that makes me want to solve the mystery she poses? I have better things

to do, not to mention much more critical.

But there's not a damn thing I can focus on beyond this. Pressing my nose to her pillow to inhale the scent of her hair. This is where she sleeps, all alone. Night after night, I've forced myself to lock my door and stay away from hers, no matter how desperately I wanted to storm in here and take her. Claim her. She has a hold over me, and that's dangerous, but I'm dangerous, too. And I can handle it. I know I can.

Though, right now, digging through her things like some pathetic stalker, I have to wonder.

Her hamper sits in the closet and is half-full. On top of the pile of clothes is a pair of lace panties. I reach for them, running my fingers over the cheap, flimsy lace before picking up the garment and holding it to my nose. Her musky scent fills my senses, and in an instant, I'm hard, practically breaking the zipper on my pants. So hard it hurts.

I have no choice but to lower my zipper and pull myself free, the panties still pressed close to my face. I breathe deep before wrapping my free hand around my cock and giving it a few experimental strokes. Pre-cum already dribbles from my tip, and I use it, running it up and down my length before giving in to the impulse that has practically ruled my existence for the past week.

Faster, faster. I imagine my face buried between her smooth thighs, that it's her pussy I'm smelling, tasting, driving my tongue into while fisting my cock like my life depends on it. I bet she would be tight. I bet she tastes like the finest wine, sweeter than honey, rich and addictive.

I have to lean against the wall when my legs go weak in the rush of burning, consuming desire. I can almost hear her soft whimpers and pleading moans by the time the familiar tingle begins in the base of my spine and gives me no choice but to succumb to release. Before I can spill my cum, I use the panties to catch it, filling them since I can't fill her pussy. By the time I finish, my knees nearly buckle, and I can hardly breathe.

I'm still holding the panties, going soft, when the click of the doorknob makes the rest of my body go stiff. Sarah is already in the room before she notices me standing in the closet doorway. Her face goes deep red, and she

begins to back away. “Oh, I’m, I’m sorry—”

“What would you be sorry for?” I drop the panties to the floor before straightening myself out. “Where is Ophilia?”

“She...” Staring at the floor, she mumbles, “She’s taking a nap. She was worn out.”

Exactly what I wanted to hear. Now that I know her scent, I need more. So much more. “Lie down.”

“What?”

“I said, lie down on the bed. Now.”

“I don’t understand.”

“What part do you have difficulty with? Lie on the bed.” When she still doesn’t move, I can’t help but growl. “I want you. Isn’t it obvious? Lie down.”

She weighs her options and takes a seat on the edge of the bed. She’s still staring at the floor, even when I step up in front of her. I take her shoulders and push them back, gently but firmly, until she does as I told her.

Without saying another word, I sink to my knees and pull off the flats she’s wearing so I can more easily unbutton and pull down her jeans along with the thong she wears beneath them. She’s breathing fast, almost hyperventilating, and that doesn’t lessen any when my fingertips brush the insanely soft skin of her inner thighs.

But her pussy—oh, fuck, her smooth, shaved lips, the little hint of pink clit poking out from between them. So fresh and pretty. Nothing in the world could stop me from descending, running my tongue over her seam. Her hips jerk at the slightest touch, and I throw an arm across her hips to hold her down so I can indulge.

And I do, lapping up the creamy nectar pouring from her, coating my tongue, dripping onto the duvet. “Oh...” She sighs, and the sound only heightens my need. I’m getting hard again. This is better than anything I could’ve imagined during those sleepless, tormented nights.

Come for me. Come like a good girl. I drive my tongue into her cunt and savor her high-pitched whimpers before turning my attention to her pink bud. She's already so close, fists twisting the blanket, and her chest heaving with every ragged breath. All it takes is a few quick flicks against the tip of her clit, and she explodes, shoving a fist into her mouth to hold back a scream before a fresh flood of juice coats my mouth and chin, leaving me dizzy and overwhelmed.

The power she has over me. It's startling, almost scary. I've never been here before, not even with Nina. Not ever.

She's limp and breathless when I stand and adjust my erection. Her eyes are closed, her lips parted so she can suck in one shaky breath after another. "You can take the rest of the day off," I murmur.

I have to leave before I do something even more necessary and even more risky.

SARAH

“*I* decided to take the afternoon off. What do you say we go out for some ice cream?”

