



SERVING
THE MOGUL

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ONE

MAXIMUS

“*OH...WELL, HELLO.*”

The sultry voice caught my attention, mainly because the owner had pushed her way into my personal space. The semi-formal cocktail dress, a warm champagne gold, played up her honey-colored skin and highlighted her hair.

She was attractive.

But as she eased closer, pressing her tits into my arm, I didn't feel a spark of interest.

Was it because I'd felt her frank study of me ever since I'd entered the lounge or because I preferred to be the one pursuing a companion? Or maybe I was just bored with easy women? Nothing about her caught my decidedly jaded interests.

Likely, it was a combination of all three.

Still, I gave her a polite smile as I extricated myself. “Have a good evening.”

She faked a playful pout, but I saw the sharp snap of annoyance in her eyes.

“I was ready to ask if I could buy you a drink, sugar.”

“I'll have to pass.” Rapping my knuckles on the bar, I caught the gaze of the head bartender and nodded to the woman. “But Ronnie will get you one on the house.”

She feigned surprise. “On the house...? Oh, wait. I *knew* you looked familiar. You are Maximus.”

“Yes. Have a pleasant night.”

Before she could engage me in further conversation, I strode from the lounge. Ronnie and the lounge manager, Katrina, had things under control, so I continued to make sure everything else inside the sprawling building flowed smoothly.

It was the last day of opening week at my new hotel.

Today was the busiest day with two wedding receptions, a rehearsal party, an anniversary dinner, and a sweet sixteen gala.

Business was good, and I intended to keep it that way.

After walking through the casual but upscale restaurant on the hotel’s main floor, I started up the staircase at a near jog. A broad landing had several seating arrangements, all in use as people gathered to chat. I nodded at a few acquaintances or staff as I continued up the second flight to the mezzanine level and headed toward the eastern tower.

The sweet sixteen gala was in full swing, the strobe lights and a pink and purple disco ball flashing as I opened the door to slip inside.

The staff member assigned to watch the door for party crashers gave me a quick look. He nodded in recognition before turning his focus back to the partying teens.

It smelled like cake, candy...and cigarette smoke. Cursing under my breath, I made my way around the perimeter of the room, noticing the lack of adults as I continued to search for the smoker.

I found the two teenagers hovering in a corner near a potted fern.

After dealing with them, I left, lingering only long enough to call down to the events staffing office and request personnel to hunt down the parents that left their underage daughters and friends in the banquet room without adult supervision.

The two wedding receptions were well underway and well in hand, so there was no need for me there.

I loved weddings, although not for me, personally.

I've never done relationships and the shit that came after. Not once.

So why did I love weddings?

Most people associate weddings with white gowns, pretty flowers, and diamond rings, but not me. I associated them with green—giant piles of it.

Turning toward Prism Hall, I checked the time. It was a few minutes shy of eight, less than a half-hour from the last evening event scheduled.

I slowed my pace as I neared the double doors thrown open, as staff hurried in and out, taking care of last-minute touches.

The Henderson/Garcia rehearsal dinner was an intimate affair with only twenty guests, including the bride and groom-to-be. Tomorrow, the happy couple would exchange rings at the Emerald Pavilion before moving to the Diamond Gallery for the reception. It was the largest ballroom in the entire facility, and since the hotel was also catering at the wedding reception, the profit margin was a number that made me smile.

It all amazed me. The echo of the skinny kid I once was looked around and shook his head. It was a million miles away from the impoverished neighborhood where I grew up.

“Everything seems to be going well.”

As if she'd sensed I was thinking about her, Charity Jones, the Lux Hotel's head of event coordination, had appeared next to me.

“Yes.” I nodded.

She tapped an ink pen against the planner she always carried on her person. “We really should have pushed harder for them to have ordered the hotel's catering service.”

I didn't bother looking away from the flowing rhythm in the banquet hall. “Keeping the customer happy is part of the package, Ms. Jones.”

“Of course. But the packages that offer catering from the hotel would bring an extra—”

Turning my head, I looked at her.

She stopped talking mid-sentence.

It wasn't an uncommon reaction around me. I didn't set out to outright intimidate people into silence, but since it often worked to my benefit, I didn't mind when it happened.

“As we discussed, when putting packages together for the events portfolio, we need to maintain excellent flexibility for our patrons, Ms. Jones.”

I knew to the nickel the difference between packages with or without catering included. I also knew that with wedding parties, in particular, it was essential to cater to the customers' needs and wishes. It's the one moment in life they overspend without hesitating. Big time. More money than they'd ever imagined. And I'd like to make friends with people when they splurge.

“Of course, Maximus. I...am going to check in with Shirlene and see how she's doing.” Charity gave me a polite smile and hurried off down the hall.

No, she wanted to get away from me.

That was obvious.

It wasn't much of a shock.

I can be an asshole sometimes. I know.

I didn't particularly mind or care. So what if people didn't like me, especially those who worked for me? Respect my authority and do the damn job. That's it. And in Charity's case, stop pouting.

Pushing away from the wall, I walked to the banquet room. An enticing scent filled the air, reminding me I hadn't eaten in hours.

“Excuse me.”

“Certainly.” I stepped aside without looking at the owner of the sultry voice.

But as the woman strode past me, I discovered something even more enticing than the delectable food teasing my stomach.

The woman.

With brisk, serene confidence, she walked with one hand holding a cellphone to her ear, the other brushing back her short hair.

She had an amazing ass.

Interest stirred.

Turn around, sweetheart.

She didn't. Instead of reading my mind, she walked straight to the double doors on the far side of the banquet hall.

I considered following, but before I could decide, my Bluetooth earpiece came to life. Turning for the door, I took the call. "Maximus."

"Boss, it's Roger. We got a situation."

The urgency in my hotel manager's voice made me increase my pace.

"THAT COULD HAVE BEEN...UGLY."

"Yes." There wasn't much else to say, so I let it go at that. Standing with my admin assistant and Roger, the three of us watched as the ambulance doors closed.

One of the private dining rooms hosted the fiftieth anniversary. The husband had been regaling his family with his usual story they'd all heard a dozen times—when he'd abruptly gone beet red, clutched his chest, and hit the floor.

While half the guests were in shock, a granddaughter had called 911. One of my servers, an army reservist with medic training, had performed CPR, which likely saved his life.

“Boss, I don’t know about you, but I’m ready to call it a day,” Miranda said, heaving out a heavy sigh. “Anything you need before I head to my room?”

“Contact the server...Penny.”

“I’ve already noted it in my calendar, sir.” Miranda smiled. She’s wasting her potential in the position she holds.”

“It’s a little scary how you sometimes read my mind, Miranda.”

I went back inside. I’d been heading toward the kitchen before the dining room emergency, so I veered in that direction, absently adjusting my cufflinks.

My phone buzzed, and I pulled it from my pocket, grimacing when I saw who’d just texted me.

Charity Jones: I just heard about the incident at the Peters’ booking. I’ll get PR to draft a press release.

I fired back a response.

M: We don’t need a PR release. I handled the matter.

Charity Jones: Maximus, incidents like these can escalate quickly. I think we should contact legal. Find out our liability if he doesn’t make it.

M: No press. Leave legal out of it. I’ll make the call if we need them. You’re off duty the rest of the night.

Go home, I thought, irritated, and leave me alone.

I appreciated an employee who could take the initiative, but I didn’t appreciate an employee who assumed they knew everything about me and how I handled situations.

Charity seemed to be the latter. We needed to have a chat.

TWO

TINA

I'D SPENT MUCH OF THE AFTERNOON UPDATING MY WEBSITE AND HAD forgotten to eat...again. On my way to the new luxury hotel in downtown Houston, I'd devoured a microwave burrito.

It had been barely mediocre, serving only to fill the hole in my stomach.

Surrounded by the divine scents of food from the catering company, run by my sister, Dina, and her husband, Newt, I concluded the microwave burrito hadn't just been mediocre—it had been an insult to my senses.

Dina, older by less than a year and so kind and warm I couldn't imagine anybody not loving her, caught sight of my face and held up her hands. "Okay, now...what happened, who died, and where's the body?"

Despite my foul mood, I smiled. "Nobody died. But if you ask me, whoever concocted microwave burritos should be dead."

She wrinkled her nose. "Oh, honey. Please don't tell me that's all you've eaten today."

"Okay. I won't." With a self-deprecating smile, I cut around her. "Where's the restroom in this joint?"

With a sigh, she answered, and I followed her directions to an employee's restroom. Pleased to find it wasn't the size of a postage stamp, I tidied my hair and gave myself a mental pep talk.

The last thing I'd wanted to do on a Friday night was helping my sister cater a wedding rehearsal dinner. I had nothing against weddings. And I adored my sister. But every time I pulled on the server's black outfit, it reminded me of how much my own business was failing.

"Not failing," I told the woman in the mirror. But judging by the expression in the dark blue eyes, she didn't buy my lie. The door swung open, and I cut off the one-sided conversation.

Stepping a few steps from the restroom into the brightly lit kitchen, so new it sparkled, I followed the sound of Dina's voice. She did her regular pep talk with the staff. Dina hated when I called them pep talks, but what else was I supposed to call them?

As the rest of the servers dispersed, I went to stand with her.

"Are you already trying to figure out what you can sneak away in a doggy bag?" Dina gave me a sidelong look.

"Absolutely not. I'm a professional."

"A professional pain in my ass." But she grinned. "Don't go sneaking food. I figured you'd be hungry, so I put together a plate for you to take home. It's in the first refrigerator, all wrapped up."

Throwing my arms around her, I gave her a smacking kiss on the cheek.

"You are my favorite big sister, Dina."

"I'm your only big sister." With a roll of her eyes, she checked her watch. "It's time. Help me get things rolling?"

"Sure." Linking my arm through hers, I wiggled my eyebrows. "So...you wanna lay bets on how many disasters will happen tonight?"

"Don't." She groaned. "The last thing we need are disasters. This gig is a great opportunity for Newt and me. Let's not jinx it." Dina shuddered.

"PLEASE HELP ME INTERVENE?" Dina looked almost frantic.

The groom's ex-wife complained *loudly*, and I gripped my sister's hand and squeezed. "You keep her away from the bride while I go find the kitchen manager. Otherwise, I think she's about to get a fork through her hand."

"She deserves it," Dina muttered. "Showing up like this...."

Losing the rest of the conversation as she strode off, I sighed.

As much as I complained about the many hours I spent lately helping my sister, the work she provided was a godsend. I needed the money. Plus, I could help my dear sister not stress over wedding drama and party crashers.

Now, where to find the kitchen manager?

THREE

MAXIMUS

PUSHING THROUGH THE SWINGING DOORS, I STRODE INTO THE RESTAURANT'S kitchen, nodding at the few who looked up long enough to notice me. The catering team and my staff worked together in surprising sync, something that rarely happens.

Tantalizing scents wafted from trays as servers moved to refill empty chafing dishes in the banquet hall just down the corridor, and my pulse picked up speed when I spotted the brunette I'd glimpsed earlier.

"Excuse me?" She asked with her left hand against the swinging door, giving me a chance to take in the short, neat cut of her nails, her long, slim fingers... and the lack of a wedding ring. Even though I'd only seen a glimpse from behind earlier, I knew it was her. That voice, throaty and rich, was unmistakable.

The surrounding chatter died, and several of the staff members glanced at me.

"Is the kitchen manager around?" That sultry voice was direct and to the point. "Or the head cook?"

Maybe if she hadn't had the most fuckable mouth I'd seen in a long while, I wouldn't have been so distracted. But I was very, very distracted, and those full lips twisted into an annoyed frown.

"Well?" She cocked a brow as she waited for me to say something.

"I don't know." Sliding my hands into the front pockets of my trousers, I smiled widely.

She blinked.

Several seconds passed as she ran her tongue across her teeth and closed her eyes for a count of five. When she looked back at me, she had a polite, almost saccharine smile on her face. “Excuse me. Did I hear you say *you don’t know?*”

“Yes.” Inclining my head, I waited to see how she’d handle that.

She didn’t disappoint me.

She advanced on me, faces locked.

Her eyes, a dark and velvety blue, like the expanse of a Texas sky if you could get out of the city far enough to escape the lights, narrowed slightly on mine.

She didn’t blink. “It’s Friday night during opening week. An employee of the kitchen should always know where the kitchen manager or head chef is.” She angled her head slightly, one brow lifting.

She wasn’t wrong.

But since I didn’t exactly *work* here, I wasn’t sure the criticism applied.

She was still glaring at me, waiting for a response.

“Give me a second.” Tapping my Bluetooth, I waited until my assistant picked up. “Hey, I’m in the Crystal kitchen. Neither Tito nor...” Damn. The name escaped me.

The brunette with the too-sexy mouth and efficiently neat manicure watched me closely.

“Jeannie?” Miranda offered in my ear.

“Yes. Neither Tito nor Jeannie are around, and I think there might be an issue in the Prism Hall. Track them down. Now.”

Ending the call, I smiled. “I’m typically busy handling...bigger fires, but my assistant will have Tito and Jeannie here within the next two minutes. Or less.”

Her lids flickered slightly, and a faint blush bloomed on her high cheekbones.

“I’m Maximus,” I said, offering my hand. “Welcome to my hotel.”

Her blush deepened, and it was a joy to watch that full mouth open. “Well.” She drew the word out as she slowly accepted my hand. After a short, perfunctory shake, she said, “I certainly feel foolish now. I apologize.”

Looking around and still not seeing Jeannie or Tito, I had to give her credit. She wasn’t wrong.

“You’re right about having the kitchen manager or head chef on hand at all times to deal with fires. If you tell me the problem, maybe I or somebody else here can help.” I glanced around.

Behind me, someone cleared their throat. “The sous chef got injured, Mr... ah, Maximus.”

I turned to find the speaker. Tito had slipped into the kitchen, and he gave me an apologetic look, his olive complexion flushed. “I’m sorry, sir. Shaniqua was on the line, chopping up strawberries, and she cut her hand. It was kinda bad, and....”

He broke off, his teeth catching his lower lip as he looked away.

“And...?”

“I saw the blood and just about passed out, boss. I’m sorry.”

“And how’s Shaniqua doing?”

He sipped from a nearly empty water bottle before answering. “Jeannie called an ambulance. It’s on its way.”

“All right. Someone stays with Shaniqua until the medics come. Try to keep her from bleeding all over the place. Make sure she has everything she needs.”

I gestured to the brunette. “I didn’t catch your name?”

She barely glanced at me as she replied, “It’s Tina. I’m with *Delights by Bell*. We’re handling the Henderson/Garcia party, and we have a problem I’m hoping your kitchen manager can help with.”

Tito swigged more water before nodding. “We can try. What’s the deal?”

“Well....” She huffed out a sigh. “The deal is that the former *Mrs.* Mike Henderson crashed the rehearsal dinner, claiming that she had *every* right to be here to watch her little baby as the flower girl. And she’s making quite a disturbance.”

Judging by the edge in Tina’s voice, it was easy to assume the soon-to-be Mrs. Henderson wasn’t happy about the former being here.

“She continues to make a spectacle of herself, screaming there’s nothing for her to eat. She says she has shellfish, gluten, and egg allergies. Are we expecting her to *starve*?”

Tito blinked slowly, his expressive face saying he was still processing all of this. “She crashed the party and is mad because the buffet isn’t catering to all her allergens?”

“Bingo.” “We send out cards several weeks in advance, requesting anybody with allergens to advise us of dietary restrictions or allergies. Since she wasn’t invited, she wasn’t on the list.”

“Hoo, boy.” Tito looked around. His brow furrowed as he considered the problem. “Okay, I can have somebody throw together a salad. We can add a chicken breast. That won’t take long. I’ll send a runner over to the main kitchen to get some strawberry sorbet as a dessert.”

“She shouldn’t get any,” Tina muttered.

I smiled at that and followed Tina out the swinging doors.

She barely glanced at me.

Good thing I had a healthy ego, or it might have thrown me off.

“It seems your fire got put out fairly easily,” I said, matching her long, energetic stride.

“Yes.” I thought her short, clipped response was all she had to say, but she halted and looked me square in the eye. “I hope your employee...Shaniqua? I hope she’s okay, and I’m sorry for lecturing you earlier.”

“No need.”

Those midnight eyes were fascinating.

Taking another step closer, I watched her pupils spike, then swell until only a thin rim of blue was visible. I half-expected her to back away, but she held her ground. “I’ll tell you what...have a drink with me, and we’ll call it even.”

“Excuse me?”

“You say that a lot,” I mused. Those eyes, her mouth...the entire package was fascinating. Up close, I noticed flecks of lighter blue in her eyes, a few faint freckles on the bridge of her nose. The image of me peeling away her simple black shirt to see if I could find more adorable freckles filled my mind. I was already planning a course of action, starting with a couple of drinks.

I widened my smile. “Tina, I’d like you to join me for a drink. After your party wraps up.”

“Hm.” That faint sound as she narrowed her eyes to look me over should have warned me about the forthcoming answer.

It didn’t.

FOUR

TINA

THE GUY WAS LUSCIOUS.

Everything about him was fine, from the warm blond hair shot through with darker strands of near-brown to his chocolate-brown eyes against his tanned skin.

Arching brows several shades darker than his hair accented his beautiful eyes and his mouth...

Wow. That mouth.

It could tempt a saint to sin, and I wasn't a saint.

After he'd introduced himself, I'd recognized him. James Maximus—the elusive handsome billionaire known as the hotel king of Texas. Owner of this ridiculously posh hotel, as well as many others. He was the local media darling, no doubt.

Not because he played up to them, though.

He ignored the cameras, the innuendo, and the rumors, which only enhanced the speculation and gossip.

That he was so ridiculously handsome didn't hurt.

I paid attention to the media as part of my business. Knowing the whereabouts, homes, and styles of the rich and famous in Houston was vital to keep up with the latest trends.

He was arrogant. Or maybe just confident. He could walk into any bar, and half the women there would join him for a drink and what followed.

But I had enough on my plate and still stinging from a relationship gone bad.

“Unfortunately, I’ll have to pass on your offer.” I gave him a polite smile before gesturing to the double doors of the Prism Banquet Hall. “I need this...issue addressed.”

Maximus blinked. If my refusal surprised or bothered him, that was his only reaction. A fraction of a second later, he inclined his head and nodded to the double doors. “I’ll walk with you. I don’t want the bride’s experience ruined by the party crasher.”

“We won’t let that happen.” I held his gaze.

He didn’t look away. “I respect that, but as this *is* my venue, I feel as though I have equal responsibility.” He lifted an eyebrow. “Fair?”

Shit.

I forced a smile. “Of course.”

With no other choice, I strode into the banquet hall with James Maximus at my side. I looked around for the bitter ex-wife.

She was easy to spot.

Two bridesmaids had taken up sentinel, creating a solid line of silk and lace between Mary Jo Henderson and the affianced couple who sat at the head table only six yards away.

Mary Jo was talking animatedly with a smile as brittle as glass, and I quickened my steps. I had images of her ripping through the bridesmaid wall, ranting at the couple right in front of her daughter.

“Some people suck,” I muttered.

Maximus surprised me by laughing. “You’re right on that.”

I half expected him to take charge, but he stayed quiet next to me as I engaged Mary Jo Henderson.

“Ms. Henderson.”

She blinked a pair of big baby blues and turned her head toward me. “My dear...it’s *Mrs.*” She drew in a dramatic breath and pressed a hand to her chest. “I still feel, *in my heart*, that Michael and I are husband and wife.”

“That must make it very awkward for you to be here,” I said, smiling politely.

Another slow blink. When the woman said nothing else, I pushed on.

“Ms. Henderson,” I refused to play into her drama, “we’ve already told you that this is a private event, and—”

“I—”

I cut her off before she *could* interrupt me. “We don’t want to upset *your daughter* by having you removed for trespassing. It is my understanding that, in exchange for the privilege of staying, you agreed not to disrupt the rehearsal.”

She gave me a wounded look. She must practice in front of a mirror because it was excellent.

“So...” I nodded toward the back corner of the room, “please return to your table, and we can discuss the arrangements we’ve made for your meal.”

“Yes.” She smiled tightly. “The meal. *Really*, is it too much to ask for accommodations to be made for us with allergies?”

“Not at all.” With a cool look on my face, I replied, “That’s why we send out meal cards to every guest *invited* asking about food allergies.”

She sniffed and started forward—straight toward me. I held my position. When her shoulder jammed into mine, I didn’t move an inch. She tottered on skinny heels, spinning her arms until she found her balance. I kept a straight face as snickers sounded around her.

She kept walking.

Turning, I followed, releasing a pent-up sigh.

“She’s delightful,” Maximus murmured. “You dealt with her wonderfully, though. Looking for a job?”

“No.” The word came out sharper than I’d intended.

I *had* a job. I had my own damned business and no intention of becoming a permanent bouncer at wedding rehearsal dinners.

AFTER TWO HOURS, I could finally slow down.

Maximus had left shortly after the ordeal with Mary Jo Henderson.

To my delight, she left not long after too.

After the bitter ex-wife’s departure, it was like everyone in the room breathed a collective sigh of relief. The food and booze started flowing much more quickly. I had just taken out the last empty tray and thrown it in the sink to be rinsed, and now I was leaning against the wall in the hall, my feet so sore that it wouldn’t surprise me to find blood on my shoes. The rest of me was only in slightly better condition.

How was it I could run a half-marathon, and yet working a catering event left me feeling run down to the bone?

“Have you *seen* him?”

I looked up, but the woman who’d just spoken wasn’t looking at me. She had her eyes on her companion, a statuesque woman who grinned at the comment and pretended to wipe sweat from the back of her ebony forehead.

“Have I ever...although not the parts I *want* to see.” She patted her chest and shook her head. “Have mercy.”

They passed by me, each offering a friendly smile as they headed toward the kitchen.