I don't think there's ever been a kid as thrilled as Ophelia is at her dad's announcement. You would think she just woke up on her birthday or Christmas morning and found a pile of presents waiting for her to unwrap. “Really?” she squeals. “You're going to play with us?”

What a choice of words. For the briefest moment, Matteo's eyes meet mine. I know what he's thinking because it's exactly what I'm thinking. He's already played with me.

And I really, really wish he would do it again. It's pathetic, not to mention dangerous, if I want to keep my job—and my self-respect. I made it too easy for him, but then it's not like I didn't want him. Or like his admission of wanting me didn't turn my body into one giant, throbbing bundle of need.

“Let's start with ice cream and see how it goes.” He tousles her curls, wearing a fond smile that threatens to crack my heart open if I'm not careful. It would be too easy to fall for this man.

“You know, I knew you weren't going to work today.” Ophelia plucks at his casual, long sleeve shirt. “You're not wearing work clothes.”

“And you are way too smart for your own good, kid.” He lifts his eyebrows when he looks my way again. “Well? In the mood for some ice cream?”

“There is never a time I’m not in the mood for ice cream.” I follow behind them, with Ophilia holding her dad’s hand and skipping with joy. I wonder if he has the first idea of how much she adores him.

It feels like living in a dream, getting into a sleek, black car whose driver closes the door for me once I slide into the backseat. Ophilia sits between us, and Matteo makes a big deal of fastening the buckle of her car seat and making sure she’s secure before we get moving. It’s all surreal, right down to the bodyguard sitting in the front passenger seat. At least he reminds me not to let myself get lost in the fantasy that there’s anything normal about Matteo’s life—or mine, now that I live with and work for him.

Of course, Ophilia doesn’t know any better. And she shouldn’t, either. I’m happy to go along with her, to laugh and joke the whole way into town, where we stop at an ice cream shop to get three cones before taking a walk so we can admire the windows of one cute, quaint shop after another.

Once she’s finished her cone, Ophilia takes my right hand in her left, and Matteo’s left in her right. I wish it didn’t feel so good. I wish my glance Matteo’s way didn’t reveal him watching me and wearing a funny, unreadable expression.

I also wish we didn’t need a bodyguard walking only a few feet behind us at all times. But I knew what I was signing on for. And like me, Bruno is only doing his job.

“Can we do this again tomorrow?” Ophilia asks once we’re back in the car.

Matteo gives her a gentle laugh before shaking his head. “I’m sorry, sweetheart. But that’s what makes special days special. You can’t have them all the time.”

“We’ll still have fun together,” I promise her, and she snuggles against me while holding her father’s hand. It would be so easy to forget what’s real and lose myself in the fantasy of us being something more than what we are to each other.

“How about I join you for dinner?” he suggests. “Would that help?”

Right away, her eyes light up again. I wish I had the ability to go from sad to happy so quickly, the way she does. “Yeah! Can you both eat with me?”

When I look down into those big, dark eyes, I am toast. How could I possibly turn her down?

After dinner, Matteo retreats to his office—but not before giving Ophilia a hug and a kiss goodnight. “Thank you for spending the day with me,” he murmurs close to her ear, just loud enough for me to hear. She’s practically glowing with pride when I take her hand so we can head upstairs for a bath before she goes to bed.

He is so much kinder and sweeter than I would ever have guessed. I could almost forget about the way he makes his living.

Ophilia keeps herself occupied during her bath, chattering away about every aspect of our day while I go back and forth over how to feel about her father. I’m still pondering my feelings and the confusion over what we did by the time I sit with her on her bed, carefully combing and scrunching her wet curls.

When the door opens a crack, my heart leaps in a way I wish it wouldn’t. I want it to be him—one more moment with Matteo before the night’s over.

Instead, it’s the gray-haired, sour-faced housekeeper. “Sarah.” Grace crooks a finger at me, and the way she looks around tells me she doesn’t want to be overheard.

“You got this, kiddo?” I place a pair of pajamas beside her before going to the door. “I’ll be right back for your story.”

As soon as I’m out in the hall, I ask, “What is it?”

She’s wringing her hands. “I have to talk to you. You seem like a sweet girl, and you love Ophilia, so you don’t deserve what’s coming.”

“I don’t understand what you mean,” I whisper while my blood runs cold.

“I... saw what happened between you and Mr. Bianchi in the hall on your first night.” She’s definitely not embarrassed to admit that. I would be if I were spying on somebody.

“Yes, I know.”

She still doesn’t seem embarrassed. “Mr. Bianchi... You have to be careful

with him. I've worked here for years, since his father's time, and I've seen him go through women like most people go through tissues. As soon as he's tired of them, he discards them. It doesn't matter if they work for him. He'll fire them without a second thought."

My blood has gone from cold to icy. I figured it would be like this, didn't I? It was always going to be complicated. And the worst part is, she has no idea how far we've gone since that night. It makes a simple kiss look like nothing.

"Thank you." I don't know what else to say. She narrows her eyes at me—maybe she was expecting something else—before giving me a firm nod and walking away.

What am I supposed to do now? I can't help but remember how nice it was today, how much fun we had. How normal everything seemed. Grace's warning has soured all of that. Spoiled it.

"Sarah? I'm ready. It's time for a story." Right. I'm here to do a job, and there's a little girl waiting for me. I can't make her suffer all because I don't know how to feel about her father.

But once she's down for the night, there's nothing to distract me from my worries. It's obvious we need to talk, even if I don't have the first clue what to say. Maybe if I had a little more experience with things like this, it would be easier. Matteo would probably laugh if he knew he was the first man to ever look at my body, to touch or taste it, or anything.

I have to be brave. I have to suck it up and get it over with, or else the questions and doubts are going to kill me. I need to do this.

The door to his office is open a crack. I close my fingers around the knob and start to push before realizing the voice I hear coming from inside isn't Matteo's.

"I want the fucker dead. This is what we talked about. That's the agreement we made." Whoever he is, he's angry—but he can't be serious. An agreement to kill somebody?

"I remember the agreement, Jack." Matteo almost sounds bored.

"Well?"

There's a sharp gasp, and I realize it's because I've already pushed the door and signaled my presence. I let go of the knob like it burns my skin and back away, ready to run—but it's too late for that because the door is opening wider, and Bruno's already menacing scowl deepens when he sees me.

“What the fuck is this?” the strange man barks while Matteo marches across the room to where Bruno holds me in place in the doorway.

“What are you doing down here?” Matteo growls with his face only inches from mine. “Tell me. What did you hear?”

“I didn't hear anything! I swear, I was just—”

Something cold in his eyes makes my mouth snap shut. How could I forget who he really is? How could I let myself think he was anything less than a vicious killer?

“We never did have a talk about your honesty, did we?” Before I can make any sense of that, he looks up at Bruno. “Take her to my room. Lock the door. I'll deal with this later.”

I know better than to fight. There's nothing I can do but let Bruno drag me away since I now understand I gave up my free will the minute I took this job. There's no choice but to live by his rules.

MATTEO

“Who the fuck was she?”

I’m still trying to compose myself when Giacomo barks out the question. I have my back to him, breathing hard, knowing she heard what we were talking about even if she tried to lie about it. She’s a terrible liar. Fear and recognition were written on every inch of her face, especially in her eyes, which were wide and terror-filled.

She knew who I was when she came here. She had to.

But knowing something and hearing it out loud are two very different things. I have no doubt she is now regretting ever stepping foot over the threshold.

And I doubt Ophelia would be enough to keep her here. I have to find a way to convince her myself.

“Hello?” Giacomo demands. “Who the fuck was that?”

“Nobody you need to worry about.” I close the door and lock it this time. My hand is trembling. I need to regain control of myself. Bad things happen when I lose control.

“Don’t give me that shit. Do you want to be in business together? Fine. We are in business together.”

That’s when he makes his biggest mistake yet. He steps up behind me and claps a hand on my shoulder, spinning me in place so we’re face-to-face. “So, start talking.”

I've never liked him. That's one thing that doesn't strictly matter when you're in business. There are no extra points for liking a business partner. He's good at what he does, he's honest enough, and he's discreet. That's all I really need.

Now, all of that is stripped away until I only see the man. He's crude and crass, not to mention more than a little full of himself.

And he's got some pretty fucked-up ideas about who's calling the shots here—and how far I'm willing to let him go.

"For one thing." I fling his hand away, sneering in disgust as I look him up and down. "Don't ever put your fucking hands on me again. Understood?"

"Come again?"

"You heard me. Number two, it's not your place to ask questions about any aspect of my personal life. What happened here has nothing to do with you."

"That's a pile of bullshit, and we both know it." With his arms folded, he tosses his head back and stares at me over the end of his nose, the way he always has. He thinks having a few years on me makes him hot shit. "The little whore you have running around your house walked in here in the middle of an important discussion."