“I can’t decide if I hope to see him around here all the time or not at all.” The other girl pushed the door open but paused when it was barely ajar. “Imagine getting called up to the boss’s office...and *Maximus* was the one waiting.”

“Honey, you’ve heard what they say about him. Do you think he’s got a playroom up there?”

Her laugh, rich and full, echoed down the hall. “I hadn’t thought about it, Daisy, and now I won’t be thinking about anything else, you bitch.”

As I stood there, listening far too close for my own good, they disappeared into the kitchen.

A playroom.

My cheeks heated even as I considered the scene. That wasn’t anything even remotely up my alley. But the idea of a blindfold, a pair of handcuffs, maybe a few other toys, and James Maximus?

“Your heart can’t take it, girl.” Pushing away from the wall, I started back toward the banquet hall. I needed to finish the clean-up, go home and pull out the vibrator I rarely used. Otherwise, I might not sleep at all, fantasizing about a sexy boss with knowing eyes and a too-beautiful mouth.

Then again, a sleepless night because of pent-up sexual frustration was an improvement over a sleepless night spent worrying about my struggling business.

FIVE

MAXIMUS

WHEN I LEFT THE GARCIA/HENDERSON EVENT, IT WASN'T TO CONTINUE ON my walk-through. Instead, I headed to my office and sat at my desk.

The floor-to-ceiling windows had automatic shades that would close so the glare from the sun wouldn't affect my computer screen, but at night, they retracted. The sprawl of the Houston skyline spread out, lights twinkling like jewels against the velvety backdrop of night.

The blue made me think of Tina's eyes, and I shook my head, amused at myself for the poetic turn of thought. I didn't get philosophical about women.

I enjoy women...a lot. And despite the bad memories from high school, I respect them. It hadn't always been that way, a fact I couldn't lie about because I demanded honesty, even from myself.

After my mother's diagnosis and short, painful struggle with pancreatic cancer when I was thirteen, I'd discovered who my father was—not a happy discovery.

For years, my mom had busted her ass to keep food on the table and make rent, and not until after she'd died did I learn that my father was none other than Connor Maximus, one of the richest men in Texas.

After my mom passed away, he took custody of me and spent years trying to buy my approval. He was a decade too late. While I'd gone to school with my shoes duct-taped at the toe, he'd been the world's biggest manwhore, only thinking about himself.

With almost a dozen half-siblings living in a giant mansion, I never wanted to be there. In the following years, I was headed for rock bottom and turning into my father.

I didn't see it coming. Not until my half-sister, Giana Eckerle, told me one morning while I was puking up my guts that if I wanted to punish our father by drinking and using drugs, I was doing an excellent job of it. But none of the women I hooked up with deserved that.

I told her that any woman who went out with me knew the deal.

She'd given me a look so cool it could have frozen the marrow in my bones. "Some would probably say the same thing about your mother."

Then she'd left.

I'd brooded about those few words so simply said.

And so fucking right.

Screwing up my life to piss off Connor wouldn't have made my mother happy. Once I acknowledged that I'd been disgusted with myself and vowed to change.

But I still wasn't the relationship type.

I loved women—particularly in the bedroom. Outside and inside the bedroom, I respected them, but I never indulged in relationships or lovers. Brief affairs or liaisons where both parties knew the score suited me perfectly because I didn't have to worry the woman might get dewy-eyed.

Maybe I wasn't so angry with my father these days, but I would never risk turning into him, either. I'd never promised a woman to love her forever and then break her heart weeks, months, or years later when I got bored.

That had been my philosophy with the opposite sex for years, and I didn't see it changing anytime soon. Or ever.

The women I dated loved my honesty and rarely said no to a good time. Unlike tonight. A rejection from a waitress.

Still, despite Tina's easy brush-off, I sat next to the floor-to-ceiling windows and looked up at a night sky that reminded me of her eyes.

And I knew I couldn't let it go without trying at least one more time.

Turning to my desk, I eyed my computer and considered the time.

They'd be busy with the rehearsal dinner for a few more hours. Smiling to myself, I switched on my computer.

It was almost an hour later when I finally leaned back from the computer, and although it tempted me to stay and keep reading about Tina Siegler, I didn't want to miss the chance to catch her before she left.

I rarely stressed over a woman rejecting my advance because I never lacked companionship. But the more I read about Tina Siegler, the more I wanted her.

The internet made it ridiculously easy to learn about people. Not everybody, but there were always some who left a digital footprint, and Tina had definitely done that.

She'd been a track star in high school. Thinking back to the tight curve of her ass in those bland black pants, it wasn't hard to imagine that she still ran, either because she just enjoyed it or because she was used to an exercise regimen.

She also had a website for her own interior design business here in Houston.

I'd checked Yelp for reviews. There were only a few, but they were all fours and fives, praising her for the timeliness, staying on budget, and her creativity. The most recent one was almost a year ago.

Being in business for yourself could suck, so I didn't bother wondering why she moonlighted for her sister.

I knew very little about interior design, except what I needed to know for my hotels, but judging from her website, Tina had talent.

Smart and sexy, a deadly combination.

Leaning back in my chair, I studied the headshot on her website and debated for another minute.

I was too intrigued to walk away now.

WHEN I LOOKED in on the party, it was obvious things were wrapping up. The caterer, who introduced herself as Dina Bell, thanked me for my help earlier.

Dina didn't mention Tina, but she didn't need to. I knew she was the sister Tina mentioned earlier. The physical similarities were striking.

"It's no trouble," I assured her, squeezing her hand and offering a polite smile. "Your sister had everything well in hand, so even if I hadn't checked on things in the kitchen, it wouldn't have mattered."

Dina's laughter was bright and cheerful. "That's Tina. If I want an issue addressed and brought into line, I just need to tell her."

"Does she work for you?"

"Tina?" Dina canted her head toward me, speculation in her eyes.

I kept my face blank.

With a faint smile, she shrugged. "Only when I call to ask her to help. I'm glad I did tonight. Panicky brides, I can handle. Angry exes are a little harder." She glanced past me, and her eyes widened. "Crap...Selena, don't!"

She rushed off, and I turned to see a heavily pregnant woman flashing her boss a chagrined look before lowering a tray back to the table.

No longer engaged in conversation, I made another sweep around the banquet hall, searching for Tina.

Not seeing her, I blew out a breath and slipped out the heavy wooden doors.

And there she was.

When she saw me, her eyes widened slightly.

“It looks like everybody survived the evening without bloodshed,” I said, offering a smile.

“I wouldn’t say that.” She wagged a playful finger at me. “You did have to send an employee to the ER for stitches.”

“True.” As I tucked my hands into my pants pockets, I nodded toward a few stragglers just leaving the rehearsal dinner. “I was referring to your guests, though.”

“Oh.” She smiled faintly. “Yeah. It ended up going pretty well. Mary Jo left not too long after you did. “I think it upset her that you would send in security just because of her.”

“Well,” I lifted a shoulder, “maybe she shouldn’t have crashed the party of her ex-husband.”

“She still considers him her husband...remember?” Tina’s wry smile and sharp humor had me grinning.

“I’ve tried to forget. It was kind of sad.”

She laughed.

Unlike her sister, Tina’s laugh wasn’t bright and cheerful.

No, it was low and warm and dark, as seductive as her eyes. Drawn to her, I found myself stepping closer, only to stop as a look of wariness entered her eyes once more.

“Listen...I know I’ve already asked once....”

She arched an eyebrow.

I paused, waiting for...something—a cutting dismissal, a flirtation... anything. So far, Tina wasn’t doing anything the way I’d expected.

Was that what I found so appealing?

Her lips bowed in a soft upward curve, and one thing was certain, I was dying to taste that mouth.

But I didn't let myself approach or draw any closer.

"And...?"

Frowning, I asked, "And what?"

She rolled her eyes. "You said, 'Listen, I know I already asked,... but you didn't finish the sentence. Usually, a line like that comes with another question.'"

Fuck. She really had me off my game.

"Yeah, I'm sorry." I rocked back on my heels. "It's been a busy week here."

"I can imagine. I'd figure I'd be ready to collapse face-first in bed if I were you."

The bed wasn't a terrible choice. But I didn't want to go alone. I already knew suggesting Tina joining me would ruin things before they even got started.

"I need little sleep," I said truthfully. "I was getting back to the offer I proposed earlier."

She looked puzzled.

"A drink?"

"Oh." With a soft laugh, she sidestepped around me. "Don't you have like a half-dozen women who'd love to have you buy them a drink already waiting in the bar?"

Possibly. But I wasn't interested in them.

"If I wanted that, I'd be there." I pivoted on my heel to keep pace with her. She didn't look annoyed, thankfully. "But...instead, I'm here."

"So you are." Slowing to a stop outside the banquet room, she rested a hand on the door frame and looked up to meet my gaze. "Listen, I'm flattered... but...no."

Without another word, she ducked back into the banquet hall.

I just stood there, staring at the closing door. I couldn't think of a way to follow her that wouldn't have me coming off as either a creep, a stalker...or both.

But I knew one thing. Tina's dismissal just made me want her more.

SIX

TINA

TO SAY THE EVENTS HAD EXHAUSTED ME WOULD BE AN UNDERSTATEMENT. Even though I'd turned Maximus down again, I hadn't been able to stop thinking about him. I wasn't into hooking up with some playboy and becoming another notch on his bedpost, but...damn, that man was potent.

When I finally fell asleep after three, I woke up before eight, as if I programmed my body to do so. Since it wouldn't do any good to go back to sleep, I did my usual five-mile run, showered, and headed to my office.

Nothing but silence greeted me as I let myself in, but that was no surprise.

I didn't have any employees.

At the rate I was going, soon, I wouldn't even have an office.

Sure, the small space, not quite hitting eight hundred square feet, wasn't exactly breaking the bank for Houston real estate, but it sure as hell was breaking me.

As my lease was up for renewal, I needed to decide whether to hold on to my failed business or let it go.

I wasn't yet ready to admit defeat, even though it was unlikely that I would receive a big job today.

I dropped into the chair behind my desk and gave my computer a baleful look.

The blank screen glared back, my blurred reflection in its depths giving the impression of a twisted smirk. It was almost like the computer knew something I didn't and was laughing over it.

"You're getting depressingly creepy," I muttered.

As I opened my email browser, my phone rang. I didn't recognize the number.

"This is Tina Siegler of Siegler Designs. How may I help you?"

"Yes, Ms. Siegler...I have a delivery for you today, and I wanted to confirm that you are in the office today."

My hopes dashed at the polite, professional greeting, and I looked at the time before answering. "Sure. I'll be here until five."

As I disconnected, I checked my emails and tried not to think about how much time had passed since the last time someone had called looking to remodel. It had been over a week, and I had to follow up by phone to see if Eloise Cantrell still wanted to move forward with the proposal. I wasn't holding my breath.

A half-hour later and halfway through the email dreck of spam, employment inquiries, and other not-going-to-pay-the-bills crap, I finally saw one subject line that had my heart lurching to a stop.

Re: Your Proposal/ Loved it. I would like to discuss this in-depth.

Hattie's Place was a non-profit organization that helped women in abusive relationships find jobs, new living arrangements, access to lawyers, and assisted with divorce procedures. As a non-profit, they had a small budget, but the word of mouth I would get from doing work for a place like Hattie's could be phenomenal.

As I clicked to open the email, a shadow fell across my desk, chased by a brisk knock. I jumped.

A delivery man smiled at me through the glass window as I unlocked the door. "Ms. Siegler?"

"Yes...?"

“Here you go.” He put a long white box into my hands.

He was already halfway to his van before I’d relocked the door.

Curious, I took the box to the large workstation on the western wall. The wall was covered with pictures of my favorite projects, from an old children’s bookstore back in San Francisco to a kitchen redesign I’d done in old French country style.

Before musing about that, I shifted my gaze to the long white box.

It confirmed a niggling suspicion when I opened it and found a simple white card nested on the pale green stems of the flowers—tulips, many of them still not fully opened.

“Well, Maximus,” I murmured, picking up the card with a brief note. “You’ve got style.”

Tina, I hope you enjoy these. I also hope you’ll do me the pleasure of joining me for dinner this Friday. Maximus.

He included his phone number.

Sighing, I rubbed my thumb over the neat print before dropping the card into the wastebasket on the floor next to me.

Then, unable to resist, I stroked a finger down the velvety petal of one bloom. The tulips were a dusty pink at the top that deepened to red as it neared the stem. They were gorgeous.

Yeah, Maximus had style, all right.

“HELLO AGAIN.”

The delivery guy from my office also showed up at my house several times that weekend. Now, at ten Monday morning, back in my office, I met his gaze with a sarcastic smile. “Any chance you’ll tell me how many more of these are coming?”

“I couldn’t say.” His smile was polite and professional as he turned over the box. “I just take the orders where they’re supposed to go.”

“Of course.” After saying thanks, I let the door close behind me, but I didn’t lock it this time. Not that I was expecting a client, but I was determined to remain optimistic.

This box wasn’t a flat white one. It was open on top and had a protective cardboard sleeve, keeping the potted orchid inside upright while protecting it at the same time.

The petals of the orchid were a rich blue and incredibly striking.

“You’re a persistent man, Maximus,” I murmured, as if he were there to respond. After easing the pot out of the sleeve, I found another surprise. Gasping in shock at the sight of the delicate glass bowl, almost the same shade as the orchid’s petals, I decided I might have to revise my estimate of one James Maximus.

He wasn’t just persistent.

He was clever as hell.

I recognized this bowl. The delicate, richly blue glass, rimmed by a metal vine of enameled flowers, wasn’t exactly what you’d expect to find your typical flowers delivered in, nor should it be.

I’d saved this design on my Pinterest board, the one connected to my business, although I’d pinned this one to a separate board titled: For my dream house.

“Sly fox,” I muttered, stroking the gleam of golden flowers. Flowers were one thing. A gift like this? So much harder to resist.

Plucking up the card nestled against the orchid’s stem, I blew out a breath.

*The blue of this made me think of your eyes. Hoping you’ll say yes to dinner.
M.*

He’d added his number down again, but I already had it memorized.

My cell phone pinged on my desk, and I gave the bowl another greedy look before gathering up the box. Last night, I gave the basket of wine and fruit to a neighbor. But I couldn't give this beauty away. The bastard. He'd gotten to me with this one.

Grabbing my phone on the way out the back door, I read a text from my sister.

I talked Newt into closing up for me tonight. If I pick up the food for tacos, would you be interested in me heading over for a last-minute margarita night?

I thought about the flowers and gifts from Maximus and decided I could use a listener while I vented and said yes.

I went inside to finish my work for the day. It was galling to admit there wasn't much. I would meet Hattie's Place's team in a few days, and I was tentatively optimistic, but for now, I had bills to pay, most of which were already late. And I had cold calls to make.

Neither one was appealing in my current frame of mind.

I TOOK the orchid home with me.

There was no way I'd leave that gift at work—not a bowl that ran almost two grand.

After clearing away the space on my small dining room table, I put the bowl down and went to change into yoga pants and a tank top.

Maybe I should have left the damn thing at work.

Maybe I should text the stubborn bastard and tell him to stop it with the gifts already. I would not be the next notch on his bedpost.

Brooding over the issue, I juiced a bag of limes I'd picked up on my way home. I still hadn't come to any sort of resolution. But I was definitely keeping the bowl, and I still would not accept his dinner invitation.

When I was washing up, I heard a rap on my front door. Then Dina called out, “Hey, it’s me! Is there a margarita waiting?”

“Pretty much...just have to add Jose,” I called back. Hanging the dishtowel back on the peg by the sink, I walked out of the kitchen and intercepted my sister, taking one bag from her. Giving her a critical look, I asked, “Rough day?”

“Mostly just an annoying one.” She rolled her eyes. “We’ll talk once I cook. Otherwise, I might...wow.”

Her eyes rounded, and she pushed around me to walk over to the table. “That looks just like the bowl you showed me from your Pinterest board.”

“Yeah.” I drummed up a smile.

She’d been running a finger along the metallic flowering vine, but at my tone, stopped. Looking up, she studied me through narrowed eyes. “Are you seeing somebody?”

“No.” Huffing out a breath, I nodded to the kitchen. “Let’s get those margaritas going, and I’ll spill. Nevertheless, tell me what you did today.”

“I almost want to skip my day and hear about yours.” She paused for a beat. “Almost. Not quite.”

Good. I was still trying to figure out how to explain things.

“I CAN’T BELIEVE that woman came by your office and tried to pump you for information about a client.” Licking a bit of salt from my lip, I shook my head and met Dina’s gaze, a blue just a few shades lighter than my own. “Did you warn Marti and her husband?”

“No.” She heaved out a sigh as she expertly flipped the chicken breasts she was grilling for the tacos. After lowering the grill’s cover, she picked her drink back up and joined me at the table. “They’re on their honeymoon. Not due back for two weeks.”

“Nice.”

“Yeah.” Heaving out a sigh, she slumped in her seat. “How can I interrupt that to suggest they put out a restraining order against a crazy ex?”

Dina drained her margarita and checked the time on her watch. “Let’s eat inside. I want another drink, and it’s too hot out here for me, even with the shade and the fan.”

Once inside, seated at the table with full plates and glasses, she gestured to the bowl with a tortilla chip. “Okay, little sister. I confessed. Now, it’s your turn. How are you suddenly in possession of such an expensive vase?”

“James Maximus sent it,” I said, deciding just to tell it all.

Dina, glass halfway to her lips, paused. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” I heaved out a sigh and grabbed my glass, downing a healthy swallow. Putting it back down, I pinned my gaze on the beautiful bowl. I met him in the hotel kitchen when I asked if they could help with the Mary Jo situation.

Grimacing, I explained how I’d put my size seven shoe into my mouth, and my sister laughed out loud. “You did *not* dress down James Maximus in his own hotel?”

It was the third time she’d repeated that question, so I didn’t bother responding.

Eyes bright and lit with her lingering amusement, she finally straightened and picked up her margarita. “To my favorite sister and her arrogant, mouthy self. May you never change.”

“Bitch,” I said with a smile. She was my sister, after all. “BTW, I’m your only sister.”

“And still my favorite,” she said with a smirk. “Okay, so...after you turned Maximus down, he...what? Started stalking your Pinterest board?”

“Well, no. First, he asked me out again.” I explained about the many flowers and fruit baskets. “I keep thinking he’ll give up, but this gift today....”

We both looked at the orchid and the extravagantly expensive bowl.

“Well, he’s committed. I’ll give him that,” Dina said.

Her sober tone had me looking at her, and it did not surprise me to see a hint of concern in her eyes. “I’m not interested in Maximus, Dina, okay?”

“Good.” Her cheeks went prettily pink, and she bit her lip before blurting out, “The guy’s got a rep. I don’t just mean that he’s a playboy, Tina. He goes through women left and right. You...that’s not who you are.”

“I know.” Taking her hand, I squeezed. “I already told you, I’m not interested. I just couldn’t refuse that bowl.”

“Well, there’s a chance he was betting on that.” She picked up the pitcher and topped our drinks off. “I doubt the guy got his rep by being scared away easily.”

“Regardless, have you ever known me to get all aflutter because some guy sent me pretty flowers?” Accepting my refilled glass, I shrugged. “He’s sexy and sharp, but I’m not into one-night stands. Right now, I’m not looking for anything, but when I do, I want something that lasts.”

“You’ll find it.” She gave me a confident smile. “You always get what you want once you decide. It’s the thing I’ve always admired about you. You don’t quit.”

She was right. I never quit, and Maximus is a distraction I don’t need. Not now or any other time. But, from what I’ve heard, he also doesn’t quit.

SEVEN

MAXIMUS

“DUDE, SERIOUSLY?”

On the computer screen, my half-sister’s face stared out at me, the familiar setting of her office in the background.

I lifted an eyebrow. “Is there a problem?”

Gianni sighed and looked at the text I’d sent her earlier. “You want me to investigate a woman just because she turned you down twice. Doesn’t that strike you as...overkill?”

Few people in my life were so blunt with me. And nobody could hold a candle to Gianni. She was about as no-nonsense as they came, calling the shots as she saw them, or so she claimed.

It was something I liked about our relationship. I didn’t have to worry Gianni ever held back or offered false assurances. Knowing I could count on her, having her opinion was one of the few mainstays in my life.

“Look, Gianni...” I tried to smile. Her scowl didn’t lessen even a little. “I’m not asking for a deep dive into her credit history, her medical records, or anything like that. I’m just...”

When I hesitated, she cocked an eyebrow. “You’re just...what? Striking out? Not charming her into bed like your usual self?”

“I don’t charm women into my bed,” I said testily.

“Well, that much is true. I don’t think you know how to be charming. Women just look at that pretty face and fall back, legs open.”

I didn’t like how close that was to the truth. “The next time I want insight from you on my sex life, I’ll ask.” Pausing a beat, I added, “Don’t expect me to ask. Ever.”

Chuckling, she leaned back in her seat. “So, judging by how irritated you are right now, I’m assuming I hit the nail on the head. I’m right, aren’t I? She wasn’t interested.”

“I’ve asked her out to dinner three times now, and that doesn’t include the invitation for a drink the night we met. I just—”

“You can’t comprehend how any woman can tell you no?” she asked with false sweetness and a simpering smile.

“Why the hell did I even call you?” Glaring at her, I pointed out, “I could hire any number of PIs in Houston, and they’d do the job for a lot less money and attitude.”

My phone buzzed.

“Well, it’s true. But then you’d worry about one of the PI’s selling the info behind your back.”

Flipping her off, I picked up my phone and hit the button to stop its vibrations. It was a call. I recognized the number, a potential investor, but I didn’t interrupt video calls with family for business.

“Are you going to help me with this or not?” I already knew she would. Gianni wasn’t one to say no to the family unless it was something completely off the wall.

“You know I will. I’ve already started.” Huffing out a breath, she looked away, her eyes running back and forth in a way that showed she was reading something on a screen. “Well, the good news is...she’s got a solid, clean rep. At least, that’s what I see on a basic background check. Never married, no kids, no arrests, pays her taxes on time...looks like her business might be in a tight spot, but she’s keeping her head above water...barely.” She hesitated and glanced at me, the look telling.

I didn't need to be a psychic to read her expression. "If she were a money-grubber, I would have suspected that already," I said levelly.

"True. Turning one of the richest guys in Texas down when he repeatedly tries to take you out for dinner doesn't exactly scream gold digger, does it?" Gianni's grin was quick and sharp when she once again glanced away from whatever report she'd been reading to meet my eyes. "I'll give this a few minutes and shoot you a preliminary ASAP. Just don't turn into a creepy stalker, okay?"

"I won't."

"Good." She winked at me. "FYI, she's licensed to carry in the state of Texas, and it looks like she's a damn good shot. She's won a couple of sharp-shooting competitions. Gianni paused, cocked her head, and leaned closer to her screen. "More than a couple. I think I'm impressed."

"So glad she meets your approval. I need to go." My phone had just vibrated, this time with a text from my admin. "Thanks, Gianni."

Her non-verbal grunt conveyed she had already shifted her entire focus to the task at hand—Tina Siegler.

Rising, I put Tina out of my mind. Well, I nudged her to the side, temporarily, so I could focus on my job.

BROODING over the mostly untouched dinner I'd ordered from the kitchen, I leaned back in my desk chair and eyed my silent phone.

It had been silent for close to thirty minutes, something that was almost unheard of for me.

It also pissed me off.

That's not to say the break from reporters and investors bothered me.

But it was almost eight, and I hadn't heard from Gianni other than a quick text, and I hadn't heard a damn thing from Tina Siegler.

I'd thought for sure that fancy bowl would get her to call.

But she hadn't called. Not even to say thanks.

Not that I give a fuck about that simple courtesy. Social niceties didn't concern me. It was the fact that Tina couldn't bother to pick up a phone that lit every cell in my body on fire.

It made me want her that much more.

Disgusted, I went into the living room attached to my office. I had a home on the outskirts of Houston, but I knew myself and my habits too well. The first few months of opening any business could be a time-consuming venture. I didn't see the point of wasting time commuting when I could simply sleep here on busy days.

Stripping out of my suit and pulling on some workout gear, I grabbed my phone and earbuds before filling a reusable bottle with water.

Since I wasn't interested in finding another woman to fuck until I'd satisfied my curiosity about Tina, I was going to hit the gym.

“GOOD MORNING!”

I gave my sister a dark stare over a cup of coffee, and she shot me a cheery smile in return before taking the seat across from mine. It had been after eleven last night when she'd finally contacted me to let me know she'd have a decent report for me in the morning, promising to give it to me at breakfast.

In Gianni's mind, that translated to, “I'll give it to you after you feed me, and we talk and not a moment sooner.”

Tired and worn out from my two-hour stint in the hotel's gym, I'd agreed. Now, after another night of hot dreams where I'd peeled the clothes away from Tina's powerhouse curves, I was less interested in food and more focused on the report Gianni placed on the table in front of her.

The server came by and filled Gianni's cup with steaming coffee and took our orders before I could ask for the report. But once we were alone, I held out my hand.

Gianni put hers flat down on the file. "You have to stay and eat with me."

"Holding it ransom?"

"Yep. For the low, low price of a meal and some conversation."

Blowing out a long breath, I waved a dismissive hand. "Fine. Now, the report."

"You'll spend the whole damn meal reading it," she said with a roll of her eyes, but she turned it over.

"You know me too well." I flipped it open and skimmed through the first couple of pages, which was just an extensive version of the details Gianni had given me over the phone.

"What are you planning to do with that information?" she asked. "It's not like she's a corporation you can just take over or something."

"No." Flipping another page, I studied it for a long moment before closing the file and putting it down. "I can't seem to figure out the right way to get to her."

"Get to her?" Gianni leaned back in her chair, both hands cradling the mug of coffee as she eyed me. "She's not a corporate spy or some investor to be wooed. She's a woman, James."

"Really." Clicking my tongue, I picked up my water and took a long drink. "Thanks for that insight. Now, I see where I went wrong."

She chuckled. "Honey, this is not like a hostile takeover. Figure out what makes her tick, understand her interests, that sort of thing."

"I'd thought I'd made a move in the right direction with that damned glass bowl." I reclined in defeat.

"You know what I gathered from the information in that folder?" she asked, nodding toward it. "You can't win her with flowers or wine...that sort of shit."

She might appreciate the gesture, but that's not what speaks to her."

"Okay, genius. What would speak to her?"

"Well...something that fits her personality." She pursed her lips, her head cocked as she considered it. A slow smile that grew in brilliance spread across her face, and she leaned in closer. "You know what? I just had a brilliant idea."

EIGHT

TINA

I WAS BEHIND MY DESK—MY HEART STILL POUNDING FROM A CALL WITH Hattie’s Place—when the office door opened.

Jerking upright, I forced a smile on my face. “Hello, welcome to...oh...Hi.”

James Maximus cocked a golden eyebrow at me, a faint smile tugging his lips up at the corners. “Ouch. There goes my ego.”

“I don’t think your ego is in any danger.” My arms crossed as I rose from behind my desk and leaned against it. “Is there anything I can help you with?”

Instead of answering immediately, he walked to the wall above my workstation, studying the framed portfolio pictures. “Are these your finished projects?”

“Yes.” I wasn’t going to delude myself into thinking he was here for anything related to business. People with the money he possessed went to top-line interior design firms, not small-time individuals like me.

“You’re very good,” he murmured after he’d walked the entire wall, taking time to look at each picture.

“Yes, I am. And thank you.”

He turned to look at me, this time with a wide grin instead of his normal half-smile. “You’re also confident. I like that you know your value.”

“If I’m not aware of it, I can’t expect anybody else to be.” I shrugged. “False modesty doesn’t get me anything. But you’re not here to discuss my interior design skills. So...why are you here?”

He walked toward me, tapping an off-white envelope against his leg.

“Have you heard about Asylum?”

I blinked. “Asylum?”

“Yes.”

Oh, hell.

“Are you referring to the new murder mystery dinner theater you can only attend after completing the escape room? And to get into the escape room, you must first navigate a laser-tag maze?” I paused to both suck in a breath and to give him a chance to respond.

The sexy half-smile on his face not only told me the answer, but made me wonder how good he was at kissing...among other things. “Yes.” I lifted my chin, forcing my face to stay carefully blank. “I might be...vaguely familiar with it.”

Asylum was a new, upcoming hi-tech entertainment destination in Sugar Land. The monstrous venue occupied an entire building, and entry was by invitation only.

“Would you be interested in joining me? I have two tickets.”

Of course he did.

I felt my defenses crumbling. “You should probably know, I’m a killer shot, and I take no prisoners.” I stared at the envelope before meeting his gaze. “Some guys, especially here in Texas, have a problem with that.”

“I don’t mind celebrating a woman’s win.” He eased closer, moving slowly to give me time to pull back.

I didn’t, though my heart and stomach were doing a silly little dance inside my body.

“Something tells me I’ll find it insanely sexy watching you win,” he murmured, dipping his head, so the words came directly into my ear. “Are you...good at it, Tina?”

He lifted his head a bit, just enough to look at me. He was so close that his scent filled my head as I stared into the dark and endless depths of his eyes.

I shouldn’t ask. This guy was dangerous, but I couldn’t keep the question trapped inside. “Good at...?”

“Winning.”

I grinned at him despite the near-palpable sexual tension rising between us. “Yeah, I’m good at it.”

“I can’t wait to watch you win, then.” He reached up slowly and brushed a strand of hair back.

He was so close that, if I leaned in just the slightest, our mouths would touch.

I was so, so tempted.

Do it. There’s no reason you can’t.

About to throw caution to the wind, I licked my lips.

And Maximus stepped back.

His gaze locked with mine as he studied my face. “Say yes.”

Heart lurching inside my chest in a near painful rhythm, I couldn’t do anything else. “Yes.”

SAY YES.

Those words had lingered with me all damn week, his low voice, a sensual rasp in my ear.

Coupled with the heat coming off him as he talked about finding it sexy watching me win, those words had all but turned my knees to jelly.

I was a confident woman, and I preferred confident men who didn't have a problem with my confidence, intelligence, abilities with a handgun, and that I could run five miles in a little over thirty minutes.

Maximus had confidence. In spades. Arrogance settled over him like invisible armor, but not so bad that it was off-putting. No, it was kind of appealing.

I'd never been...pursued like this.

The echo of that coaxing whisper went through my mind, and I couldn't stop wondering about him.

That heat in his eyes. The implied promise when he said he'd like watching me win...and the other silent promise in his eyes when pulling away, leaving me wishing he'd done...something.

Like kissed me.

I relived those few moments more often than I wanted to admit. It was easy to imagine pulling Maximus close, tracing the sculpted lines of his mouth with my tongue, wondering what would happen next.

As I was getting ready for the date, I knew there was a good chance I'd find out before the night was out. Unless he ended up making all the wrong moves, but I didn't see that happening.

So far, he'd only made the right ones, even with all the brush-offs I'd given him.

My phone buzzed, then pinged with a notification, the tone letting me know it was Dina. Picking it up, I skimmed it and grimaced when I saw it was an invitation over to their place for dinner.

Usually, I'd be happy to spend a Friday night with my sister and her family. She and Newt had adorable kids.

After I typed out my reply, I hoped she'd move on without asking questions because one thing I didn't do well was, lie to my sister. She always picked it up in a text, and I wasn't getting into a discussion about Maximus, not after I told Dina I was too smart to get tangled up with a playboy.

Hey, I'd love to, but I already made plans. Running late. Talk tomorrow?

Before I could second guess myself, I put the phone face down and grabbed my makeup bag. I wasn't running behind, but Dina knew I hated being late, that it stressed me out, so I hoped she'd let it go.

There wasn't another ping from the phone, and I breathed out a sigh of relief.

Now, I could stress about tonight...and whether I was going to sleep with James Maximus.

"Liar," I hissed to the woman staring back at me in the mirror. "You already waxed this morning, shaved your legs, exfoliated, and put on that sexy bra and panty set you've been saving for a special occasion."

Heaving out a sigh, I admitted it. "Yeah. I'm totally ready to sleep with Maximus."

"I CAN'T DECIDE if I'm irritated or impressed."

After stripping off my vest, I looked up at Maximus, my heart hammering from the intensity of the laser tag course. The golden strands of his hair were messy enough to make me wonder how he would look after I fisted my hands in them as I kissed him. Despite his comment, he had an amused—and hot—gleam in his eyes as he returned his laser tag gear to one of the waiting staff members.

The team we'd just trounced—thoroughly—walked by us, the girl clutching her boyfriend's arm and patting it soothingly.

"It's just a game, baby...."

I refrained from laughing as I accepted Maximus's hand, and we fell in step behind them. He kept our pace deliberately slow, and once they were farther down the corridor, I looked over at him.

"Irritated or impressed by...?"

“You.” He looked at me the statement blunt and direct. “That guy up there... he’s....”

“A dick?” I offered.

“That fits. The minute the staff grouped us with the other couple, I knew the guy would be a jackass. I wanted to get a couple of shots in on him, but every time you already had him in your sights.” Maximus stroked his thumb along the back of my hand. “So...it could irritate me. But watching you win is... sexy as fuck.”

The low, smoky tone of his voice sent my blood pumping, and I couldn’t stop the shiver that broke out, wracking me from head to toe.

Maximus tugged me to the side of the darkened corridor, his eyes searching my face. “You’re shivering. Are you okay?”

That would depend on his definition. Somebody passed through the corridor behind us, and I managed a smile. “I’m fine.”

Brows coming together over his eyes, he studied my face. The dim lighting made it harder for us to see each other clearly, but not impossible. “Then why are you shivering?”

Blood rushed to my cheeks, making me glad for the low lights. I did not want him to see me blushing. “Ask me later.”

He narrowed his eyes speculatively, but after a few seconds, he backed up. “Are you ready to see what sort of murderous mayhem waits for us in the escape room?”

“Oh yes.” Tugging on his hand, I smiled. “Murder and mayhem are my middle names.”

He laughed. “Well, I can see one of those fitting.”

“Which one?” I asked tartly.

“Mayhem.” He squeezed my fingers. “Although I feel you wouldn’t be above other things if someone had backed you or your family into a corner.”

“Aren’t you the insightful one?” I glanced at him.

“Not so much.” He shrugged. “I just saw how you were with your sister last week. I, too, have a few people in my life that I would do almost anything to protect. So, I get it.” He glanced over, then away, almost as if the vulnerability he’d just shared unnerved him.

It had done something to me, too.

I just wasn’t sure what.

Not yet, at least.

NINE

MAXIMUS

“I TOLD YOU IT WAS THE SISTER,” TINA SAID.

The smug satisfaction in her voice had me smiling.

“Yes, you did.” We’d reached my car, but instead of opening the door for her, I leaned against it and tugged her against me, pleased when she came closer and tipped her head back to grin up at me. “But let me be honest. You had me at a disadvantage, so I don’t think it’s fair for you to keep rubbing it in.”

“Oh?” She arched her eyebrows, a smile dancing on her pretty mouth. “And why is that?”

“Because every time I look at you, I want to do this.” Giving her a chance to pull away, I lowered my head.

She didn’t pull away.

She met me, rising onto her toes, her mouth opening, her soft lips parting on a hungry moan as I pulled her hips in closer. Tangling a hand in her hair, I pivoted our bodies, keeping her tucked against me, so we didn’t break contact. But even pinning her between me and the rigid brace of the car, her soft body, and all those sleek, delicious curves molding to me wasn’t enough.

Breaking the kiss, I skimmed my mouth along her jawline. “I want you,” I said, gripping her hip and holding her steady, so there was no mistake. “I want you wet and naked around my cock. But...if that’s not what you want, okay. Say the word, and I’ll have you back home in twenty minutes.”

Her breath came in short pants, and she fisted her hands in the fabric of my shirt. The blue of her eyes looked black in the stark streetlights, but the hunger was unmistakable.

“What if it is what I want?” she asked in a husky whisper.

Sliding my hand lower until it rested just above the ripe curve of her ass, I pulled her even closer. Lowering my head, I raked my teeth down the arch of her neck.

She shivered once again. “If it is what you want...say the word, and I’ll have us at my place in twenty, you naked five minutes later and my face between your thighs thirty seconds after that.”

A weak whimper escaped her lips before I caught them with mine, and I felt the press of her nails into my shoulders as she grabbed onto me. I wanted them digging into my back. And I wanted to see her straining against ropes as I tied her down.

Easy, James...slow the fuck down.

“Your place,” Tina said, breaking the kiss to say it against my mouth before catching my lower lip between her teeth and biting me softly. I responded in kind. Then, before either of us lost our heads, I pulled her away from the car so that I could open the door.

“Get in,” I said. “If we don’t leave now, we might spend the night in jail for indecent public behavior.”

A nervous laugh escaped her as I shut the door.

But I hadn’t been joking.

I was ready to fuck her, here and now. Before the temptation became too much, we needed to get somewhere private.

THE DRIVE to my hotel passed in silence, and I wished that, for once, I’d opted to use a car service rather than driving myself. I usually only hired

drivers when I was traveling, but if I'd opted for a driver tonight, I could have already had my hands all over Tina.

She shifted next to me, the silky cut of her top whispering against her skin. It was a seductive image, and I couldn't wait until we were at my place, and it would be my hands brushing against her instead of fabric.

"You live at your hotel?" she asked as I pulled up in front.

"In a sense." Putting the car into parking, I climbed out. When I came around to meet her, she had already opened the door and exited the vehicle.

A pang of discontent went through me. I wanted to open the door for her, offer my hand, little things I rarely considered when out with a woman. Honestly, though, outside of sex, I rarely spend time with women aside from family.

She arched an eyebrow at me, curiosity showing in her blue gaze. "In a sense, meaning?"

"I have a place outside the city, but you know how bad traffic can be." Shrugging, I looked back at the hotel. "The first few months when opening a hotel like this, it can be a pain in the ass. If I'm stuck in traffic forty-five minutes four or five days a week, that's hours I lost. I have living quarters attached to the office on the top floor."

"Efficient," she murmured.

Giving no response, I offered my hand.

She accepted, and as we walked by the concierge, I tossed my keys to the young man behind the desk. He recognized me and gave a polite nod.

I led her past the elevator bay and used a code to unlock a frosted glass door at the end. "The code is 7216 if you ever want to drop by. Same for the elevator. The code bypasses all the other floors and takes you straight to mine."

And why the hell had I just told her that?

As I pondered the question, the doors slid open silently, and we stepped inside.

The scent of Tina, wrapped around me, was a potent drug that had already made me an addict.

She leaned into me, but I didn't let myself touch her.

One kiss and the control I was clinging to might falter altogether.

The ride was smooth and silent, the doors not opening until we glided to a stop on the top floor. I took Tina's hand and led her to my office, using my phone to unlock the door.

The lights were still on low from earlier, and I didn't adjust them. I walked Tina through the main office area to the door that led to the living quarters.

It was a simple but elegant set-up, a small kitchenette and living room with an oversized bedroom. The floor-to-ceiling windows offered a panoramic view of the Houston skyline. It usually drew a glance from me, but I had other sights to investigate tonight.

Taking Tina to the giant king bed, I lowered my mouth to hers.

She pushed up onto her toes, curling her arms around my neck, her lips parting when I slid my tongue along the seam.

Catching the hem of her shirt, I slid one hand under it, seeking soft, warm skin.

She shivered.

Smiling against her lips, I whispered, "You told me to ask later. It's later. Why were you shivering earlier?"

The muted lights in the room were just enough to let me see the flush of her cheeks as she answered, "Because I want you. It's so...intense. I can barely breathe through it."

The raw, naked words had about the same impact as if she scraped her nails down my chest, flooding me with male satisfaction.

I wanted to turn her around, strip away the trim black trousers she wore and push into her. A hard, fast fuck, spanking the curve of her ass as she came, maybe hold off letting her orgasm until she begged.

But I had no idea how she'd handle any of that.

“Show me,” I whispered instead, catching her lower lip between my teeth and tugging. “Strip for me. I'm dying to see you naked.”

I made myself let her go, back up a few steps to see how she'd react.

A faint smile flirted with her lips, but despite the color on her cheeks, she didn't hesitate.

My dick, already hard, felt like it might explode as she caught the hem of her top, a soft, silvery blue, and tugged it up. Slowly.

By the time it cleared her head, I was about ready to shred it.

Shit...her bra. White lace, delicate, a soft blue bow in the middle, and cups that plumped and pushed her tits up until they looked like they were a banquet on display for me.

“Leave the bra.”

She'd just gone to unhook the back, but at my rough command, she stopped. Something that might have been wariness flashed through her eyes, but it disappeared fast, and she gave me a wicked smile that had my swollen dick pulsing in response.

Her slim fingers made quick work of the tab and zipper of her pants, and I closed my eyes, swearing as she bent forward in a teasing shimmy that hid most of her while pushing them down.

She stopped with the pants halfway between her hips and knees, looking up at me with pursed lips. “I forgot my sandals.”

Swearing, I strode forward and caught her around the waist, boosting her up and onto the edge of the bed.

Laughter escaped her, followed by a whimper as I dragged down the pants, slightly delayed as they tangled in those forgotten sandals. However, persistence was my specialty, and soon I worked them free.

She rewarded me with the sight of her drawing one leg up so she could brace her sandaled foot on the bed, treating me to an erotic vision that I wanted to

capture forever.

Long silvery cords twined up around her lower legs, from the top of the sandals to her knees in a latticework design.

“Nice,” I murmured, trailing my finger over the material.

A lazy smile curved her lips. “I wasn’t about to laser-tag in heels, but these... well. Not every woman can wear gladiator sandals. The style just doesn’t work on you unless you’ve got the right legs. I do.”

“Fuck, yes.” Looking from the leather lovingly wrapped around her calves up to the white panties with a blue bow—matching the bra—I met her gaze. “I can’t decide if I want to just stare at you like this or strip away the bra and panties and fuck you while you’re still wearing those sandals.”

Her mouth parted while her eyelids drooped.

Leaning over her, I planted my hands by her head and bent down. I caught the entire ripe curve of her lower lip before saying, “Any preference? Or is it all up to me?”

“Let’s...” She licked her lips. “You can decide.”

Good.

Straightening, I took her hands and pulled her up to her feet. “Take off the bra and panties.”

I moved around the bed, turning my back on her as she moved to comply, needing a few seconds to get my head—and dick—under control. Pulling my shirt off, I tossed it onto the wingback chair before removing my belt.

Hearing movement, I turned to see her straighten, her breasts swinging free... and her panties crumpled in her hand. Her bra was on the foot of the bed.

Heart pounding like a drum, I yanked open the nightstand and pulled out a box of condoms, unopened, and dropped it next to the lamp before curling my finger at Tina. “Come here.”

Her breasts trembled as she drew in a breath. As I pulled her into my arms and lifted her, she exhaled. I threw her back on the bed and shoved her legs

wide. "I think I timed it about right," I murmured against her lips before starting a slow journey down.

"Timed?"

"I said I'd have my face between your thighs within five minutes of getting you naked. I'm a man of my word."

Reaching my destination, I gave her a quick look, then lowered my head once more, indulging in a long, slow taste.

She cried out, her hips bucking upward. I caught her behind her knees and pushed her legs up, then apart, opening her completely. She tensed, but cried out two seconds later as I caught the hard bud of her clit in my mouth and tugged.