That single word has the power to take the entire world and dwindle it down to a single point. I see nothing around me but his snide, asshole face. Everything else is dark and fuzzy. He is in a very dangerous position right now and has no idea. If he did, he would no longer be in the room.

"I am going to let that pass just this once," I grit out through clenched teeth. "But don't count on me being generous again."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"It means if you don't watch your mouth, I'll have to break it. It's up to you."

His brows draw together in confusion and probably doubt before he cracks a smile. "Oh, so that's how it is. She's what? The whore with a heart of gold? How long have you been fucking her?"

He did this to himself.

My fist pistons out and connects with his mouth before he knows what's coming. One second, he's laughing, mocking Sarah—and me by extension.

The next, he's stumbling backward, arms pinwheeling before he claps a hand over his bleeding mouth. "The fuck?" he shouts, and when he does, blood dribbles from between his fingers.

"I warned you," I tell him, opening the door to usher him out. "And now, you can get out of here before I decide I liked that enough to do it again. Got me?"

"You're out of your fucking mind." He makes a point of spitting blood onto the floor before glaring at me.

"Maybe I am." I advance on him, and he backs away like the coward he is. "But if you ever disrespect her again, I won't stop at a punch in the mouth. I will fucking end you. Do you understand?"

He says nothing, only giving me one final, cold stare before turning around with as much dignity as he has left and quick-stepping his way down the hall.

In the aftermath of my rage, I'm shaking, thirsty for blood now that I've shed a little. I let him off too easy. The impulse to follow him is almost strong enough to overwhelm me, but it would be a waste of time. There are more important things to take care of.

Like Sarah. What do I do? I need her to trust me, and not only because Ophelia loves her.

It's because I love her. I have no business feeling the way I do about that girl, but I can't help it. There's no hope of convincing myself to leave her alone. I need her, and that's all there is to it.

I need her so badly; the desperate craving moves through my veins like lava, lighting up my darkest places, the ones I thought died long ago. She's brought life back to me. To my household, to my daughter's life. I wake up in the morning, and she's all I want to see. I go to bed craving her skin, her warmth, her sweetness.

When Bruno returns, he finds me alone in my office, pacing the floor. "What happened?" he asks. "Did he leave?"

I ignore his question, as the answer is pretty obvious. Instead, I push past him and leave the room, ignoring what doesn't matter in favor of what does as I march up to my bedroom.

I hate the way she flinches when I unlock the door and open it partway, going slowly to gauge her reaction. It's like trying to approach a spooked animal. I've already made things bad enough and don't want to make them worse.

She is sitting on the edge of the bed and now wraps her arms around her trembling form. She's afraid of me. I can't blame her. "I'm sorry," she whispers, but that isn't the worst part. The worst part is the way her eyes fill with tears. "I swear, I didn't mean—"

I've already heard enough. "Stop." I step into the room and close the door behind me, fighting to keep from going straight to her. That's all she needs, having me fling myself at her when she's already terrified.

"You don't need to apologize," I tell her, then watch relief loosen her muscles. "You did nothing wrong. I should've double-checked the door was closed."

"But... you were so angry."

"I was taken by surprise. That's all. Sarah, I..." I can't ignore the constant, pulsing need that has me in its grip, intensified now that it's just the two of us in my room, alone. "I need you. I need you so much that it isn't easy to breathe. I need you now. I don't think I can stay away."

Her mouth falls open while my dick begins to thicken in anticipation. "What are you saying?" she whispers, eyes searching my face before she starts trembling again.

I can only think of one way to show her, and so I do, crossing the floor in a few long strides, taking her arms in my hands, and pulling her to her feet. "You are the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," I whisper, letting my hands run down her arms until I'm lacing my fingers through hers. "I've never wanted anything or anyone as much as I want you. I have from the minute you walked into my office, and it's only gotten worse since then. Harder to fight. You have to know. You have to feel it."

"I do," she confesses in the softest whisper.

“Let me touch you,” I beg in a whisper of my own. I’m shaking, burning for her by the time I lift her thin sweater over her head so I can cup her full tits encased in a lace bra. “You are so beautiful.”

She leans into me, swaying, before her eyes close, and a whimper of pure desire escapes her parted lips.

Lips I quickly claim with my own, kissing her deeply as I continue peeling away everything separating my body from hers.

Tonight, there’s not going to be anything separating us. Not anymore.

SARAH

*I*s this really happening? Did I fall asleep waiting for him? Because this has to be a dream. The thrill of his kiss. The delicious fire that races its way over my skin at his slightest touch. His urgent breathing, the way he groans when he cups my ass with both hands and pulls me in. It can't be real. I'm only imagining this.

"So beautiful," he whispers between kisses, reaching behind me to unclasp my bra so my boobs can fall free. His eyes widen before he descends on them, burying his face between them and pushing me back onto the bed so he can worship me. That's the only word I can think of. It's worship and reverence; his touch and kiss are respectful and passionate all at once. He takes his time, using his lips and his tongue to make me moan and writhe beneath him. My heart's pounding, and I can't stop trembling, but every kiss against my flushed skin eases me a little deeper into relaxing and enjoying. Either he is extremely good at this, or he's meant for me, meant to give my body pleasure.

I arch my back once he kisses his way down my stomach. When he hooks his fingers under my waistband, I lift my hips to help him. I've never been here before. I don't know what to do or how I'm supposed to act. I'm going on instinct, and my instincts are telling me to take everything he has to give. I have never needed anything more than this.

We've been here before, with his head between my thighs. There's no fear now, no anxiety. I part my legs eagerly and lift my hips; I'm so desperate to have his tongue on me. He tears off his clothes and treats me to the sight of

his chiseled chest and thick shoulders before lowering his head and placing the softest, sweetest kiss against my bare mound.

But then he growls, like his resolve vanished at that first taste of my skin. And now he's like an animal, lapping at me, grunting and moaning the way I do. Every sweep of his tongue takes me higher and heightens the tension building in my core. He's invading me, making me his, making me sob with joy and unbelievable bliss.

"Please, don't stop," I beg, jerking my hips and grinding myself against his face. He likes that, so I do it again, and he rewards me by sucking on my nub, flicking the tip with his tongue. "Oh, god! Yes!"

I could sob with relief when the tension breaks and bliss rolls over me like a wave and pulls me under, where everything is sweet and warm and right. I've done that so many times alone, and it's nothing compared to having a partner. The right partner.

The right partner who won't stop kissing and touching, caressing and stroking. The scruff on his cheeks chafes my sensitive skin, but I welcome the sensation. I welcome it all. There's so much I want him to show me.

"You taste so good." There's pure happiness in his smile as he crawls up the length of my body. "Taste yourself," he invites before covering my mouth with his. His tongue slides between my lips, and I taste my juices on him. There's something that feels so wrong about it, and somehow, that only makes me want more. More of him, more of this, more of everything. I run my fingers through his hair and hold him close, moaning into his mouth, wrapping my legs around him. I don't know what I'm doing, really, I don't, but my eagerness makes him groan before he grinds against me, still wearing his boxer briefs. He's so hard, so big, and for the first time, a touch of fear leaks into the blazing heat, making my body go stiff for a heartbeat.

And he feels it. He breaks the kiss to look down at me with concern lurking in his dark eyes. "What is it? Tell me."

Even if I didn't want to, I would have no choice. I can't resist him. "I'm a little nervous. This... this is my first time."

"I had a feeling it might be." He kisses me again, soft and sweet. "Do you

trust me? Do you believe I'll make it good for you? Because I would never do anything to hurt you."

I believe him. A sense of peace replaces the fear, and I smile while running a hand down his cheek. "I trust you."

"I promise, I'll take it slow." He reaches past me into the nightstand behind me and pulls out a foil packet. I watch, fascinated, as he unrolls the condom down his thick, unbelievably long dick. He's huge. How am I supposed to take all of that inside me?

I can't believe how much I want to try.

He settles between my legs again and goes back to kissing me. I want him inside me, but he waits, and soon I realize he's easing me into it. Making sure I'm relaxed, and that I want him as much as he wants me. I don't know how much more I possibly could; there's a wet spot under me, and my pussy is pulsing rhythmically with every beat of my heart. I don't know how much more I can take of this burning pressure before I have to beg him to fuck me.

The sudden pressure at my entrance makes me gasp, and all at once, I lift my hips, eager for more. "Take it easy," he rasps, rolling his hips, teasing me.

"But I need you," I whisper, dragging my nails across his muscular shoulders. "Please, take me. I want this so much."

"Not as much as I do," he promises, then pushes forward.

I suck in a gasp of surprise and pain, biting down on his shoulder to hold back my cries. He moves slowly, filling me inch by inch, stretching me until I don't know if I want him to stop or if I want him to never stop because even the slight touch of pain has pleasure behind it.