"Fuck, you're sweet...delicious...just like I knew you'd be," I muttered against her pussy, craving more, even as my dick demanded to get in on the action. I didn't relent until she came to a brutal, breathless climax, and then I straightened, standing over to watch as she drifted back down.

Her drugged eyes met mine.

"You taste delicious," I said, dragging my zipper down.

She was still breathing raggedly, and it made me wonder what she expected from her lovers. Then I shoved the thought aside because the idea of her touching another guy pissed me the fuck off. I removed my pants and wrapped my hand around my cock, staring at her as I stroked.

Her eyes widened as she saw what I was doing, her gaze falling momentarily. When she licked her lips, I asked, "Are you imagining what I taste like?"

Her eyes flew to mine, but she nodded slowly.

Then get on your knees and ask me. Maybe I'll let you suck me off. That was what I wanted to say.

I didn't. Instead, I continued to pump my fist up and down my length, my erection pulsing while the ache grew heavier and more intense as her breaths became more ragged.

She sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed, her every move smooth and graceful and female. She went to reach for me, and without thinking, I caught her chin in my hand and held her there.

She made a low groan deep in her throat but didn't pull away, looking into my eyes as I continued to work the heaviness of my erection with my fist.

Her gaze dropped, and her lips parted.

I couldn't ignore the silent request, not when I wanted to feel her mouth wrapped around my dick so damn bad.

Pushing my hand into her silky hair, I fisted it, then brought her closer, my free hand holding my cock steady. "Show me what you want, baby."

Her breath hitched in her chest, her eyes going dark as she opened for me, mouth stretching wide as I slowly pushed inside.

She went to pull back, but I tightened my grip on her hair. "No...hold still, will you? I want to fuck that pretty mouth."

A startled moan in her throat and the sudden rush of color to her cheeks told me she didn't mind at all, so I moved, keeping it slow and steady, even though I wanted to pull her off the bed and onto her knees, holding her head between my hands as I thrust as deep as she could take me.

My balls drew tight as I watched her, the mental fantasy combined with reality, a potent drug that slammed my system into overdrive. Pulling on her hair, I eased her back.

"No," I said when she tried to touch me, grabbing her wrists in my hands. "I'm about two seconds from coming, and when I do, I want to be inside you."

She blinked lazily, reminding me of a feline. "Okay."

"Fuck, you're dangerous," I muttered. "Get on the bed."

Her lips curved, and I had to force myself not to crush that smiling mouth with my own.

As she slid back onto the bed, I grabbed the box of condoms. Ripping a foil packet off, I tore it open and almost dropped the damn rubber in my haste. It was a miracle my hands weren't shaking by the time I had it in place.

Tina's eyes were fogged with heat and want as I stretched out on top of her, her mouth seeking mine. Kissing, in my experience, was usually little more than a means to an end.

But not with this woman. Her sweet, lush mouth was one I could feast on endlessly, especially when she made those soft moans as I settled between her thighs. Taut muscles trembled as I rubbed my cock against her folds, then tightened around my hips as I pressed against her. We kissed.

She was tight as a fist as I pushed inside, a soft sound of distress escaping her. Breaking the kiss, I lifted my head to look into her eyes. Her mouth parted on another gasp as my weight shifted.

"Are you alright?"

She sucked in a breath, eyes closing. "I...yeah. It's just...been a while."

"I guess that explains why your pussy is like a fist."

Her eyes flew back open, and she stared at me.

Against my chest, the hard thrust of her nipples seemed to pulse, and her cunt tightened around me even more. Smiling slowly, I stroked a hand up her side and cupped one round, plump breast, stroking with my thumb. I took my time, and when I reached the stiffened areola, she was all but pushing into my touch.

"You haven't had too many lovers indulge in dirty talk, have you?"

Mutely, she shook her head, but the glint in her eyes told me what I already knew.

She liked it.

"That's too bad. You should have a man who doesn't mind telling you that your tits are beyond perfection." I tugged on her nipple. She jolted, her hips rocking up as if there was a band between her breasts and pelvis, and that touch incited a chain reaction.

My cock pulsed at the milking caress of her cunt, and it took every bit of control I had not to thrust into her to my balls. Then again, over and over, until we both shattered.

“Perfection,” I said again before ducking my head. Pushing her breast up with my hand, I caught her nipple in my mouth.

She cried out and fisted her hands in my hair, pressing me closer.

I thrust deep, burying my dick inside the hot, honeyed depths. And she bucked again, jerking her hips and shuddering as she climaxed. I gritted my teeth against my orgasm and held off, pressing my hips into hers as she thrashed under me.

It could have gone on for seconds. It could have gone on for hours. Either way, it ended far too soon, and when she lifted her lids to look at me from drugged, sated eyes, I had only one thing to say...

“Again.”

Before she could respond, I pulled out, went to my knees, and flipped her onto her belly.

She moaned as I thrust into her, and she moved back on me eagerly.

Fuck. I’d thought taking Tina to my bed would fix this fascination.

But I already knew it hadn’t worked out that way.

I just wanted more.

And more.

And more.

While I drove into her with a force that made her whimper, she orgasmed again before I could give in to my own. As my muscles relaxed, I dropped onto the bed, rolled to my side, and pulled her into the curve of my body.

Typically, this was the time I’d get up, shower, and send my companion for the night off by herself.

Burying my face in Tina's hair, I murmured, "After we catch our breath, I'm going to have you again."

"Hmmm...okay. You might kill me at this pace, but...okay."

She covered the hand I had resting on her belly.

That made me smile while a strange warmth settled in my chest.

What the fuck was it about her?

TEN

TINA

I WOKE WRAPPED IN WARMTH AND FEELING PLEASANTLY ACHY.

After moments of confusion, I remembered the reason I ached.

Holy shit, girl.

Memories of last night flooded through me.

Maximus was stretched out behind me, his arm around my waist as he held me against him.

What an odd experience.

I could count on one hand the number of times I'd spent the night at some guy's place—and that included Cecil, my only serious boyfriend, since I'd ended things with the guy I'd dated in high school.

Maximus stirred behind me, and I closed my eyes, almost afraid of how the next few minutes would play out.

But then he kissed my shoulder. "Morning."

The soft, intimate murmur made my heart stutter. Unable to resist the temptation to see him, I wiggled around in bed and examined his handsome face. Thin, early morning light shone in through sheer curtains, allowing just enough illumination for us to see each other.

"Good morning, Maximus."

His eyelids drooped. “James.”

“What?”

He reached up and cupped my cheek. “My first name is James. I’d like you to call me that.”

“Okay...James.” That felt even more intimate than being wrapped in this cocoon of bed linens and blankets...and I liked it. “I wasn’t planning on falling asleep and spending the night.”

“I’m glad you did.” He skimmed a hand up my arm, then back down. “I enjoy the feel of you in my arms, Tina Siegler.”

My heart lurched, then started dancing in my chest. Even though the admission left me feeling vulnerable, I confessed, “I think I enjoy being in your arms, James Maximus.”

His smile was adorably crooked. “I guess it all works out rather well then.”

“I guess so.”

He rolled and tucked me under him, spreading my thighs and rocking against me while his hands stroked over me, and his mouth rediscovered the places he’d found last night.

When he finally came inside me, it was lazy and gentle.

He slipped from the bed afterward but wasn’t gone for more than a few minutes.

My blood felt thick and golden, all too warm and rich for my body as he pulled me back into his arms.

“Join me for breakfast?”

“Hmmm. Okay.” Rubbing my cheek against his chest, I decided maybe taking the risk of going out with him had been worth it.

“I want to see you again, Tina.”

My heart did a funny tap dance in my chest at his softly spoken admission. Keeping my face pressed to his chest, I inhaled deeply. “I might be open to

that.”

It was nearly eleven by the time we left his suite.

Tempted to spend the entire day with him, I checked my phone and saw a response from the team at Hattie’s Place. I would not risk reading it in front of him, but I couldn’t afford to put it off, either.

“Can I call you tonight? Or maybe tomorrow?” he asked as the elevator doors slid open.

Using the elevator mirror, I finger-combed my hair and inspected my clothes. They weren’t severely wrinkled, but next to Maximus in his elegant suit, I looked...well, I looked like I’d just spent the night with a guy. I was determined not to worry about it.

“Yes. I would like it if you called me.” This small area behind the frosted glass door was relatively private, so I enjoyed the way he looked at me and let myself enjoy the look of him as I leaned against a wall. “Thanks for arranging a car for me. I appreciate it.”

“It’s no trouble.” He traced the curve of my upper lip, gaze hot. “I’d drive you myself, but you said you needed to work. If I spend too much more time around you, I’ll just end up stripping you naked. Again.”

My cheeks heated in pleasure, and I made myself opt for silence instead of what I wanted to say—which was, I don’t mind.

My phone made a demanding ping, and I patted my pockets for it, only to remember I had dropped it into my purse. “Hold on a second.”

He was quiet as I rooted through my purse, and I sensed his amusement as I dropped the bag on the accent table next to the private elevator. Holding it open with one hand, I dug around with the other, getting more annoyed by the second.

“Stop smirking,” I advised him. “Every other thing in my life is organized to the nth degree. I’m entitled to a slightly messy purse.”

Snagging the phone, I gave him a challenging look.

He smiled back at me, not saying a word.

I saw the message from Dina and smothered a pang of guilt when I realized she'd already texted twice. Pushing the phone into my pocket, I looked back up at Maximus.

He had his phone in hand and tucked it away at my mock scowl. With a look of fake innocence, he lifted both shoulders. "What?"

"No comments about my purse, or I might re-evaluate that calling thing."

"What purse?" With a charming smile, he dipped his head and rubbed his mouth against mine. "I'll call soon. I can't wait to see you again." He bit my lower lip gently before releasing me. "The car pulled up a few minutes ago. The driver just texted me. His name is Felix. He'll take you wherever you want to go."

Before I could pull his head down for more, he pulled back and turned away, leaving me wanting a heck of a lot more than that light brush of his lips with a nip.

Sighing, I reluctantly started for the door that would take me to the lobby while he disappeared through another door, one that would likely go to some maze of offices.

Out front, I squinted into the painfully bright light of a Texas summer morning, letting my eyes adjust before looking for the driver named Felix. A small child came bolting out the revolving door and almost crashed into me before his mom caught him. I sidestepped out of reflex and almost bumped into a beautiful blonde wearing a black sundress dotted with sunflowers, her high-heeled sandals matching the motif.

"Sorry," I said, grimacing. "Late night, and I haven't had enough caffeine yet."

She chuckled. Her expertly made-up eyes skimmed me over before her lips bowed in a knowing smile. "I've had those sorts of late nights myself. I hope it was a good one."

My cheeks heated, but the woman had already moved past me, so I didn't worry about responding.

"Ms. Siegler?"

I turned and spotted a tall, almost painfully thin man a few feet away. He smiled as we made eye contact and bobbed his head. "I'm Felix. I'll be happy to take you anywhere you need to go."

"Thanks."

He escorted me to a sleek black town car and opened the door for me. Sinking back into the leather seat, I closed my eyes to organize my thoughts. I needed to go home and shower, change, then go to my office. I had a toothbrush and toothpaste in my purse, but...

My purse.

The car pulled away from the curb as I swore. "Oh, shit. Wait!"

Immediately, the car halted, and Felix looked at me in the rearview mirror. "Is there a problem?"

"I left my purse in the elevator. Can you wait a minute while I run inside?"

"Of course." He opened the door, but I already had mine open and was striding toward the hotel entrance.

Once inside, I strode toward the frosted glass door and punched in the code. My purse was still there, exactly where I'd left it. I grabbed it and headed back out, taking time to make sure the door shut securely.

"I...well, hello."

I stilled, looking up to see the blonde in the daisy sundress from just minutes ago standing a few feet away. She looked at me, then back to the frosted glass door. "Were..." she stopped and pursed her lips, then shook her head slightly. "You spent the night with Maximus." It wasn't a question.

"I...excuse me?"

She came closer, stopping only a foot away. "There's no point in lying, honey." She rolled her eyes. "There's only one reason a woman comes out of those doors looking like...that." She sniffed. "But you must not have been all that entertaining. Maximus and I are having brunch together."

She gave me a cool smile and arched an eyebrow, clearly waiting to see how I'd respond.

Hurt ripped through me.

But I didn't let it show.

"Well. Isn't that nice for you?" Without saying another word, I cut around her and strode for the doors. I felt her gaze on me the entire way, but I didn't look back.

I didn't want to see her face or anybody else's in this damned hotel.

My reaction wasn't rational, I knew. The man I'd just slept with and barely knew had made no promises to each other, and we certainly didn't have any sort of commitment or obligation not to see other people.

But damn.

After wooing me with flowers, wine, and expensive bowls, I was only one in a line of many with whom he toyed. Maybe the risk of seeing a playboy hadn't been worth it after all.

As Felix pulled away, I kept my gaze fixed straight ahead. If I could have had my way, I'd forget that this place and its charming, deceptive owner even existed.

ELEVEN

TINA

“GORGEOUS...”

Smiling into the laptop camera at Roseanne Humphrey’s evident appreciation for the specs and mockups I had sent, I continued my presentation, “I’m glad you like it. I’m rather pleased with how the mockups turned out.”

“Oh, honey...” She beamed at me, her bright smile luminous against her dark skin. “Like don’t touch it.”

My phone vibrated. I barely controlled my grimace.

Rosanne continued... “Overall, how much time do you think the re-modeling will take? And you’re sure we won’t have to displace our residents?”

I flipped through my copy of the proposal to double-check my estimates and gave her the timeline. She smiled, clearly pleased. “And I don’t expect your residents will have to be displaced. We’ll need to close off certain areas while we renovate, but we’ve already discussed the arrangements for that. However,” I held up a hand. “Hattie’s Place is in an ancient building. On my walkthrough, I saw nothing that would concern me, but sometimes we find problems after we start the renovation.”

“I understand.” She blew out a breath, then gave me a tight smile. “I have options should it come to having to vacate the premises for a short time.”

“Alright.” My phone buzzed again. *Damn him.* I knew it was him. It was like I’d developed spider-sense or something. Only it pertained to Maximus and Maximus alone. It was annoying as hell. Instead of remembering him as the

shallow asshole you can expect when dating a playboy, I thought about other things. I thought about how he touched me, how his hands felt electric on my skin, and the way his eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled.

As I forced my attention away from the sexiest guy I'd ever known, I continued. "Let's hope it doesn't come to that, but if the worst happens, I've got a kick-ass crew I subcontract with, and they can handle these issues."

"Wonderful." She rubbed her hands together. "Most of the board members are...well, onboard. We're meeting at the end of the week, so I'll let you know when we have the go-ahead."

"Sounds good." Covering my vibrating phone, I gave her my best professional smile. "Tell me if you need anything before then."

We ended the Zoom call, and I picked up my phone.

Yes. Maximus had been buzzing.

He'd called twice during that fifteen-minute Zoom session. And sent five texts. More than yesterday.

And, of course, he'd tried with the flowers again.

Brooding, as I stared at the many unread texts, I told myself that it was anger towards him.

Recalling the elegant woman, who had pointed out her brunch date with Maximus, I refused to consider the emotions inside me could be anything but anger.

Not hurt.

Definitely...not...hurt. I hardly knew the guy. So what if he were easy to talk to and liked my sharp mouth, liked that I had a brain and enjoyed using it, or that I'd kicked his ass at laser tag?

Everything about him pointed toward him being an expert at seducing women into his bed. Not that I knew all that much. It wasn't like I'd been snooping around online trying to find out more about him.

There was no reason to, right?

My phone rang, the vibration in my hand made me jump—and I swore. “Maximus, for crying out loud...”

But the swear lingering on my tongue faded as I saw Dina’s name pop up.

I could dodge Maximus’ calls, not my sister’s.

“SO,” Dina said, sitting across from me, a bottle of wine between us, each of us with a full glass already poured. “Are you going to talk?”

“About what?” Sipping my wine gave me something to do with my hands, and I could stall a few more seconds as I tasted it, letting it roll around on my tongue before swallowing. Holding the glass up to the light, I swirled it around. “The wine’s not too bad.”

“I was hoping for better than that.” She sighed and took a sip of her own. “But that’s my impression, too. Not too bad.”

“There’ll be a better one.” Four more bottles of wine waited. A relatively new regional winery had approached Dina about using their label at certain events, and my sister enjoyed supporting local businesses when possible. I liked to enjoy the samples she occasionally brought with her.

“Let’s hope. We’ll finish this one off and try the rosé next.” She took another sip, then focused on me once more. “Now...why are you so down?”

Huffing out a breath, I said, “You are like a dog with a bone.”

“Damn straight.” She blew me a kiss and put down her glass so she could select a slice of fruit. After crunching into an apple, she waved a hand, waiting for me to spill.

“I’m just bummed about how things are going with my business.”

Her face softened, sympathy in her eyes. “You’ll get things turned around. You always do. Things are looking good with that project for the shelter, right?”

“Yeah.” Taking a golden slice of cheddar, I nibbled on it. I kept my gaze averted so Dina wouldn’t pick up on the relief in my eyes. Not that my business didn’t worry me. I was beyond worried, the stress of it enough to keep me awake late into the night far too often. But that wasn’t the main reason for my dark mood the past few days. “It’s not a high dollar project, but it is money—and it’s a good way to get my name out there too. Roseanne—she’s the CEO and runs everything—she says she’d like to do an open house after the renovation. Offer training to the residents to help them land jobs and reach out to local businesses that are open to help.”

“That’s a good idea.” Dina leaned back in her seat, sipping her wine as she considered. “Shoot me her email. I’ll contact her. That sort of thing is something I’d like to be involved in.”

“I’m not surprised.” Selecting an apple, I bit into it. “I want to get my design business up and going so I can do that sort of help too.”

“You will get there,” Dina sounded utterly convinced.

Her faith in me was one thing I’d never had to doubt. Tipping my glass toward her, I said, “Thank you.”

“What are sisters for?”

I chuckled and reached for the bottle of wine, topping off my nearly empty glass, then pouring the rest into hers. After another sip, I said, “You know, the second glass of this is better.”

Dina laughed. “I can include that in the description—the first glass isn’t too bad, but the second glass is better. My clients will swoon.”

I tossed a grape at her.

My phone buzzed with a text notification. Dina glanced at it, and I bit back a sigh as I checked it, knowing she’d be curious if I didn’t.

Spying James’ initials, I put the phone back down and took a couple of grapes from the fruit and cheese plate.

“Nobody you want to talk to?”

“Nope.” I tossed one grape into my mouth. “Let’s just leave it at that.”

TWELVE

MAXIMUS

THE TUESDAY AFTERNOON RUSH HOUR TRAFFIC DIDN'T DO SHIT TO IMPROVE my mood, but I wasn't about to stay in my suite at the hotel. Despite my fresh sheets, I could still smell Tina's scent in my bed, and the past few nights had been anything but restful.

I doubted I'd get much more sleep outside Houston, but at least I wouldn't have to worry about the scent of her skin taunting me.

When the monitor on the car's dash chirped a message notification, I had a split second of euphoric hope it was Tina, only for it to crash when I saw it was just Scot Cutler, one of my many half-siblings.

"Play message," I said with no actual interest.

It was short and to the point, which was typical for him. He was going to be in Houston in a couple of weeks, and asked about meeting for drinks. Even as my thoughts drifted to Tina, I made a mental note to text him back.

I didn't get it. Why had Tina pulled back suddenly?

The memory of the look on the florist earlier had me drumming my fingers on the steering wheel in frustration.

She'd shared a picture the delivery driver had snapped, two dozen roses scattered on the sidewalk, crystal shards glittering among the stems like wet diamonds.

“She told Joey she’s not interested. This was how she treated the last bouquet I put together. As much as I want to keep your business, Mr. Maximus, I don’t enjoy having my flowers treated in such a manner. And the vase...such an exquisite piece.”

I didn’t give a damn about the destroyed vase or the flowers.

I *did* give a damn about why Tina had destroyed the gift, something she wouldn’t share because she wasn’t talking to me.

What the absolute fuck?

“JAMES. HONEY.” The pretty blonde sitting behind the desk leaned forward and pinned me with a stern look. Her pale, almost white-blonde hair, cut to frame her heart-shaped face, accentuated her high cheekbones and intense dark brown eyes. Right now, that dark gaze held mine without blinking. “Have you lost your ever-loving mind?”

“No.”

My half-sister, Gianni, cocked a brow and tilted her head slightly to the side. “Are you sure about that? I mean, have you listened to yourself? Read any of the texts you sent me last night and this morning?”

Tapping my finger on the arm of the leather wing chair where I sat, I bit my irritation. “I’m beyond busy this week, Gianni. There’re fires at the hotel that I need to put out, so if we could move this along, I’d appreciate it. Can you give me a timeframe on the job?”

“Sure.” She leaned back in her chair and kicked up her jean-clad legs, crossing them at the ankle on the edge of her desk, a sardonic smile I knew far too well curving her lips. “I’ll be done...never. Will that work?”

“Gianni, I’m not in the mood for bullshit.”

“Neither am I.” The smile had gone, and she dropped her legs and grabbed her phone from the corner of her desk. She tapped the screen, then looked at me.

The irritation sparking in her eyes left me with the urge to shift uncomfortably. I smothered it, barely.

“Alright, look...I’m sorry I hounded you so much last night. That was uncalled for.”

“James.” Elbows braced on the table, she sighed. “It’s not just that you kept me up. It’s that you texted me seven times about this woman. Now you’re here, in my office, on the opposite side of the city from where you and I both know you would be if you hadn’t met Tina Siegler. And you want me to find out why the hell she’s not returning your calls.”

Flinging her hands up in the air, she glared at me.

“Yes. That’s exactly what I want.” Scowling at her, I beat my fingers on the arm of the chair a little harder. “I pay a solid monthly retainer to you, Gianni, so I don’t see the problem here. It’s not like I’m asking you to gather up her credit card history and social security number so I can steal her identity or some sort of...nefarious bullshit.”

“No, you’re right.” Gianni’s no-bullshit expression didn’t change. “You’re not asking me for any nefarious bullshit. But you’re not asking for business-related information either. You’re asking me to dig up private personal information. Get it on your own. This isn’t information you hire your sister or any private investigator to get!”

“She won’t fucking talk to me!” The sound of my voice, halfway to a shout, echoed back to me like a slap in the face, and I swore. Shoving up from the chair, I started pacing. “Sorry. I’m in a shitty mood, and I don’t need to take it out on you.”

“Hell, James. If I can’t handle you yelling, I’m in the wrong business.”

I had my back to her, but I could practically hear her rolling her eyes. It didn’t improve my mood.

“I can’t figure this woman out. I need your help.” Turning to face her, I jammed my hands in my pockets. “Please.”

She closed her eyes and lifted her face to the ceiling, lips moving silently.

After opening her eyes, she rose and came to stand in front of me. “James, no. I’m not doing this, even if you stand there and give me that serious broody look that probably works on just about every other female you’ve ever met.” She cupped my face in her hands when I tried to look away, irritated as always by how easily she seemed to see inside me.

“Fine.” Wrapping my hands around her wrists, I tried to tug her away.

“Listen to me, James.” She twisted free of my grasp, then linked our hands when I went to back up. “You can’t expect other people to do the work for you when you’re trying to get to know somebody. That’s not how relationships work.”

“Why the hell did you help me out last time, then?”

“Frankly, because you caught me by surprise when you asked.” Squeezing my hands, she let go and went back to her desk. But instead of sitting in her chair, she leaned against the heavy oak surface and braced her hands on it. “James, you’ve never shown that kind of interest in a woman before. Ever. So, when you asked, I was...surprised. Then I was curious. So even though it wasn’t the best idea, I went ahead with it and did the basic background check on her. But that’s all I’m doing. You can’t skip the basics that go into creating genuine relationships. You just can’t.”

Blood crept up my neck, a self-conscious reminder that I knew absolutely nothing about relationships. All my relationships had happened by pure luck—and not a single one was romantic.

“Look.” Frustrated, I shoved my hands through my hair. “I– this thing with Tina, I... son of a bitch.”

Spinning on my heel, I stalked over to the window.

“I don’t know how to do this shit, Gianni. I just don’t.”

“Trust me. I’m aware.” She joined me at the window, nudging me with her elbow. “But you are going to have to figure it out if you want things to go anywhere with this woman. The little I know of her tells me one thing—you can’t cut corners with her, James. Be real, or she’ll not be interested. That means you have to be the one to get to know her. Be the one talking to her.”

“How can I do that when she won’t talk to me?” Bewildered, I glared at her. “Fuck, maybe I should just give up the whole idea.”

“Oh no...” She caught my arm when I went to turn away. “You’re not taking the easy way, my dear brother. That’s being a quitter and a coward. You’re neither.”

With a baleful glare, I pointed out, “I’m not a kid you can provoke with reverse psychology taunts or dares.”

“I know.” She shrugged. “I’m not attempting any of those tactics. I’m just pointing out the truth. And you know it.”

“Fuck, but you can be a bitch,” I grumbled.

“Buddy, you need somebody who can be a bitch with you. You intimidate the hell out of lesser beings, and that will not help you here.” She fluttered her lashes at me and smirked.

“Fine.” I leaned against the window and stared off into the distance. “You got any suggestions? I don’t even know why she stopped talking to me.”

“Hmmm.” Lips pursed, Gianni strolled back to her desk and sat down, long legs stretched out in front of her. “How did the date go Friday night? What did you do?”

I told her and watched as she grinned, clearly pleased.

“Alright, James. Do what you did last time,” she said, gesturing vaguely with one hand. “Get creative. You figured out something that appealed to her. So do it again.”

THIRTEEN

TINA

THE WORDS IN FRONT OF ME RAN TOGETHER. DROPPING THE PEN, I LEANED back in my chair and rubbed my eyes.

Roseanne from Hattie's Place had cautiously given me the green light after talking with the various board members, although the meeting wasn't until tomorrow. I didn't have any other projects to work on, so I was roughing out the blueprints and making calls to gauge availability with my preferred contractors.

I'd only been at it for a few hours when I felt a low-level headache, and my eyelids weighed about five pounds each.

Sighing, I dropped my head on the chair's padded rest and closed my eyes.

Last night had been yet another restless one, plagued by hot, hungry dreams that had woken me twice, both times achy with need and angry at James Maximus all over again.

The bastard.

I should have known better than to go out with him after everything I'd heard. And sleeping with him...what the hell had I been thinking?

"You weren't." Once I'd let my guard down and agreed to go out with him, I'd lost all control. I'd looked into his dark, intoxicating gaze, and my panties all but melted off.

My phone rang, and I grabbed it, answering as I fought a rush of hot embarrassment.

“Hello, Siegler Designs.”

“Ms. Siegler?” A polite, formal voice intoned.

“Yes, this is her.”

“Hello, Ms. Siegler. I’m Miranda Wilkins, and I work for James Maximus of Maximus Unlimited. Please hold?”

The line clicked before I could say the words that immediately leaped to my tongue—a firm, resounding, Hell no.

Then the line clicked again, and he was on the phone.

“Hello, Tina.”

“Mr. Maximus.” His voice had been polite and coolly professional. Fine. I could do that too. And when he asked me out for drinks this time, I’d tell him to shove those drinks where the sun doesn’t shine.

He didn’t bother to correct my use of his last name.

Leaning back in my chair, already preparing my politest kiss-my-ass speech, I waited for whatever shit he had lined up this time.

“I’ve checked out some of your work with the firm here in Houston and in San Francisco, and you have an impressive portfolio. I’d like your opinion on a project starting soon. Is your schedule open for new clients?”

My polite kiss-my-ass speech froze on my tongue.

“Tina?”

Talk, you idiot!

“I’m looking at my calendar,” I said in a flat voice. So much for thinking Maximus wasn’t the sort to mix business with pleasure.

After a few more seconds of pretending to look at my calendar, I said, “I’m pretty much all booked up for the next month, but if you’re flexible in your

timetable, perhaps I can work with you. That depends on what you need, of course.”

“I’m flexible.”

I waited, wondering if some double entendre was coming, but instead, he gave me an address. “Are you able to pull that up on your computer and look?”

Something about it rang a bell, and once the search result loaded, I saw why.

I swallowed.

He couldn’t be serious.

“You gave me the address for the old Biscayne hotel. Is that correct?”

“It is.” His voice was level and smooth, nothing like the rough growl I remembered from our night together. It had been just days ago. I’d swear I could still feel his hands on me. His mouth. “Are you familiar with the place?”

Despite the sensory echoes of his touch, I replied in an equally professional tone. “About as much as the typical Houstonian. Well, perhaps a bit more since I’m a bit of a history buff and enjoy doing historical renovations when they come my way.”

“I’m purchasing the hotel.”

Although the place was a derelict mess right now, it was in an area galloping through a revitalization. The price tag attached to that hotel wouldn’t be cheap—not to buy or renovate. And although the artist in me was salivating at the thought of bringing something so stately back to its former glory, I was also a realist.

“That place is an utter mess,” I said bluntly. “Renovation will probably cost even more than the purchase price. The Biscayne is amazing, in purely historical and architectural terms, but you’ll sink so much money into it, you may never see a profit.”

“I’ll see a profit.” He said it matter-of-factly, like there was no question of it. “The question is whether you want to be part of bringing the Biscayne back,

not just to what it once was, but better?”

Huffing out a laugh as my incredulity temporarily overcame my anger at him, I said, “There isn’t an interior designer alive who wouldn’t drool at this chance, Maximus.”

I almost bit my tongue the second his given name escaped my lips, and I wanted to kick something, swear, hit, or bite something. Not something. Him.

Expecting him to comment, I held my breath. As much as I needed both the project and the publicity I’d get from such a job, I wasn’t sure my pride could take working with him.

“So, are you interested? I’d like to hire you to handle the lobby, and if I’m satisfied with the results, we’ll extend the contract for the entire hotel. What do you say about such a project?”

Closing my eyes, I rubbed my temple. How insane was this? The idea of working with him on anything, much less something so unique but also long-term, had my muscles knotting up with tension. And the bland, business-like way he was handling everything. Shit, it was like our night together had never happened.

I wasn’t sure if that made the possibility of working for him better or worse.

“I think it’s doable,” I said cautiously. “I have another client, but as I’m primarily handling the designing, hiring, and budgeting aspects, there’s no reason I can’t do both.” My mind was already running through the details, shuffling timelines and considering my contacts.

“I can be flexible,” he said, reiterating that point. “This is a... personal project, and I’m willing to invest enough time and money to make it happen. Meet me tomorrow at the hotel so that we can go over a few things. Inspect the lobby and put together a proposal.”

I had plenty of reasons to say no, but more reasons to say yes.

If he wasn’t so professional, saying no would be easy, but my business couldn’t afford to miss the chance of getting a project like this.

Besides, how likely am I to have to see him?

Sure, I might have to talk to him directly tomorrow, and maybe occasionally throughout the job...if he hired me. But he was the big man in charge of a multi-million-dollar company. He had his fingers in a lot of pies, and billionaires like him delegated work by necessity.

“I’ll be there, Mr. Maximus,” I said, pulling up the shield my professionalism offered. It was a buffer that should have stayed up from the first time I met James Maximus. I would not drop my guard again. “What time did you have in mind?”

FOURTEEN

MAXIMUS

I'VE NEVER BEEN A SOCIAL PERSON. MY FEW CASUAL FRIENDS, EVEN THOSE from when I was younger, had been just that—casual. Little more than acquaintances.

There were many reasons for it, no doubt. A therapist would have a field day with me, but I didn't need sixty minutes on a shrink's couch to learn that I've unresolved anger issues, as well as problems with trust and commitment. All tied to the fact that my rich bastard father slept with every pretty woman who caught his eye, while my mom had to work two jobs to keep food on the table.

It had taken a long time to accept my mother's choice. She could have gone to Connor at any time, and he would have helped. No doubt. But, back when it happened, I only understood that my mother had died, and she left me with a guy I didn't even know.

It wasn't until Gianni had steamrolled her way into my life that I'd even acknowledged the other kids Connor had fathered. She was the person who knew me best, but it had taken her years to get through the many walls I'd built.

Those walls had kept me on the sidelines in high school and much of college. While my brothers were learning to flirt, I waited for girls to notice me so I could dump them.

I'd never had to work in a relationship because I'd never wanted one. Even what Gianni and I have, which I valued more than just about anything, wasn't

something I went after. Now, I would fight like hell to protect it. But she was the one who did the work.

To say that I was treading on new ground with Tina would be an understatement. Six months ago...hell, six days ago, if somebody had told me I'd be twisting inside out to reach a woman, I'd have suggested they seek mental health advice.

However, here I was, leaning against my car in front of a hotel I was in the midst of purchasing, all for one reason. She had a passion for history and a love of older buildings.

I knew that because of interviews she'd given for local architectural publications in California. She'd even won an award in San Francisco for her renovation of a historical home, turned into a B&B. In the interview that followed, she'd confessed her passion for restoring old buildings. The bigger, the better.

Here I was, ready to spend millions on a project, just to get a woman to talk to me.

"You've lost it, man," I muttered, checking my watch. A whole five minutes had passed since I'd last checked. Another half-hour before Tina would get here.

Today, of all days, the traffic hadn't sucked, and I'd made it here in record time.

My phone chirped with a notification.

The real estate agent handling the hotel sale offered, once again, to join Tina and me on a walkthrough. I'd done everything short of telling her the deal was off if I couldn't have an hour alone to discuss the project with 'my' designer. But that didn't stop the woman from calling or texting several times.

I ignored the message and opened my email.

At the very least, it would make time fly by.

Seventeen emails later, I noticed a flashy red paint sports coupe coming up. I caught sight of Tina's profile, and something in my chest twisted.

Forcing myself to relax, I closed my email and tucked away my phone.

Tina parked her car.

Then she just sat there.

From where I stood, I could only see the back of her head. It took more restraint than I liked not to stride over there and open the door. Being a gentleman had nothing to do with the urge, either. I had a feeling she wouldn't appreciate the gesture; otherwise, I would have done it.

But she'd already put up a wall between us, and I would not give her more bricks to add to it.

I counted the seconds waiting for her to climb out.

By the time I reached one hundred thirty-seven, I was about to climb out of my skin and throw caution in a dark hole where it belonged.

Before I could shove off my car and stalk over to hers, the door opened.

One long leg, then another emerged, Tina's lithe, sexy form moving with a fluid, effortless grace as she climbed out. Without looking at me, she ducked back in, head first, to retrieve something.

I took advantage of the position and eyed her ass, remembering the curves in my hands, the firm, soft length of her legs, the taste of her pussy.

My cock came to a hard, aching readiness, and I swore mentally, turning toward my car under the pretext of studying the old hotel, just a few short yards away, waiting for our inspection.

Man, the place was a fucking mess.

I was out of my mind.

"I hope I didn't keep you waiting long," Tina said.

"You didn't." I refused to tell her I'd gotten here almost forty-five minutes early. "Looks like you dressed for the job."

She lifted a brow but did not comment.

The khakis and simple navy polo, paired with worn work boots, did nothing to hide her curves.

I had dressed similarly. Though I'd gone with jeans instead of khakis, and my polo was gray instead of blue. Since the moment I met her, I couldn't look at the color blue without thinking of her eyes.

Tina moved to the back of her car and opened the hatchback, pulling out a leather messenger bag, faded from years of use. After pulling the strap crosswise over her torso, she joined me on the sidewalk, her eyes already on the building.

"She still has good solid bones," Tina murmured, a light entering her lovely blue eyes. "They didn't build many older buildings to last. Most of them, all you can do is tear them down. But this place, with time and money put into her, she'll be beautiful again."

I tipped my head back and studied the hotel front, trying to see it through her eyes.

"Are you looking to go with a style similar to the original?"

I looked at her before answering, caught a glint of what I suspected was hope. I hadn't considered it one way or the other until that moment.

"Yes. If, of course, you think that's doable."

"I can make it happen." She caught her lower lip between her teeth, a thoughtful expression in her eyes.

For a moment, I thought she'd say more. But she only nodded toward the doors. "You got the okay from the building inspector for us to enter?"

"Yes." I'd paid a shit ton of money to get somebody at the last minute—as in almost nine o'clock last night—to make sure the building was sound. It hadn't been in use for more than a decade, but miraculously survived storms and harsh weather without deteriorating into dangerous conditions.

Once inside, Tina stood in the entryway, gazing around with an expression that I'd carry with me for a long time. A mixture of longing, excitement, and

something almost akin to lust. Or maybe it was greed—not for money, but for this place...to tackle this job and remake this hotel to its glorious days.

Not wanting to risk ruining the moment, I stayed quiet.

Several moments passed before she took a deep breath and blew it back out. She met my gaze.

“Sorry,” she said, her tone polite, but that cool edge was back, and the warmth in her eyes just seconds ago had vanished. “I just needed a minute to take it all in.”

“It’s not a problem.” Fuck. This was going to be more challenging than I thought. “Shall we walk around?”

She moved to my side without speaking, pulling a tablet from the messenger bag. She made a few notes as we inspected the hotel and asked short, pointed questions that gave no room for anything but business.

She would not give me an opening.

Fine. I’d just make one.

“Why haven’t you answered my texts or calls?”

From the corner of my eye, I saw her reaction, the way her shoulders stiffened slightly, the soft rush of color to her cheeks.

“I’m not sure what you mean,” she said. “I talked to you yesterday, didn’t I?”

“You took the call because my PA called—you didn’t know it was me,” I said bluntly. Stopping, I waited for her to turn and look at me.

I was almost surprised that she did.

But the impassive expression on her face pissed me off. I wanted to pull her against me and kiss her, strip her naked, stroke those strong, sexy curves until she begged me to fuck her.

“Are we here to discuss business or not?” she asked, voice cool.

Son of a bitch. “Business. By all means.” Leaning against a mahogany counter with a layer of dust and grime, I gestured expansively to the grand

lobby. “Tell me what you think we should do here.”

I hoped her answer involved me bending her over; perhaps by the broken fountain, her hands braced on the marble edge as I fucked her.

“Well, for starters...” She turned away so quickly it was like she couldn’t stand to look at me.

Fuck this shit to hell and back. The things she said barely registered as she rubbed her boot against the dirty ground. I had tried again and again to figure out why she had pulled back so hard and fast.

“...Maximus?”

At the sound of my name on her lips, I snapped back to attention and looked at her.

She flushed and shifted from one foot to the other, obviously uncomfortable.

I tried to remember what she’d been talking about, but couldn’t.

“Sorry,” I said, but even to my ears, the apology fell flat. “I’m having a hard time paying attention. I keep thinking about how it felt to have you in my bed.”

Her cheeks went bright pink, and she snapped her jaw shut with a click.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I waited for a reply.

She looked down at her tablet, then off to the side. Finally, she shoved the tablet back into the bag and pulled the strap over her head. She turned to face me, still flushed with embarrassment, but her gaze was direct.

“We don’t need to discuss any of that.” Her tone clarified that she meant, I don’t want to talk about it.

“Don’t we?” Driven by the need to touch her again, I moved closer.

She tensed but didn’t back away, so I took another step, then another.

But when I was close enough to lean down and take that mouth as I wanted, she lifted a hand and braced it against my chest.

“Stop,” she said. “I had a good time with you, but I’m not interested in auditioning for the role of plaything or flavor of the week or whatever you call it.”

“Audition...” Narrowing my eyes, I considered the word. “No. I don’t think I offered you the chance to audition.”

“Stop being an ass.” She glared at me. “I didn’t leave your place expecting a proposal or some stupid shit like that, but also sure as hell wasn’t planning on joining your harem, okay?”

“My harem?”

“Is there an echo in here?” she demanded. Shoving me, she spun around and paced a few steps before turning back to me. Fire shot from her dark blue eyes, her face still flushed but now with evident anger. “I met one of your ladies, Maximus. And can I tell you this? I’m not overly impressed by how you jumped from me to somebody else in a few hours, but it is quite impressive that you’ve still got the libido of a teenager.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“The tall leggy blonde I met leaving your place Saturday. While I was on my way out, she was on her way in. She told me you two had a brunch date.” She held up a hand to suggest a woman’s height, maybe four inches taller than her. “About this tall, hair down to her ass? Ringing any bells?”

Yeah. Twenty of them. All going off inside my head.

Simone.

Fuck.

“Yes.” Pinching the bridge of my nose, I took a deep breath. After letting it out, I lowered my hand and looked at Tina. “That was Simone. And for the record? She and I haven’t had a date in weeks.”

Tina blinked.

I closed the space between us. “I didn’t invite Simone over Saturday, no matter what shit she told you.”

“But she was there.”

“She showed up to pout and bitch because I hadn’t called in a while. I told her to go home, that I wasn’t interested.” Dipping my head, I whispered in her ear. “I haven’t been interested in anybody—except you—from the moment we met.”

FIFTEEN

TINA

MY HEART WAS RACING AT TOP SPEED FROM THE MOMENT I SAW HIM LEANING against a sleek silver sports car that looked like it cost the moon.

Now it was pounding at a pace that I knew couldn't be healthy. Maximus was standing close enough that my breasts pressed into his chest, and the warmth of his breath tickled my ear.

I wanted to believe him. I wanted to reach out and touch him again, feel the heat of his chest under my hands, feel his mouth against mine.

But...

There were many reasons not to indulge.

He wanted to work with me on this project.

He had a reputation that made an alley cat look virtuous.

He was already intruding enough on my sleep.

I didn't want to get close to a guy and end up hurt. Again.

"Say something," he murmured, lowering his head to press a kiss to my neck.

Fisting my hand in his shirt, I fought the urge to turn my face and seek his mouth.

Instead, I pushed him back, then took a few steps away. My knees were already shaky, and we'd barely touched. "There's not much to say."

“Isn’t there?” He pulled me back against him, hands on my hips.

Against my butt, I felt the hard ridge of his erection, and it took far too much willpower not to rub up against him.

“She didn’t even get inside, baby,” Maximus murmured, nuzzling my neck.

With no conscious decision, my head fell to the side to give him better access. He bit me right where the neck curved into my shoulder and the hot aggressive caress made me shiver.

“She stayed only a few minutes and left pissed because I told her to go.”

With just a few touches, he had already cast a spell of seduction around me, making it hard for me to follow his words. But when it finally clicked, I stiffened. “James...”

“I love the sound of my name on your lips.” He cupped one breast in his hand, squeezing possessively. With his other hand, he pulled my hips back into him and rocked against me, letting me feel the hard evidence of his arousal.

I gulped in air and tore away from him, walking on wobbly legs until I had a good ten feet between us. Only then did I turn around and look at him.

“I don’t know whether to believe you,” I told him, not bothering to pretend otherwise. “And it doesn’t matter, anyway. If you want me to work for you, I can’t be in a relationship with you.”

“Why not?”

The response came out so simply and practically, I found myself at a loss for words.

“Because...well, I just can’t!” I blurted.

Maximus arched a brow.

Glaring at him, I turned away and pushed my hands through my hair, then pressed them to my still-flushed cheeks. “I don’t mix business and pleasure. I can’t believe you do.”

“I’ve had no trouble keeping the two separate. I’m surprised you do.”

Irritated by that comment, I looked at him, but instead of the arrogant bastard I half expected to see, he was scowling, looking almost...confused.

“I learned the lesson the hard way,” I heard myself saying.

Maximus tilted his head. “Tell me.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Looking away, I crossed my arms over my chest. “It’s in the past, and I prefer to keep it that way. But I learned an important lesson from it—never mix business with pleasure. I want this project, and even if I am attracted to you, I can’t pass up a job like this.”