"Are you okay?" he asks once he's as deep as he can go, and his hips are settled against mine.

I open my eyes and see the concern in his. It lights up my heart. I think I might love him. "Yes." I wrap my legs around him and hold him in place. "Yes, I'm okay."

And then he starts to move, and I move with him, letting him set the pace,

trusting him the way he asked me to. How did I go my whole life without this? Feeling connected, wanted, cherished.

His lips find my throat, and I throw my head back, gasping when he goes deep, so deep, pressing me into the mattress, whispering my name like it's a prayer while his lips trace my throat, my shoulders, my jaw. How can such sweet kisses spread fire through me?

"Yes," I whisper, because it's the only word that runs through my head. Yes, I want this. Yes, I want you. Yes, this is good, this is right, this is where we're meant to be. I'm more sure of it with every thrust, every time our bodies come together, with every kiss, and every time our eyes meet, and I get to watch him lose himself in me.

"You're gonna make me come," he whispers. Now he's helpless; this strong, powerful man is helpless inside me. "Fuck, you're so tight. I'm gonna come..."

I tighten my legs around him, jerking my hips to meet his strokes because I want to come, too. I need to. There's nothing but pleasure now, deeper and more intense than before.

"Fuck, Sarah... You're so good..." He buries his face in my neck, grunting, breathing faster, and the heat from his breath and the sound of his pleasure take me higher, so high, high enough that I would swear I'm flying before he slams himself deep one last time.

And just like that, fireworks explode behind my eyelids. Red, blue, green, and gold fill my head, bursting with every tremor that runs through my body. I clench around him, holding him tight, afraid of the intensity, afraid there's something wrong with me for coming so hard. Am I broken? He's probably going to think I'm ridiculous.

Nothing could be further from the truth. He pulls out, and I whimper in disappointment, but he doesn't leave my side, wrapping me in his arms and almost rocking me the way he would a baby. Easing me through it, calming me down until reality comes back in, and I can think straight again.

Unfortunately, when I do, it isn't the thoughts of how amazing that was that first enter my head.

It's Grace's warning. Now that we've done this, is he going to get bored? Is he going to decide he doesn't need me just when I need him most?

MATTEO

She's even more gorgeous now that I've claimed her. Yet those big, brown eyes keep darting away from mine whenever I try to hold her gaze. "Are you all right?" I finally ask. "Are you hurt?"

She shakes her head but still won't look at me. "No. I mean, a little, but not in a bad way. I just... I don't know what to do now."

"Now? Now, you bask in what's called the afterglow. You let me hold you for a little while. Will you?"

She rests her head on my shoulder, but I still feel her hesitation. I have to wonder if this is more than awkwardness after her first time. "You know, you don't have anything to be embarrassed about."

"Oh, I know."

It doesn't seem that way. "What's on your mind? Talk to me." After stroking her back for a while, I feel the tension draining from her muscles and joints. Her weight settles on me as she relaxes, and I welcome it. I welcome all of her.

"You said something earlier," she whispers in the dark. "About honesty? I don't remember exactly what you said."

Oh, hell, I hardly remember myself.

"And you're right. I wasn't honest with you. And now I'm afraid."

“Afraid of what?”

“I’m afraid you’ll tire of me now that we did this. I’m afraid something got ruined. And I really, really need this job. It’s all I have.”

“That can’t be true. What about your family?”

She only scoffs before pushing herself up on her elbow and staring at my chest. “You know I lied about that. And I know you know.” She bites down on her lip, and I hold my breath, waiting. “I do have the siblings I told you about, but it didn’t go the way I described. I was twelve when social workers came and took us all out of the apartment. All four of us. We got split up. I never saw them or my mom again.”

And there I was, worried she was lying because she was a plant from a rival family.

“When I turned eighteen, I was on my own. No more foster care, nothing like that, so I’ve been bouncing around for about a year now.”

“What do you mean, bouncing around?”

“I mean, I’ve been homeless.” Her voice cracks. “Sometimes I sleep in shelters, sometimes I sleep on a couch somewhere. I’ve had a couple of jobs, but none of them have lasted long. The only thing that ever came out of it was the people I worked with and how nice they were. They would let me crash for a few nights now and then. I found a way to get by, but... I can’t do that forever. That’s why I need to stay here. I’m sorry I lied, but I didn’t think you would hire me if I told you the truth.”