I half expected him to brush me off and tell me he’d changed his mind.

But he didn’t.

“Very well. Business it is. Why don’t you tell me how we can get started?”

“Um.” Unsettled by the easy acquiescence, I looked around. “I have to take some pictures.” Sticking to the original style will simplify the proposal, but if you want options, I can provide them too.”

“Let’s finish looking around,” he said. He picked up my bag and brought it to me. “I’d like your input on a few things before I decide.”

As we worked for the next hour, we were almost in silence, speaking only to ask or answer questions.

Maximus was quiet. It was almost...unsettling, especially after he’d spent the past several days trying to talk to me. I kept waiting for him to change his mind, but whatever thoughts he had, he kept to himself.

“What’s the other project you’ve got going?” he asked as I finished jotting down the last of the measurements I needed.

“I haven’t gotten the formal go-ahead yet, but it’s for a local shelter called Hattie’s Place. They specialize in providing temporary housing and jobs training for women fleeing abusive home environments.”

“Yeah?” He stopped and looked at me, a spark of interest lighting his eyes.

A little surprised at the response, I nodded. “Yes. The board is meeting today to go over the proposal. If they give it the okay, we’ll start work soon.”

He asked more questions. I answered, pausing a few times while taking notes.

“I think that will do for now,” I said, zipping the iPad into my pack. I took another long look at the lobby and blew out a breath. In my mind, I could already envision the finished result. In the glamorous 1920s, before the Great Depression, they had built the Biscayne with luxury in mind. But a luxurious style has many facets. I needed to know what sort of clientele Maximus had in mind.

I turned to ask him—and ended up pressed against him.

His hands cupped my face, and before I could think to resist, his mouth was on mine.

I moaned. My bag fell from my limp fingers. Reaching for Maximus, I curled my fingers into his shirt and clung to him.

I gleefully pressed myself closer.

His hand gripped my butt, and he pulled me in tight, pressing his erection against my belly.

Hot pangs of longing pulsed and spread outward. My blood was carrying the message to every part of my body. I wanted him. I wanted him more than I’d ever wanted anything.

It scared the hell out of me.

But I didn’t push him away.

Finally, the kiss ended, neither one of us breaking away from the other.

Heart thundering in my ears, I stared into his dark brown eyes. He stroked his hand up, then down my back—long, lazy caresses designed to soothe, not entice. I felt like a cat, ready to stretch out and arch under his touch.

“Why did you do that?” I whispered, my lips still tingling from his kiss.

“Because I wanted to. I’ve been dreaming about kissing you again ever since you left my place.” He cupped my cheek in his free hand and brushed his thumb over my lower lip. “And because the taste of you haunts me. I can’t stop thinking about it. I’m not worried about mixing business with pleasure,

Tina. We can have both.”

I wished I could believe him.

Disentangling myself, I stepped free. “I’m not so sure that’s possible, James.”

“I assume you’ve tried before and ended up burned.” He tucked his hands into his pockets, the brooding expression returning to darken his features once more.

“You could put it that way,” I muttered. Brushing my hair back from my face, I scooped my bag up from the ground. I needed to get out of here before I questioned everything.

“Did you react to him the same way you react with me?”

Whipping my head around, I stared at him. “I...no. But that doesn’t matter. I don’t trust myself to keep things separate, James. Maybe you can, but I’m not made that way. You’re gorgeous. You make my brain melt, and I want you, but I’m an adult. I know we don’t get everything we want in life. As much as I want you, I need this job more.”

SIXTEEN

MAXIMUS

MIXING BUSINESS WITH PLEASURE HAD NEVER BEEN AN ISSUE FOR ME, AND IF it had been anybody other than Tina, I would've accepted the rebuff and moved on. It wasn't some bullshit thing about wanting what I couldn't have.

It was her.

And she wanted me too.

"I can have one of my employees take over for me on this project." It wasn't what I wanted to do, but the hotel was just a means to an end—to her. Now that I'd gotten a glimpse of just how much she wanted this job, I would never take it away from her. Even if she walked out the door and never wanted to see me again, she would get this job.

It might take work to convince her to mix business with pleasure, but I'd never been one to back down from a fight.

Warily, she eyed me. "I'd already assumed you'd have somebody handling things from here on out. Isn't that what you normally do?"

"I don't have a normal way of doing things, but I'm happy to step back to ease your concerns about mixing business and pleasure." My gaze dropped to linger on the lush, ripe curve of her lower lip, the need to taste her again already driving me crazy.

With a huffing sort of laugh, she shoved her hair back. "I don't get it? I'm not the most beautiful woman in the world. I'm not even the prettiest woman you've seen this week." She held up a hand before I could say anything.

“Sure, I know damn well I’m attractive, but I’m just not...all this.” She waved her hands around.

“I want you,” I said.

“You’ve had me.”

Smiling, I shook my head and looked away. “Tina, Friday night didn’t even take the edge off. If you have any idea...” I stopped, figuring it probably wasn’t a good idea to tell her all the ways I’d fantasized about having her.

“You know, part of the problem lies right there,” she said, her tone sharp.

That brought me up short. “And what does that mean?”

“You’ve got something of a reputation, Maximus. Don’t tell me you aren’t aware.” Although her face flushed again, she didn’t look away.

“Just what, exactly, have you heard?” It wasn’t any secret that I had...less than traditional preferences for sex, but it wasn’t anything that got discussed in the paper.

She clenched her jaw. “Enough to make me wonder, but for the record, it’s not your unusual proclivities that are my main issue.”

“Unusual proclivities,” I murmured. It almost made me smile. It was better than being called a pervert. “Alright, if it’s not my unusual proclivities that are a problem, what is?”

“Seriously?” She sighed and let her head fall back, staring upward at the faded paintings decorating the high ceiling. When she finally looked back at me, the flush had disappeared from her cheeks, and her gaze had lost that bright glint. “I’m not interested in being your flavor of the month. I think I already mentioned that. You’re a playboy, James. If I did a google search on you, the image results would probably show a good thirty different women on your arm—and that’s just for the past year or two.”

“So you’re looking for commitment?”

“I don’t know!” she snapped. “All I know is that when you’re not a dick, I enjoy being around you. But you seem to push for more than just another date. If this were to go on any longer than that, then I’d like to know I’m the

only one sharing your bed.”

“That wouldn’t be a problem.”

She opened her mouth, then closed it. Shaking her head, she turned away and walked over to the high counter that was once the registration desk. “Stop it, okay?”

“Stop what?” I walked toward her. She stiffened, but when I bracketed her in place with my arms on either side, she didn’t try to flee. Lowering my head, I skimmed my lips down the side of her neck. “You want me to stop craving you? I can’t. Besides, you want me as well. I can feel it.”

She shivered as I bit her, just barely scoring the skin with my teeth.

“What are you so afraid of?” I murmured. “You never know how things could be if you don’t give it a chance.”

Her fingers brushed across my thigh. When she spread her palm flat against my skin, I had to fight not to spin her around and start stripping away the clothes that were an unwelcome barrier. I wanted to feel her hands on me, her mouth.

“You’re driving me insane,” she whispered, her words so soft that I wasn’t sure if she meant for me to hear them.

“That’s fair,” I said.

“Fair?”

Gripping her hips, I pushed my hips against her ass. “I’ve been going crazy since the moment I met you. Crazy with a cock-stand. So, if you’re having some trouble thinking straight, that just puts us on even playing ground. Come on, Tina...give this a chance.”

I kissed her neck again, and she shivered.

“What, exactly, will it be? I mean...if we were to get involved? This...lifestyle of yours, I’m not sure I understand enough of it.”

Finally, we’re moving forward. “I’ll show you. There’s this place. A club.” I tugged on her hips, guiding her until she faced me. The glitter was back in

her eyes, as well as the faint flush to her cheeks. “It’s exclusive and very private. It caters to people with...unusual proclivities.”

“I know you find my word choices amusing,” she said. “I guess you want me to go to this club with you.”

“Yes. Tomorrow night. It’s easier to understand if you experience it.”

An alarm flickered in her eyes. “You mean, you want me to...?”

“No, no.” Catching her hands, I squeezed. “There is nothing that can happen to you that you don’t want to happen. But you could observe. See how you feel about it.”

She licked her lips, nerves still dancing in her eyes. “I...maybe. I’m not sure. Can I think about it?”

“Of course.” No, was what I wanted to say. But I couldn’t rush her. Not if I had a chance in hell of making it work.

SEVENTEEN

TINA

LOST IN THOUGHT, THE SOUND OF MY PHONE RINGING STARTLED ME.

It rang a second time before I got my act together.

“Hello. This is Tina with Siegler Designs.”

“Tina!” Roseann’s cheerful voice came over the line. “I’ve got news for you.”

Reeling in my thoughts, I sat up straighter and put my pen down. The doodle I’d drawn caught my eye, and I scowled. It was a cartoonish version of Maximus’ face. I put my stapler on top of it as I greeted Roseann.

“How are you today?”

“I’m great, Tina. How are you?” Then, before I could answer, she barreled on. “The meeting with the board went wonderfully, and they approved the plans for the renovation.”

“That’s splendid news.” I tapped on my mouse to wake up my computer, then opened the folder holding Hattie’s Place plans. “I appreciate this chance, Roseann.”

“No need to thank me, Tina. I didn’t give you anything. You worked hard for it, and that earned the approval of the board.” She took a deep breath, then laughed. “Wow, I’m still a little giddy. You do not know how long I’ve been trying to get this renovation to happen. Well, I’d like to get together sometime next week?”

“Sounds wonderful.” I was fortunate to handle stress well. If I accepted the job from Maximus—a job I couldn’t afford to pass up, it would take up most of my time. The other invitation he’d given me... Shoving those thoughts aside, I asked, “Did you have a day in mind?”

HOURS AND MANY NOTES LATER, I dropped my pen and rubbed the back of my neck. A few business cards I had pulled from my desk drawer to scan into my contacts partly covered the doodle of Maximus. My gaze kept drifting at it ever since getting off the phone with Roseann.

“I don’t have time for this,” I told the cartoon sketch.

Irritated that I couldn’t get him out of my head, I pushed away from my desk and spun the chair around. I stared at the oversized eclectic clock I’d bought to go with the minimalist décor of my office.

The second hand ticked around, moving at a pace far slower than what seemed normal—and far louder. Oddly hypnotic.

“It’s exclusive and private. Caters to those with...unusual proclivities. It’s easier to understand if you experience it.”

Experience it. What in the world was I supposed to experience?

A part of me was shying away from that. The other part of me wondered just how kinky was Maximus?

Spinning back around in my chair, I went online, then typed Fetish Club into the search bar. The first result to come up was for a movie shot in the early 2000s. I skipped it and several other suggestions that were clearly porn.

Eyes landing on a link to a fetish event, I clicked.

I braced myself, half-expecting the cheesy music of a porn flick blasting out at me.

But there was no music.

The images featured two blindfolded women dressed in lace body stockings. Bracketed between their bodies, as if they were presenting the slideshow, was a picture. Above that picture, in a large, elegant font, it read: Step into the Garden.

The image in the box below faded away, replaced by another. A silhouette of a woman kneeling in front of a man, head bowed, arms pulled behind her back—either tied or cuffed. He stood in front of her, still dressed. But he had his trousers open, and his cock was out, one hand holding it. Although it was a still image, I could almost see him stroking up, then down. The way his free hand cupped the woman's cheek, his intent was apparent.

“Open for me, Tina....”

I sucked in a breath as my vibrant imagination filled in the rest of the picture, placing me in the woman's position while the man standing before me was Maximus.

Between my thighs, I was suddenly wet, and an aching, empty need had me clenching my thighs.

Was this what he wanted me to experience?

“No way,” I told myself. But I didn't sound convincing.

Uncertain if the knowledge embarrassed or encouraged me, I grabbed the mouse and went to the menu at the top, selecting the About the Garden tab.

Maximus hadn't told me where he was taking me.

This...Garden was not in Houston—it was in San Francisco. Was it a fetish club like this he had in mind?

If it was, how did I feel about that?

“Well, you haven't run away screaming yet, have you?” I muttered. Despite my nervousness, I clicked on the photo gallery instead of leaving the website, curious to see what else I could learn.

IT WASN'T EVEN five when I left the office. I couldn't accomplish anything with the state of my mind.

I was almost glad for the usual rush hour traffic. If I focused on traffic and the surrounding drivers, I had less time for my mind to wander.

I arrived home and pulled my phone out to call him, but I stopped.

My nerves were in an uproar.

“It will not get better until you decide.” The sound of my voice was deafening in my empty apartment, and I groaned, pressing my fingers to my temple. It did nothing to ease the headache coming on.

Not giving myself any more chance to procrastinate, I grabbed the phone and opened my messaging app.

Hello James. I've decided to join you tomorrow. Did you have a time in mind?

My phone chimed before I could put it down.

Around 8:30, if that works.

I blew out a nervous breath, and I told him that was fine, then put the phone down. Five seconds later, I grabbed it.

What do I wear?

A leather catsuit and stilettos were not happening.

Wear what makes you comfortable.

I winced. I was most comfortable in a pair of running tights and a sports bra. Or jeans, boots, and a t-shirt.

Little black dress comfortable, I assume?

He replied immediately.

If that's what you want to wear, that's fine.

He sure as hell wasn't making any of this easier.

I went into the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of wine from the fridge. After pouring an enormous glass, I picked out a book from my shelves.

A book, a hot bath, and a glass of wine were in order.

Maybe, just maybe, I could get myself under control so I could sleep.

THE WAY MAXIMUS'S eyes heated when he saw my dress made me glad I had gone shopping.

For that dress, I would eat ramen and eggs all week if necessary. Seeing the intensity in Maximus's eyes made it worthwhile.

"You look stunning," he murmured, eyes roaming over me before returning to mine.

"Thank you." The dress was black and sleeveless. It gave the impression of being strapless but wasn't—the collar connected to the sweetheart neckline by a series of skinny straps in front and back. The bodice skimmed my curves without being tight, ending a few inches above my knees. Strappy black heels finished the outfit. I kept my hair short but had spent an extra twenty minutes styling it to make it look more tousled, and the black-beaded wire earrings I wore, combined with a black accent bracelet, were the only accessories.

Nothing about the outfit screamed I'm going to a kinky club, but I didn't think I'd stand out because of my clothes either.

"Are you nervous?" Maximus asked softly.

"Ah...it's better if you don't ask," I told him.

"Why?"

"If I answer, I'll either have to lie or be honest, which will only make matters worse." I had a hundred butterflies dancing in my belly.

"If you become uncomfortable, tell me," he said, cupping my cheek. "We'll leave."

Then he kissed me, a sweet, almost gentle brush of his lips against mine that left my knees feeling weak.

The club had a simple plaque on the door as a sign. If I hadn't been looking for a sign of what he led me into, I'd have missed it.

The plaque said The Black Star.

My heart raced harder as Maximus swiped a card in front of the card reader.

Maximus glanced at me as he tucked the card away, and I smiled as the doors in front of us swung open.

The expected wave of music rolled out, although muffled. I saw why as we stepped into a small antechamber—there was yet another set of doors, far more innate, and blocked by a bouncer, dressed in a well-fitting black suit. He gave Maximus a friendly smile.

“Mr. Maximus. I hope you're doing well tonight.” The security guard stepped to the side. “Enjoy your evening.”

“Thank you, Lee. Have a good night.” They shook hands, and I suspected that money slipped from Maximus to the guard.

As we moved into the club, the music was loud, a pulse in the air that echoed in the blood. It was deep and soulful, not the typical EDM music you'd hear when going clubbing. But then again, this was my first time at a fetish club.

We stepped into a corridor, bracketed on both sides by high walls. Lights flashed, the strobe light effects popular at many dance clubs.

The club's main floor spread out beneath us, staircases on either side that lead down to the dance floor.

A woman approached, dressed in a form-fitting black velvet dress that fell straight to the floor. Her warm golden skin glowed against the ebony, and her smile was warm as she greeted Maximus. He dipped his head to hear her and then glanced at me, angling his head to the side, showing me we should follow her.

She led us to a booth near the railing. It had a perfect view of the dance floor and something I hadn't noticed until now.

A stage.

I couldn't look away.

A woman stood there.

Black rope bound her.

Like a kinky costume, the rope twined around her breasts before rising to twist around her shoulders and neck. The man next to her wore a three-piece suit as he adjusted the rope in one spot, then another. My breath hitched in my chest as he stopped behind her, cupping her breasts in full view of the entire club. He tweaked her nipples before letting his hands glide down to her hips.

As he urged her to her knees, Maximus shifted his chair closer to mine. "Are you intrigued?"

"Um." I had to clear my throat twice, and even then, my voice was hardly loud enough for him to hear. "Yes."

Onstage, the man sank behind the woman. He'd bent her forward over a chair, her face no longer visible. The position exposed her hands bound behind her back; the rope winding up to her elbows.

He caught her hips again and rocked against her, pantomiming the actions of sex.

A hard pulse went through my core, and I squeezed my knees together in reaction. The pressure on my clitoris from that simple movement was so intense, I groaned, the fierce sensations so strong, I felt like I was on the verge of climax.

Maximus put his hand on my leg, just below where the skirt ended.

"What are you feeling?"

"I'm not sure." Licking my lips, I tore my gaze away from the stage and met his dark, hypnotic eyes.

He leaned in, closer and closer, until his face was all I could see.

I thought he might kiss me, but then he dipped his head and pressed his lips to my ear. “Are you wet?”

Embarrassed, I tried to duck my head, but he cupped my chin in his hand and brought my gaze back to his.

“Yes.”

He kissed me deeply, and I was panting when he ended the contact and trailed his lips to my ear. “I want to feel for myself.”

Stunned, I jerked back, staring at him.

His lips curved in a smile. “Don’t look so shocked. Nobody would know. And look...look down on the dance floor. Look at the other tables.”

Dazed, I did as he suggested. It took a few seconds to focus, and I couldn’t unsee what I saw.

A woman was wearing a lace and leather catsuit with a mask covering the upper part of her face. She held a leash in her hand, connected to the collar of the man dancing with her.

Well. The two weren’t dancing—more like swaying.

He was on his knees but still able to take her nipples into his mouth. I doubted she topped five feet.

The man trailed a hand up her thigh, and she wrenched his head back with a fist in his hair. She gave him a stern look before pushing him back, then pointed at the floor. He knelt in front of her, on his hands and knees. Subservient.

She circled him as she spanked him with a long thin rod—a quirt. My mind supplied the word even as I sucked in air.

She slapped his ass three times, and the man shuddered each time.

Another man approached. He rubbed against her before sinking to his knees in front of her.

As the woman instructed the newcomer to take out his cock, Maximus slid his hand up my thigh, fingers just barely dipping under my skirt. “I want to

feel how wet you are, Tina.”

Heart pounding, and barely able to believe I was about to do this, I spread my thighs. The sensation of his roughened fingers rasping along the delicate flesh just above my knees, then higher, had me shaking. I slumped in the chair.

I could no longer see the couple I’d been watching—couple? Threesome? I didn’t know.

I could still see the stage, though.

A wall of frosted glass had lowered. I saw the three silhouettes behind it, their actions clear.

The man had his hand wrapped around his cock and was kneeling in front of her. With his free hand fisted in her hair, he used his hold to guide her mouth to his cock.

The other man was behind her, clearly erect.

The second he slammed into her, Maximus slid his fingers along the wet folds between my thighs. Then, with no ceremony, he pushed two fingers inside, hard and fast. In and out, repeatedly.

I came with a sharp cry, hands digging into the arms of the chair.

EIGHTEEN

MAXIMUS

“PERFECTION,” I WHISPERED AS SHE ROCKED AGAINST MY HAND, FUCKING herself on my fingers as the orgasm gripped her.

So easily primed, so ready for me.

I had to make her mine.

I’d never had a woman as my exclusive sub, but there was no way I’d let Tina go.

I twisted my fingers inside her, hampered by the close fit of her skirt, the chair, and my position. But I would not break the spell to fix any of that.

She whimpered, her head falling back as I twisted my wrist and screwed my fingers back inside her a third, then a fourth time.

She tightened her thighs around my hand, those sleekly muscled thighs I was dying to have wrapped around my hips...even my head as I ate her out.

Once the climax was over, I pulled back.

As she attempted to smooth her clothes back into place, I licked my fingers.

I could feel her watching me, and I turned my head as I placed my index finger into my mouth and slowly, deliberately, sucked the taste of her.

Her face flushed an even deeper shade of pink.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” I asked.

“I don’t know if there are words to describe what I’m feeling right now,” she said, voice unsteady.

Cocking my head, I pointed out, “You’re not running.”

“No.” The flush of pink on her cheeks deepened, but her eyes held mine steadily.

Offering her my hand, I asked, “Would you like to dance?”

“Just dance?” She shot a nervous look at the floor where everything short of outright intercourse took place—and sometimes, even that.

“Just dancing,” I promised.

She put her hand in mine, and we rose. Tugging her close, I dipped my head and murmured, “I’m tempted to turn you around and make you stand against that railing right now, fuck you while everything down below goes on, feel you shudder and shake as you get closer and closer, but I doubt you’re ready for anything like that.”

She grabbed the front of the shirt I wore, hands clenching in the fine cotton. “No. No, I’m not.”

“You’re intrigued, though.” I lifted my head to look into her eyes and saw the glitter of lust.

“Yes.”

My cock pulsed, and I pulled her closer so she could feel what she was doing to me.

Her lashes fluttered. “James...”

Backing up, I closed my hand around hers once more. I had to get a little distance between us now, or I might scare her off.

Between the music and the feel of Tina’s body against mine, time slid away.

A new ‘event’ started on the main stage, then ended, the curtain falling to signify the public sessions were over for the time being. Experience told me that meant it was between eleven and midnight. After midnight, the performers at The Black Star became even more inventive, and I’d seen the

notice on the website early that had mentioned Ghost, a famous Dom who was appearing with one of his subs, Swan. Swan was a favorite here at The Black Star, and usually, I'd enjoy sitting back to watch the show.

But after more than an hour of dancing with Tina, watching her eyes glaze with heat and lust, feeling the push of her breasts against my chest, or the way her body would shiver and tighten when I pulled her in close enough so she could feel my cock, I was on the knife's edge.

The music was intense, and I tightened the arm around her waist, then dipped my head so I could whisper into her ear. "Will you come home with me?"

She turned to face me, gaze lingering on my mouth before slowly lifting until we stared into each other's eyes. "Yes."

I kissed her, scoring her lower lip with my teeth, tightening my arm at her waist when she would have turned.

With my free hand, I stroked her side, then leisurely glided up until I grazed the outer curve of her breast. She stiffened, but didn't immediately break the kiss.

My fingers still stroking her sweetly curved and annoyingly covered breast, I murmured, "Will you let me play?"

"I...I'm not sure."

I bit her lower lip and increased the contact, nearly cupping her breast now. "Just say the word, and I'll stop."

Her head fell back against my shoulder, and she closed her eyes. Her slow nod was the sweetest victory I'd ever known.

I palmed her breast.

A few people glanced at us, but I didn't pay them any attention. I didn't care if they saw us. Exhibitionism didn't bother me, but it didn't turn me on either. What I enjoyed was Tina's willingness to let me touch her, to let me take her, one step at a time, into my world.

She shivered as I found the stiff peak of her nipple, guarded by her dress and a lined bra. Tugging on it until she whimpered, I tightened my grip around

her waist, pulling her against me, eliminating even a hint of distance between us.

“I want to fuck you.” I nuzzled her neck before continuing. “My dick is so hard I hurt. Come home with me.”

“Yes,” she said, the word intense and ragged with need.

I eased my hold on her waist. I slid my hand down to grip her thigh in a blatantly possessive move. “Be certain. I will not be all vanilla and gentle tonight.”

Lifting my head, I waited until she opened her eyes. The faint smile on her mouth, shy but full of anticipation, told me everything I needed to know.

“THIS ISN’T the way to the hotel,” Tina murmured ten minutes into the drive.

“No.” Shooting her a quick look before taking the exit that would lead to my house outside Houston, I said, “We’re going to my place—my home.”

“Oh.” She shifted, and the sound of fabric whispering against soft bare flesh had me gritting my teeth.

Traffic was light, and I made the drive in just over twenty-five minutes.

Parking in front of the sprawling expanse of wooden beams and glass, I walked around to help Tina from the car. She’d already opened the door but wasn’t out yet, and when I offered my hand, she gave another one of those faint half-smiles.

“I would never have pictured you as having such old-fashioned manners,” she murmured as she placed her hand in mine.

Waiting until she was out of the car before answering, I crowded her against the sleek McLaren, her body as hot as a Texas summer, her scent lush and tempting.

“I don’t,” I told her, gripping her hips and holding her steady as I leaned into her. “But for the right woman....”

Her lashes fluttered, the only visible sign.

Lowering my head, I bit her neck, taking care not to leave a mark. She stiffened, then moaned, pushing one hand into my hair and tightening her fingers.

Grabbing the hem of her dress, I pulled it up. All evening, I’d been admiring this sexy as fuck garment. It fit so smoothly, so perfectly, I hadn’t been able to make out a panty line.

My fingers encountered narrow bands of silk that ran high over her hips but left the cheeks of her ass bare. Cupping that perfect butt in my hands, I pulled her up and against me.

She moaned as I fit my cock against the notch between her thighs and wrapped her legs around my hips. I could feel the spiked heels of her shoes digging into me, and an electric thrill raced down my spine at the sensation.

“You’re so fucking wet that I can feel you through my trousers,” I muttered, breaking the kiss long enough to tell her that. “It’s fucking perfect.”

She didn’t respond, just tried to pull me back to her.

“No,” I said, lowering her to the ground.

Her expression soured disappointment in her eyes.

Catching her around the waist again, I pulled her close, then moved, spinning until we were at the hood of the car. Then I turned her around and nudged her forward until she put her hands on the vehicle.

Stepping back to admire the view, I saw the panties were black as well, a jewel against her lightly tanned flesh. Tanned...everywhere.

Kicking her ankles apart with just enough force that she understood what I wanted, I waited until she adjusted her stance and had her balance. Then I smoothed a hand down her spine, over the curve of her ass. “You saw the spanking demonstration. Did you enjoy it?”

“Yes.”

Dipping my hand between her thighs, I found her liquid and hot with readiness. Soothing her flesh with my free hand, I stroked my fingers in, out, slowly, teasingly, until she tried to follow me and deepen the contact.

“No, Tina,” I murmured. “We’ve got all night.”

“James...” her husky voice hitched in the middle of my name.

I twisted my fingers in her pussy and curled them, relishing that broken cry that echoed in the vast openness around us. With plenty of open space around my property, I didn’t have to worry about any intrusions, and now, as I fucked Tina with my fingers and stroked her ass, I was damn glad of that.

She moved back to me again. The urge to spank her for the disobedience was big.

But we weren’t there yet. Tina was still learning about what I wanted from her, and I wouldn’t push so hard that I sent her running. Breaking contact, I undid my belt, my zipper then pulled out the condom I’d been carrying all night.

“I want to fuck you outside right here, right now. If you don’t want that, tell me now.”

She swallowed, the sound almost painfully loud.

It did not surprise me when she looked up, scanning the endless dark night around her, searching for neighbors who might see.

There were none.

“Tina?”

She turned her head and met my gaze.

Then, with a sensuality that laid me low, she pushed back and rubbed her ass against me.

Swearing, I ripped open the foil protecting the condom.

Tina bent over the car's hood, her upper body weight braced on her hands, the perfect curve of her ass now on display as I fumbled the condom into place.

Taking a step back, I tugged the scrap of her pants out of the way, pressed my cock against her pussy, then fisted my hand in her hair, jerking her up.

A startled "Oh, James" rang out in the air right as I slammed into her.

Hot, silky wetness closed around me. I braced one hand on the truck, bending forward and forcing Tina to do the same. I didn't relax my grip in her hair, wanting, needing her to feel at least the edge of what I wanted from her.

She clamped down tight around me, her hands clutching at the hood of the car to brace herself.

I didn't give her a chance. With my free hand, I pushed her down until she was flat against the hood, head arched slightly up from my relentless hold on her hair.

She whimpered and shuddered, cried out, and clamped down, her entire body reacting to the fucking I gave her.

And it still wasn't enough.

Letting go of her hair, I straightened. Her dress rucked up about her hips, but the bodice was still in place. Seeking the hidden zipper, I lowered it and peeled the material down, then unfastened her bra, pulling away enough to free her from the tangle of material.

As she lowered herself, I cupped her tits and pinched her nipples.

She bounced up on her toes and wailed, one palm slamming down on the McLaren's hood, while her cunt clenched me even tighter.

I kept my possessive grip on one breast but reached for her hip with the other, pinning her as I slammed into her harder and faster.

"Yes," she whimpered. "Please...more..."

I pinched her nipple.

She bucked and exploded.

Shoving deep inside her, my teeth gritted against the brutal climax that threatened to put me on my knees.

Riding her through it, I waited until she'd calmed to the occasional shudder before I pulled out, my dick still hard. I hitched my trousers up and carefully re-zipped.

Then, as Tina struggled to catch her breath, I caught the material of her dress, now tangled around her waist, and worked it down until she wore nothing but that skimpy pair of panties. Gathering up her clothes, I turned her around, then dumped the bundle into her arms.

She squealed in surprise when I picked her up, eyes flying wide open.

I carried her up the stairs, putting her down long enough to unlock the front door and disarm the alarm system. Then I took the clothes, pulled her to me, and pushed her back up against the front door.

“Again.”

NINETEEN

TINA

I SHOULD HAVE BEEN TOO EXHAUSTED FOR...WELL, ANYTHING. BUT WHEN I stepped out of the shower to find James waiting for me, a towel in his hands, my heart did a crazy little dance inside my chest, and I couldn't help leaning against him for a long and slow kiss.

He cupped my chin in his hand and adjusted the angle of my head, deepening the contact, and I groaned as I felt his cock pulsing against my belly.

He'd showered earlier. I'd fallen asleep on the wide comfortable bed and woken to find him coming out of the bathroom completely naked and confident in his skin.

It had taken everything I had not to pounce on him.

Now, with nothing separating us but the towel I had wrapped around me and his low-slung gray joggers, I doubted I'd have the energy to resist him.

So, I didn't.

Reaching between us, I cupped him through the worn joggers.

A deep rumbling sound rolled out of his throat, and he broke the kiss.

I tried to follow, but he pushed his hand into my hair and held me back.

His other hand caught my wrist and pulled it away.

The urge to sulk like a toddler denied a toy washed over me, and I glared at him.

“Say please,” he whispered against my lips.

A shiver raced down my spine. I could feel James throbbing against my belly, and the empty ache inside me was already swelling out of control again.

“Please.”

His mouth curved against mine, and he let my hand go. As I closed my fingers around him, he locked eyes with me, the gaze beyond intimate now, the way he watched me as I stroked him.

“You know what I want?” he demanded, his gaze dropping to my mouth.

“No.”

“I want to see that beautiful mouth wrapped around my dick.”

I jerked in surprise at the blunt words, even as heat rushed to gather between my thighs.

Instinctively, I clenched my knees together. Somehow, he could tell, and he nuzzled my neck. “You liked that...what do you like the most, Tina? Me telling you what I want? Or the thought of doing it?”

I’d lost my mind.

Mouth dry, I licked my lips before answering, “Is both an option?”

“Yes.” He swept me up into his arms and carried me into his bedroom. But instead of going to the expansive bed, he carried me to a recessed sitting area in the corner, the large windows letting the moonlight spill in to paint the room in splashes of silvery white.

He put me down and cupped my face, one thumb stroking over my lower lip as his gaze held mine.

The silence was heavy, weighted with sexual tension, and I shivered with the intensity of the need building inside me. When he stepped back and broke contact, I thought I’d cry.

But then he hooked his thumbs in the waistband of his loose gray joggers and pushed them down, stepping out of them to stand before me, completely naked. My mouth went dry, and my toes curled. With a shuddering sigh, I

watched as he came closer, then reached up.

Eyes closing in anticipation of his touch, he surprised me when he pulled the towel away instead.

“Hey!” Nervous, I went to cross my arms over my chest.

Maximus caught my wrists and eased them back down. “You’re beautiful,” he said, releasing my wrists and reaching up to cup my breasts.

The bold possession sapped my strength away, and I was ready to collapse against him, beg for more, but he stopped those teasing, delicious touches and slid his hands down my sides to grip my waist. “I want you on your knees.”

The guttural words resonated through me, and I flicked a nervous look at him, but he watched me with no expression. I couldn’t tell if he expected me to do what he’d said or if he was daring me. He cupped my chin again and stroked his thumb over my mouth. “This mouth...it’s sexy as fucking sin. I want you on your knees with your mouth wrapped around my cock, Tina.”

Heat exploded through me in a torrential current, turning my bones to mud. When I grabbed Maximus’ waist for support and knelt in front of him, I kept my eyes on him the entire time.

His eyelids drooped, lashes sweeping low to hide his eyes, but I could still feel the impact of his gaze. Breaking that eye contact was almost impossible, but he cupped the back of my head in a guiding motion, nudging me.

I gasped as he pressed the head of his cock to my mouth. No subtlety to the movement.

“Open, Tina. I’m going to fuck your mouth.”

Whimpering, I opened for him, and he pushed slowly, oh so slowly in, the flared head of his dick breaching my lips, rubbing over my tongue, then withdrawing.

The second thrust went deeper, and the third even more so.

On the fourth, I tensed, and even though I tried not to jerk back, I couldn’t stop.

He immediately pulled back, settling into a lazy rhythm with his fist wrapped around his cock to mark my limit.

My pussy clenched, the longing pangs demanding fulfillment. Squeezing my knees together to find relief, I gripped his thighs.

“More?” James asked, one fist twisted in my hair.

I couldn’t nod, but he didn’t ease his grip, either.

“If you want more, look at me,” he said.

Rolling my eyes upward over the length of his torso, I met his gaze.

He moved faster, hips circling, falling in to match my rhythm easily.

He shuddered; the muscles in his thighs felt like iron.

“That’s good...Fuck. Tina. More...take more....”

I wanted to, but I wasn’t sure how. Whimpering, I pressed closer, and in the back of my mind, some random bit of line from one of those fashion mags for women popped into my mind. How to give great oral sex...and make them beg for more.

The columnist had talked about her technique for deep throating.

Before I could change my mind, I adjusted my position more, then took him in again, farther than before, until my mouth bumped against his fist, and he shuddered, that hand moving to twine in my hair like the other.

“Like that,” he muttered. “Don’t move...oh, fuck....”

Tears burned my eyes from the act, from how deeply I took him, and my shoulders jerked. Not prepared for how fully I’d taken him to the back of my mouth, even swallowing—or trying to. My body reflexes took over, and I had to pull away.

He let me, but only for a second, and then he was dragging me back, again and again. The empty pulsating ache between my thighs was so intense I wanted to cry.

Abruptly, Maximus stopped and tumbled me to my back, pinning me to the ground.

His mouth savaged mine.

I bit his lower lip, and he gripped my hip, hauling me up as he wedged his hips between my thighs.

The head of his cock rubbed against me, and I tore my mouth from him, crying out. "Please!"

He canted my hips higher and slammed into me.

"Your mouth," he muttered, and that was all he said before kissing me again.

The heat of him scorched me, his mouth so deliciously hot and sweet, his cock so thick and massive, the ridges stroking me in the sweetest way. It felt...different.

In the back of my mind, reason tried to take over.

I kicked reason in the face and wrapped my arms around his neck, then tried to curl my legs around his hips.

He stopped me, shifting his angle so he could hook my knees over his elbows, opening me fully. From there, he grabbed my wrists and pinned them down, eyes boring into mine as he slammed into me again and again...

The thickness of him was too much, and I came again.

Hard.

Abruptly, Maximus stiffened and jerked back, pulling out of me.

Dazed, I cried out and reached for him. He didn't come back to me, nor did he move farther away. Movement caught my eyes, just barely, then he came back over me, weight braced on the one hand. His other hand...I shivered as I realized he was fist-pumping his cock.

"I forgot the damn rubber," he muttered. Then he groaned, and I felt a hot, wet splash over my belly.

Maximus shuddered, his body jerking as he finished.

Then he stretched out over me, the slick wetness of his release still on my belly. He didn't seem to care, and oddly, neither did I.

"I'm sorry." His words were muffled against my neck.

"What for?"

"I forgot to grab a damned condom." He pushed up onto his elbow and met my eyes. "I'm clean, but I can have blood work drawn—"

"No."

I touched a finger to his lips. Something inside me clenched tight, a hopeful, silly wish, and I shoved it away, buried it even as I smiled at him. "It's okay. And I'm on birth control. I've got a hormonal implant, so we're clear there."

His eyes remained on mine for a long moment, then he dipped his head to kiss me. It was slow and surprisingly sweet.

As he rolled onto his side and pulled me into the hard curve of his body, my heart quivered.

What have I gotten myself into?

ONCE A MONTH, usually a Sunday, my family got together at Dina's house. That meant excellent food and even better desserts.

Ready to clear my head and cool off in the pool, I left my home an hour early and listened to an audiobook during the drive so my mind wouldn't wander to the dilemma I couldn't figure out.

"You're early!" Dina greeted me at the door with a quick hug and pulled back, her smile fading as she caught sight of my face. "Hey, are you okay?"

"Sure." Flashing her a smile, I shrugged. "Just not sleeping well...too excited about the project with Roseann, and I might have another in the pipeline too."

"Ohhhh..." Her eyes sparkled. "Tell me more."

“No.”

Giving her an arch look, I sailed past her into the kitchen. For once, my paranoia about discussing potential jobs too soon came to my benefit.

“You’re no fun,” she declared.

“Oh?” I sailed past her down the hall that led to the kitchen. “Well, I guess I’ll take my sangria-making stuff home then.”

“You’re absolutely fun. The best sister ever.” She circled the island to grin at me, her hands braced on the surface. “Need anything?”

“Nah.” I eyed the dishes on the island, sniffed the air. “Taco bar?”

“Taco bar. Your sangria will be a perfect match.”

We worked in peaceful silence for a while, Dina with the rest of the food, including flan for after, and me mixing up a mega-size pitcher of sangria.

By the time our parents arrived, I was relaxed and had put Maximus out of my mind.

“Dina tells me you landed a job renovating a shelter,” Warren Siegler, my father, said, meeting my eyes as he passed the platter of corn shells to my mom. “That could be big for you.”

“I know.” Smiling a little, I admitted, “The word of mouth will be great, but that’s not my primary reason to take the job.”

“We didn’t think it would be,” my mom said. She patted my hand and accepted a glass of sangria from Dina. Norman asked if he could have some, and after the chorus of “no’s” went up, Mom looked to me. In her late fifties, Lois Siegler was still an attractive woman, and when she smiled, she became beautiful. “You’ve always had a strong moral core, Tina.”

My cheeks heated, and I looked away.

Mom just laughed and patted my knee.

“What’s a moral core?” Norman asked, looking from me to his grandmother.

Before I could answer, his sister Carol spoke up. “It’s knowing what’s right and wrong and doing the right thing. Right, Aunt T?”

“Yes.” I smiled at her and wanted to say something else, but my phone buzzed. Grimacing, I grabbed it and met my dad’s gaze. “Sorry, Dad.”

He waved it off, and I nearly dropped my phone. I was so surprised. Phones at the table were a big no for him.

Muting it, I shoved it in my pocket.

A few seconds later, as I sipped my sangria, the phone in my pocket vibrated to signal a notification.

Then there was another.

And another.

Another.

“What the hell?” I muttered under my breath just as Dina’s phone chimed with a message.

Dad scowled now, shooting her a look. She blushed, looking as guilty as I felt, and shoved her phone into her pocket.

Newt’s phone started going off.

He sighed and got up. “Excuse me a moment,” he said, smiling at all of us.

Dina caught her husband’s hand and squeezed briefly before letting go so he could step into the kitchen to take the call.

While the conversation ebbed and flowed around us, and my phone vibrated almost constantly with the continual notifications, I looked up to see Dina slip from her seat and join her husband.

They stood in the doorway.

He passed her his phone.

Worry twisted inside, and I practically got up to hug her as her face dropped and the blood drained away, leaving her pale.

But then her gaze swung toward me.

The bottom of my world gave way and collapsed.

TWENTY

MAXIMUS

JUMPING OFF THE TREADMILL, I ACCEPTED THE CALL FROM MY FATHER, MORE out of duty than anything else. I no longer hated Connor Maximus, but I wasn't great at building—or keeping—relationships.

“Hey, son,” Connor said, his voice still the hale, hearty boom it had been when he'd greeted me the first time.

“Connor. How are you doing?”

The hesitation was barely noticeable, and he pushed on without commenting about how I used his given name.

“I'm fine, I'm fine. Listen, son. I just heard from Scot. He mentioned he texted you about coming to Houston to visit, so I thought maybe we could all get together. Perhaps a fishing trip, if you have time.”

My gut instinct was to say no.

But I'd learned to hold back on that. I couldn't endlessly blame Connor Maximus for how shitty things had been for my mother and me.

“I'll check my schedule.”. As you know, my new hotel keeps me busy. If we don't have time to fish, we can definitely grab dinner together.”

“Heck yeah, that sounds swell.”

The happiness in his tone made me uncomfortable. Rushing to change the subject, I asked, “How is everybody doing?”

“Good, good.” He cleared his throat. “Speaking of your hotel, I went by earlier this week to look around. What a gorgeous place, son. You did amazing.”

And now I was even more uncomfortable because I realized I was a little proud of myself.

“Thanks.” Clearing my throat, I said, “I don’t want to jump off the phone, but I just finished a workout, and I’m expecting a call. I’d like to grab a quick shower first.”

“Alright. You let me know about the fishing trip—or if it’s just going to be dinner.”

“I will. Talk to you later,” I said, disconnecting before he could say anything else.

I stood staring out the window over the rolling fields of the property that surrounded my home outside of Houston.

It had been roughly ten hours since I’d dropped Tina off. Ten hours since she’d told me she needed time to think. I hadn’t heard from her since.

I wanted to go after her and knew I couldn’t.

She needed time.

She needed space.

I needed her.

Blowing out a breath, I closed my eyes. “Patience, Maximus.”

SATURDAY WENT. Still no word from Tina.

Sunday, I was up at the crack of dawn. After prowling around the house for hours, I climbed into my favorite sports car and hit the road.

If I kept pacing, I’d go nuts.

Speeding down the old highway with the convertible top down and music blasting, I tried not to think about how many hours had passed since I'd dropped her off.

Not even a goodbye kiss, just her lips on my cheek and the news she needed time and space. To think.

I'd pushed her too hard. Hadn't I?

But the look in her eyes, the way she'd come around me, so fucking tight and wet. She enjoyed it. The press of her short, neat nails in my thighs as she'd greedily licked and sucked my dick, then slowly took me deeper, the hesitant moves making it obvious she was walking on uncertain ground. And she'd been so damned aroused by everything, kneeling in front of me, letting me fuck her mouth, then slowly taking the lead when I ceded control.

The spark in her eyes at the club Friday night. That, too, haunted me. She'd been so hot and ready it'd been torture just dancing with her.

Did I push too far?

Was it the condom? Being in such a greedy rush for her, I forgot something so basic...had that been the problem?