“Oh. Sarah.” She lets out a strangled gasp of surprise when I pull her closer and hold on tight. “I wish you had told me. I’m so sorry you went through that. You are the strongest person I’ve ever met.”

“All I did was—”

“You have fought like hell and moved forward when most people would lie down and die. That is strength. I can’t tell you how much I admire you.”

“But do you understand what I’m trying to say? Are you going to get rid of me?”

“What gave you that idea?” I tuck a strand of hair behind her ear, then take her jaw in my hand and tilt her head until we’re eye to eye. I’m not going to let her dodge the question, no matter how she wants to.

“I... heard... something.” She closes her eyes and blows out a sigh. “I don’t wanna get anybody in trouble. But somebody around here told me you get tired of women, then you get rid of them. They were trying to warn me to be careful.”

“Grace. It had to be Grace.”

Her eyes fly open wide. “How did you know?”

I didn’t for sure, but there’s a reason I guessed as quickly as I did. “She’s a busybody. Thinks she knows better than everybody, all because she’s been here as long as she has. But she doesn’t have the first idea what she’s talking about.”

“So she was lying?”

“Not exactly.” She flinches. “I’m going to tell you the truth. I won’t sugarcoat things. Honesty is all we have, right?”

“The truth can hurt.”

“It can. And yes, she’s not wrong. I have been through my share of women. Not when I was with my late wife, though—when I find the right woman, that’s it. But in the years before I met her? I had my share of flings. Maybe more than my share. But that’s none of Grace’s business, and since I lost Nina, there hasn’t been another woman in my life. I guess she didn’t tell you that part.”

“No. She didn’t.”

“Not until you.”

“But—”

I kiss her and don’t stop kissing her until she softens and melts into me. I don’t care what it takes. I’m going to convince her I mean this. That I need her, and this is real.

Her eyes are hazy by the time I let her up for air. “This is real,” I whisper, stroking her hair, her face, her throat before kissing the tip of her nose. “I mean it. I’m all yours if you want me.”

She gasps softly, searching my face like she’s looking for the truth. Is she afraid to believe me? I hate that she has any reason to doubt what I mean with all my heart.

“Well?” I ask after her silence becomes too much to bear. “Do you want me?”

“You know I do.”

“But I need to hear it from you. I don’t want you to say it because you feel like you have to,” I insist. “I want the truth.”

“I want you. I want this, what we have right now. I do. I just can’t imagine why you would want me. I’m nobody.”

“You are everything. And if you ever point me in the direction of whoever it was who convinced you otherwise, I’ll kill them.”

“I’m not even going to act like I think you’re kidding.”

“Good. Why waste time pretending?”

The sharp little laugh that bursts from her mouth gives me hope. She looks surprised at her reaction, and this time, I have to laugh. She wants to give in. I feel it. She even looks regretful and certainly sounds that way when she replies, “You could have anybody in the whole world. You’re handsome, you have money, you’re smart. And you have a beautiful little girl who any woman would fall in love with. What do I have that makes me special enough for you?”

“It has nothing to do with special enough. You’re already special, and you were before we met. I want to take care of you. I want to make sure you never have to worry about another thing as long as you live.”

She bites her lip, still fighting her lingering doubts.

I think I know how to solve this. “Give me a second.” I unwind my arms from around her body and get out of bed, heading straight for the safe in my

closet. She wants proof? I'll give her proof.

"What are you doing?" she asks when I turn on the lamp on the nightstand, then sit beside her on the bed.

"I'm showing you how serious I am." I hold out the sapphire blue velvet box. "Take a look."

Her hands are shaking, and the box shakes with them. "Matteo..."

"I like that," I tell her with a smile. "I want you to say my name all the time. Say it again."

"Matteo," she whispers, still staring at the box.

"It's not going to bite." When she doesn't open it, I do, watching her reaction when she takes her first look at the four-carat diamond set in platinum. It sparkles almost blindingly, and I can see the reflection of those sparkles in her wide eyes.

"Oh, my god," she says on a breath.

"It belonged to my mother," I explain as I take the ring from its velvet cushion. "But now it belongs to you. If you want it."

"What are you saying?"

Why bother with words when actions speak louder? I take hold of her left hand and slide the ring over her finger. It's a perfect fit. The way she is a perfect fit for me. "I'm saying I want you to be my wife."

"You're... sure?"

The fact that she is not repulsed by the idea floods my system with relief. "I've never been more sure of anything. I want you to be mine, now and always. Will you? Will you make me the happiest man alive and agree to be my wife?"

She doesn't stare down at the ring but instead throws her arms around my neck confirms I've made the right choice. "Yes. Yes, yes, that's what I want. I want to be your wife."

I close my eyes and soak in the sheer joy of the moment. "I love you," I

whisper in her ear, stroking her hair while I hold her tight.

“I love you,” she murmurs, and I feel her joyful tears against my cheek. “I love you so much. You and Ophelia. I can’t believe we’re going to be a family.”

A family. A family full of love.

That is as good a place for a marriage to start as any I can think of.

EPILOGUE

SARAH

Two years later...

“*M*om? Can Christopher have a snack?”

I look up from the laundry I’m folding to give my daughter a narrow-eyed look. “Christopher wants a snack?”

Her curls bounce when she nods. “Yup. He told me so.”

“Honey, your brother is fifteen months old. Are you telling me he asked for a snack?”

“Well... I kind of want a snack, too.”

“Oh. That explains it.” I can barely hold back a grin as I carry the laundry basket to the dresser. “Yes, you can have a snack, but your brother doesn’t need one. Next time, just ask for yourself, okay?”

“Okay.” She runs off like lightning, the way she always does. We’ve been a family for two years now, and I would swear the kid has aged two decades in that time. She is just too much.

She also has me completely wrapped around her finger, the same as her dad. There’s not much either of us can deny her.

“Honey.” Matteo happens to walk past the baby’s bedroom in time to catch me putting his little onesies and tiny socks away. “That’s what Grace is for, remember? You don’t have to do any of this.”

“But you know I like to.” Not only that, but I have a certain way I like to do things, and I like to feel like I’m the one taking care of my kids. I don’t have to work or anything—my job is taking care of my family. It was fine to let Grace take care of things before I came to live here, but times have changed.

“I know you like to.” He winds his arms around my waist and presses his lips to my forehead. No matter how many times he does it, the gesture never ceases to melt me. He knows just how to love me the way I need to be loved.

“How is your day going?” I ask as we leave the baby’s room hand-in-hand. Christopher is across the hall in his Pack and Play, where his sister was entertaining him until she decided to run downstairs for a snack.

“You know how it is. Phone calls, contracts, and the like when I would much rather be up here with you guys.” As always, Christopher goes wild at his father’s approach, bouncing up and down on his butt and lifting his chubby arms for Matteo to sweep him up, holding him high so he can blow raspberries against the baby’s chubby belly. The sound of his laughter mixed with Matteo’s is the sweetest music. I’ll never tire of it.

Thinking of being tired makes me look at the time. “I don’t know why I told Ophelia she could have a snack. It’s time for naps.” And even though she’s a big girl at seven, she spent the morning swimming and always does better with a nap after she’s been so active for hours.

Matteo helps me settle them down, changing Christopher’s diaper while I convince our daughter she’s not too old to take a nap. Normally, I might bend a little and compromise with quiet time in her room. But there’s some business I need to discuss with my husband, and I would like to be alone while I do.

Finally, everything’s quiet, with both kids tucked away peacefully in their rooms. Their father and I meet in the middle, finding each other in the hallway. “You know, I was thinking,” I whisper as I tiptoe his way.

“Thinking about what?” he asks.

“About redecorating the empty bedroom next to Christopher’s.” I take him by the hand and lead him that way, to a room full of sunshine, but not much else. There are a few boxes here, like the one holding a toddler bed for when Christopher is too big for his crib. But we have some time to go before that happens.

“What do you want to do with it?” Matteo asks.

“I was thinking maybe it should be a bedroom.” I turn to him, biting my lip. “Maybe another nursery?”

He must have had a long day already because it takes a second for understanding to dawn on his face. “Are you serious? You’re pregnant again?”

“It’s not too soon, is it?”

“Too soon?” He throws his arms around me and lifts me off my feet, spinning me in a circle while I giggle helplessly. “Are you kidding me? I’m almost disappointed it took us this long.”

He finally sets me on my feet and takes my face in his hands. “You keep finding ways to make me the happiest man in the world.”

“I love you,” I whisper as happy tears fill my eyes.

“And I adore you.” His hands find my hips, and he pulls me close so I can feel the excitement in his raging erection. “Would it be wrong to ask the mother-to-be if I could fuck her senseless while we have a little time to ourselves?”

“Are you kidding?” I kick the door closed behind me before pulling him to the floor. “Why do you think I waited until nap time to tell you?”



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