She made me lose my mind a little every time I touched her. The last time I'd been that careless about sex, I was a teenager. Had I scared her off with my recklessness?

I didn't know.

My phone rang, and I looked at the dashboard. Gianni's name came up. Since it wasn't Tina, I ignored it.

I wasn't in the mood to talk to anybody—except Tina.

Groaning, I shifted in the bucket seat of the McLaren 720.

My phone rang again, and I scowled at the console screen as I saw Gianni's name flash. Again.

I hit the decline button on the console as a text notification alert chimed from the phone.

Tina?

I fucking hoped. Glancing in the rearview mirror to ensure I didn't have anybody right on my bumper, I pulled over and picked up my phone to check the message. Two seconds later, I threw it back into the passenger seat and climbed out of the car.

The hot Texas sun beat down on my shoulders. Off in the distance, heat mirages made the road shimmer. I stared until my eyes blurred and my head ached, ignoring the third call from Gianni.

Sweat beaded on my forehead by the time I shoved off the car, but I didn't climb back inside. I paced around the car, full of restless energy, nearly turning into pointless anger. I didn't have a reason to be angry, and I wasn't—not exactly, but the frustration was running high.

When my phone rang a fourth time, my frustration boiled over and came out in a snap as I growled into the phone, “What the fuck, Gianni?”

“I'm sorry, James, but this is...kind of urgent.”

The note in her voice punched through the fiery anger, and I sighed. “Sorry about snapping,” I said, still in a foul mood. Walking around the car, I climbed in. “Is everybody okay? Connor?”

“Yes. The family is fine.”

I waited as my shoulders knotted up, and a tension headache pounded at the base of my skull. Gianni rarely let it pass when I addressed our father by his first name.

“What's wrong then?”

“Okay, first...” She hesitated, then pushed onward. “Listen, I need you to take a deep breath and stay with me, okay? This is bad.”

“Gianni, will you quit rambling and tell me what the problem is? Or I'll drive to your place and wring your neck.”

“Fuck,” she mumbled under her breath. “This is going to be so, so, so bad....”

“What?” I half-shouted.

“Maximus...stop yelling,” she said, her temper edging in. “I’m sending you a link. Promise me you will not do something stupid that’ll require me to bail you out of jail.”

“Fine,” I bit off. “What’s up?”

My phone chimed to let me know she’d just texted me.

“See for yourself.”

Gianni sounded dismal and resigned.

Focusing on the distant heat mirages dancing over the road, I breathed in, then out. A second time. A third. Then, knowing I wouldn’t get any calmer, I grabbed my phone and opened the messenger app to see what the problem was.

“James?”

Gianni’s soft voice came to me almost at a distance as I stared at the bold font of the heading. It could have just been the rush of blood pounding in my skull as my heart thundered, my muscles going stiff and tight while my skin seemed to shrink down, trapping me inside a cocoon of flesh and fury.

Rage was a pulse in the back of my mouth, a sheen across my vision as I scanned the headline one more time.

Yeah, Gianni was right. It was bad.

“James?”

Closing my eyes, I said, “I’ll call you back.”

“James, listen, I—”

Disconnecting the call, I turned on “do not disturb” on my phone and read.

The article from a local tabloid-style site about the rich and famous in and around Texas, was short. The writer had done a bang-up job of painting broad strokes with her words.

The two pictures posted in the article added vivid stripes of color to an already passionate image.

FIFTY SHADES MAX

Flicking back to the article's title, I read the byline and subtitle repeatedly, hoping to find some clue who had taken the pictures.

There was nothing.

The article itself offered no clues either.

James Maximus, also known as simply Maximus, a Houston heartthrob, and mega-millionaire, was spotted at a local Den OF SIN. Spell that in all caps, ladies, because The Black Star is no place for nice Texas girls. Ms. Tina Siegler, one of Houston's fine business owners, is definitely not a nice Texas girl, nor is she ashamed of it.

Below the block of text was a picture of Tina and me, taken by an accomplished photographer. The focus sharpened on Tina, her back to my chest, and my hand cupping her right breast, while the other club-goers were just a blurry suggestion in the background.

I wasn't particularly recognizable, only some of my face showing as I kissed Tina's shoulder.

But Tina?

Despite having her eyes closed in sensual pleasure, it was clear.

Anybody who knew her would recognize her in that picture.

For anybody who isn't aware, The Black Star is...well, we've given it many names. Den of Sin. Pleasure Palace. Fetish Club. Dark Dungeon. To be specific, The Black Star is an exclusive club for the rich. The Star's motto seems to be WHATEVER YOU WANT GOES! Or should we say...comes?

Look at the following picture and see what you think.

Jaw clenched tight enough to send pain shooting up into my skull, and I scrolled down to the picture. Fuck.

“Who the hell are you?” I muttered, wondering how somebody could have gotten this angle. Photography wasn’t allowed at the club for obvious reasons. That meant little, since anybody with a phone could snag a somewhat decent picture these days. However, this picture was taken in my private booth. Only a few angles would allow for such a shot.

Blood boiling, I stared at the image. Tina’s head slumped slightly, but not so much that the viewer couldn’t see her parted lips or the way I had my hand up her skirt.

The shot was so provocative and well-done, I could practically hear her moaning, and could imagine the shudders of her body as she climaxed.

Sure, I had firsthand knowledge, but nobody would miss what was going on.

For more details on this delicious story, hop over to [HOT IN HOUSTON](#), one of our favorite bloggers. There’s more to share, and some of those pictures are absolutely yummy.

I hurled the phone in the passenger seat and climbed out of the car, no longer able to stay still.

Fuck!

I almost shouted to the empty expanse of sky overhead. Grabbing the shreds of my control with a brutal fist, I paced back and forth until the anger ebbed. Part of me wanted to get back in the car, peel off in a squeal of tires and burning rubber, but that would not solve shit.

I wasn’t the only one being dragged into this.

Back in the car, I grabbed my phone and clicked on the [HOT IN HOUSTON](#) link.

MAXIMUS, I’LL KNEEL FOR YOU!

The title font was a garish red.

The words had me recoiling.

I had no problems with my sexual tastes or how they ran toward the darker, kinkier variety.

That didn't mean I wanted strangers tossing out shit like this.

Every successive line of the blog post got worse.

There were more pictures and the anonymous guest blogger, going under the name of SilkinBonds, gave a running commentary for everything.

This isn't the first time for Maximus at this rodeo, ladies. A birdie told me he's been known to pay for a private dance booth at the Black Star and request several ladies at a time for all sorts of torrid, illegal orgies.

Bullshit. So much bullshit. I didn't like the private booths, and orgies weren't my thing. I didn't care if other people got off on it, but there was a distinct lack of control there, and control was crucial for me.

He's one of their wealthiest customers, so there's nothing the staff at the club will deny him, even if it's not comfortable for the dancer.

By the time I finished the blog post, a good five minutes had passed. I kept checking each picture, comparing it to my memory of that night in hopes it might help me learn about the vicious bitch behind it all.

Let me wrap this up with my favorite image...Maximus, there, licking his finger and making it clear we all know just what he was doing under Tina's prim and proper skirt.

Prim and proper? It had fit like a fucking glove, putting that ass of hers on display to perfection.

That made me stop and read through the piece again.

"Huh." A thought whispered in the back of my mind, but I throttled it for now. Later, I'd worry about that.

There were other concerns on my mind.

Grabbing the bottle of water from the cup holder, I drained half of it, then poured some on my hand to splash on my face. It was still cold, but the hoped-for effect of clearing my head didn't happen.

I was too angry.

"Focus," I muttered to myself.

I had a lawyer to call, a sister to reassure, and then figure out how to keep Tina from turning tail and running from me.

TWENTY-ONE

TINA

HORRIFIED DIDN'T DESCRIBE HOW I FELT RIGHT THEN.

The order from Dina to come with her had already put me on edge, and my parents' worried looks did little to reassure me.

"What the hell is this?" Dina demanded, shoving her phone into my face.

I stared at the screenshot that Dina had received via Messenger from a friend. I felt my face getting so red it hurt. Blood roared in my ears, and I was lightheaded from the brutal slap to my senses.

And Dina was furious.

"Well?" Her near-strident demand jolted me, scraping along nerves that felt exposed and raw.

Lifting my gaze from her phone to meet her eyes, I asked, "What do you want me to say?"

"Tell me that isn't you!" she half-shouted.

I flinched.

Newt stroked a hand down her arm and gave me a pitying look. He wasn't yelling at me, which was nice, but pity wasn't much better.

"I can't lie to you," I whispered. *Could the ground open up beneath me?*

Dina flipped her phone back around, stared at the image with a hard, angry stare, and then shoved it back into my face. “So that is you. My baby sister, who told me she would stay away from James Maximus? The guy I warned her was a manwhore and a fucking sex freak?”

I stiffened at that. Hurt going deep as my shame spilled acid on the fresh wound. What would my sister think if she knew how aroused I’d been at the club? That I had seen nothing freakish, just...different?

Tears burned my eyes, and I looked down.

“Dina.” Newt nudged me to the side and stood before his wife, blocking me from her view. “That’s enough. You need to calm down.”

“Don’t tell me what I need to do!”

“So, you want your mom and dad to come in here and see what all of this is about?” he asked. “You want to keep saying horrible things to the sister you love with all your heart, things you can’t take back?”

His tenacious defense might make me feel better. Later.

Right now, the only thing that would help was waking up and all this being a dream. Or a nightmare.

“How could you do this? What were you thinking?” Dina demanded, shoving Newt out of the way to stare at me with bruised eyes. “Do you have any idea what this could do to my business?”

Wrapping my arms around myself, I looked away.

“I can tell you didn’t even think about it,” Dina said, sounding hurt. “Tina, this could ruin us. If this stunt of yours comes back to hurt my business, I will never forgive—”

“Okay, that’s enough!” Newt pushed between us again and caught Dina’s arm, pulling her away.

“...just stop, okay?”

“Stop? Are you nuts? She just all but fucked some notorious manwhore in public, and you want me to—”

I couldn't listen anymore.

Turning on my heel, I walked blindly through the house, back into the family dining room. My parents looked up, both of them with worried expressions.

Considering the possibility that one of their friends might see the article, my stomach turned inside out.

"I'm not feeling good," I blurted out, my voice sharp and shrill. "I need to go home."

My mom was halfway out of her seat, a concerned look on her face. "Oh, honey...another migraine? Should you be driving?"

"I can drive. It's just...auras," I said, tossing words out without even wondering if they made sense. I just had to get out of there. Now. Right now.

THE DRIVE PASSED IN A BLUR.

I had no concrete memory of leaving the home I'd lived with my sister and parents for years.

My mother could be right. Perhaps I shouldn't be driving.

Making it home safely, I turned off the car, then just sat there.

Heat gathered in the car, and sweat formed on my brow while the muscles in my neck and shoulders locked up. Even the slightest movement was agony.

A bead of sweat formed on my temple, rolled down my cheek, and fell to my chest, snapping me out of the apathy that had kept me frozen in a car getting hotter and hotter.

Jerking the keys from the ignition, I climbed out and made my way to the front door of my house.

How could you do this?

What were you thinking?

Somehow, I let myself into the house, but my composure deserted me after locking up, and I leaned back against the door, sliding down until my legs were sprawled in front of me. With a clatter, my keys fell to the floor, and I stared into the distance as Dina's recriminations played in my head.

My stomach twisted with shame and nausea.

My head pounded.

The memory of Dina's expression cut into me like tiny daggers.

She was right.

I hadn't thought about her.

I hadn't thought about anybody but myself.

Pulling my knees to my chest, I pressed my face to my legs and dragged in a breath, blew it out. "Get it together, Tina."

My embarrassment felt permanently imprinted on me, but I forced myself to think past it because, as Dina pointed out, this was not about me.

I'd been stupid, selfish, and thoughtless.

Cringing at what I might find, I pulled my phone from my pocket and opened the messages I'd been ignoring.

Casual acquaintances had contacted me, ranging from the concerned to the crude. I made myself read every message before following the link to the website.

Seeing the headline, then the many pictures of Maximus and me dancing, was like a punch to the chest, but I absorbed it and forced myself to keep going.

I died a little inside when I saw the links to my profiles. Now it would forever link this to anything with my business.

"It's my fault," I said quietly, absorbing the blow and accepting it.

What had I expected to happen? I'd walked into The Black Star knowing what went on there. What made me think I could indulge in such a way and walk away unscathed?

“Only if you believe in fairy tales,” I mumbled.

One thing noticeably absent from my phone was a message from Maximus.

Had he seen?

Did he know?

How could he not?

The blog post had tagged him too. Both his personal and business accounts looped into the tawdry mess.

I spent the next half hour locking all my social media accounts, putting everything on private until I could figure out what to do.

I deleted over two dozen lewd private messages—including dick pics—from total strangers.

And still, there was no message from Maximus.

“Fine,” I muttered.

Not giving myself a chance to think, I wrote Maximus a text.

Have you seen the news online? About us at the club?

It was vague, but I didn’t know what else to say.

I pressed send, forced myself upright, and headed to my bedroom. I couldn’t do shit to fix what had happened.

But I felt dirty.

Dirty from the thousands of people who’d looked at those pictures.

Dirty because somebody had snapped such a picture.

Dirty because I’d damaged a bond so precious to me.

I made my way to the bathroom and stripped to the skin, then climbed inside the shower.

The water didn’t get hot enough to wash away the stain, but I sure as hell tried, blasting it to as high a temperature as I could stand and scouring my

sensitive skin with a loofah until it felt like I'd peeled the top layer off.

After that, I collapsed into a corner, letting the water wash over me until the heat gave out and the spray felt like ice on my skin.

Only after shivering did I climb out.

I still felt dirty and exposed.

SITTING IN MY BED, I rubbed at my face and stared off into the distance.

I had to do something—everything was spiraling out of my control.

Only one thing came to mind.

Since Maximus couldn't even take a minute or two to respond, it made sense.

I tapped 'new message' on my phone.

Maximus, I've thought about the situation, and I feel the best thing to do would be to minimize our interactions until people forget about this matter.

I'm withdrawing from the hotel project.

For the foreseeable future, you and I should keep our distance.

TWENTY-TWO

MAXIMUS

A VICIOUS HEADACHE POUNDED AS I ENDED THE CALL WITH GIANNI. OVER the past hour and a half, I'd been on the phone with her, then my lawyer, then Gianni pretty much nonstop, while messages and notifications lit up my phone.

Until I had finished my calls, I ignored them. First, I needed a plan. I hoped that Tina hadn't seen any of this shit, but I was a realist and knew she probably had.

However, now, after skimming her messages, I realized I should have contacted her before the lawyer.

She wanted distance.

Fuck that.

We had something intense burning between us and the idea that she would let this come between us?

Hell no.

My frustrations only got worse on the drive over. Sitting in my car in her driveway, I took several deep breaths. The only way to handle this was through calm, rational logic.

I reminded myself of that as I climbed out, walked to her front door, and knocked.

Her pale face and the shadows under her pretty eyes hit me hard, and my calm, rational logic took a flying leap.

“Please tell me you’re not letting this shit get to you so bad that you’re crying over it,” I bit off.

She flinched, and I felt like a bastard. Sucking in the air, I clenched my jaw and ordered my thoughts.

“I guess I should have expected you to come over,” she said, her voice dull. “Come in.”

The lack of vibrant energy, the very thing that had drawn me to her, hit hard, but I bit back another comment that would only make shit worse.

I stepped into the small living room. “Look, I’m sorry I didn’t respond right away. I was on the phone with my lawyer to get a grip on this and see what we can do.”

Tina had her arms wrapped around herself, and she stared outside instead of looking at me.

Several seconds passed.

“Tina?”

She sighed and swung her head around to look at me, her eyes unreadable. “I heard you. I still feel we should stay away from each other.”

It cut even deeper to hear it from her lips.

“Why?” I demanded, taking a step closer. “Are you that worried about what people think about you?”

“Not everybody has millions to fall back on, Maximus,” she said, averting her gaze. And while people see you as eccentric, they’ve already labeled me a whore. My other client, Hattie’s Place, contacted me earlier to tell me they’re suspending the project. Even my sister has to deal with the fallout since I work for her on the side. Two of her clients already contacted her to make sure I wouldn’t be there.”

She lowered her gaze to her phone with a wounded look in her eyes.

I wanted to hit something.

I wanted to hold her and promise to make this all better.

Before I could figure out even a single word that might soothe the pain in her eyes, she glanced at me and turned away. “It’s not just about you and me.”

“Funny, because it’s only you and me in that article,” I bit off. A quiet voice in the back of my head told me to shut the hell up and listen, but I couldn’t stop. The panic at the thought of her disappearing was a fist around my throat. “Just you and me. If you’re a little worried about your business and your sisters’, we’ll fix it. I’ll have my PR people help us through it. The gossip won’t last. It’ll barely make a ripple in the long term!”

“Worried?” she scoffed and tossed me a look over her shoulder. “Maximus, I was barely keeping my business alive before I met you, and the clients I’ve been wooing for the last month just put everything on hold. I think I’m entitled to be worried. My sister works with many traditional family-oriented companies—if this affects her catering business, she’ll never forgive me. But...hey, it was only you and me in the article.”

She walked over to the window.

The distance between us was like miles as I felt helpless. It only got worse when her shoulders shuddered.

Fuck. Had I made Tina cry?

“I won’t let this hurt you,” I said stiffly. “Or your sister. It’s not your fault some asshole took pictures of us in a private place. She can’t blame you for that.”

“If she loses clients, I would even blame me,” Tina muttered in a voice so low, I wasn’t sure she’d meant for me to hear. “If only I’d listened....”

She went quiet as I walked up behind her.

“Listened to what?” I asked.

She stayed silent.

But I already had a good idea, and the knowledge was a blow.

“Let me guess. You and your sister talked about me.” She said nothing, but her rigid posture filled in the blanks. “Here, I thought you were confident enough not to worry about others’ approval. But it’s pretty clear you’re ashamed.”

She spun around, eyes burning as she glared at me. “Tell me, James. How many times did somebody call you a slut today?” she demanded. “How many total strangers have messaged you with dick pics, asking if you needed company? Because I lost track and ended up locking my social media accounts.”

She waited for a moment. “Women are judged for shit a lot differently than men. People will paint you as eccentric, and women will fantasize a little about you. I am branded as a whore and spit upon by strangers. What do you think that makes me feel like?”

She was shouting by the time she finished and sucked in a breath.

“You don’t get it,” she said, her back still to me. “Some of us worry about our reputations. An article like this won’t affect your business. It’ll barely make a ripple, as you say. But for me? I will not survive the summer. I lost the only gig I had on the horizon. With this scandal branding my reputation, who would want to hire me?”

Guilt twisted through me, twining with the rage I still hadn’t throttled. And envy.

Tina’s loyalty to her sister was a big part of why she was upset, and I wanted that loyalty, too.

Fat chance. She’d already kicked me to the curb in her mind.

Still, I would not let all of this go without a fight. Not when I could make it better for Tina. And her sister.

“You’re stuck between a rock and a hard place,” I said coolly.

She turned to face me, a wary look in her eyes.

“You have one other client.”

She wrapped her arms around herself and shook her head. “No. I told you, I can’t do your hotel project.”

“You don’t have a choice,” I said calmly. “I don’t give a shit about that article, and neither should you. Let’s begin as planned. I will have my office act as your intermediary since you don’t want to speak with me directly.”

Her eyes fell away, shoulders slumping.

I thought I’d find pleasure in taking out some of her anger.

I didn’t.

“Don’t worry, though,” I said. “I’ll keep my distance, just as you asked. Your reputation will be safe from me.”

Not waiting for a response, I left.

TWENTY-THREE

TINA

IT'D HURT MORE THAN EXPECTED TO SEE HIM WALK AWAY. MY HEAD WAS spinning from the emotional roller coaster.

Since I saw the pictures, I never thought Maximus might hurt too. Because of me and my reaction, not the article.

It felt like I had run an emotional marathon and was dealing with the aftermath. I knew falling hard for James Maximus would come easy.

It had happened so fast I never realized he'd felt it, too. That pull. That promise that we had something special between us.

And now it was over.

It was more than just wounded pride to him.

"It's better this way." I made myself believe it, my head against the wall and my eyes on him as he climbed into his car. A clean break now before we get too involved.

He would never understand why I was angry on Dina's behalf. He didn't get how important family was to me.

He rarely talked about his family. I've told him pretty much everything about my family, but knew nothing about him.

We were from two completely different worlds.

A dull headache pulsed at the base of my skull, and the temptation to sleep it off was strong. But, after James drove off, the sound of the powerful engine no longer a memory, I grabbed my work bag.

Turning on the lights in my home office, I settled at the workstation and booted my computer.

I had already transferred my hotel photos and, after picking a few, I began editing. It wasn't as easy to lose myself in the work as I'd hoped.

Snippets of our fight haunted me, and after an hour, I'd made no progress.

Whenever my phone vibrated with an incoming text, I would grab it. Although my logical part insisted I never wanted to hear from James again—outside of a work context—my heart sank every time a new message wasn't from him.

Newt texted to make sure I was okay.

Mom texted to ask about my migraine.

Roseann texted to apologize for the board's decision and promised she would talk to them.

Dina didn't text.

James didn't text.

Every hour that passed without hearing from either of them worsened the pain.

I finally stopped working for the night. My progress was minimal, and I was ninety percent sure I'd trash it all after a good night's sleep.

But the entire night wasn't a waste. My primary purpose in working had been to occupy my mind from the shit-fest that had been my day. Sleeping and putting this behind me would help me focus better in the morning.

MY FOCUS WAS STILL a problem days later.

I'd written my preferred crews for historic building renovation projects, and luck had stepped in to make sure the company I needed first—demolition—had a job cancelation last minute.

I was in the right frame of mind for demolition, and Tuesday evening, two hours after the crew had packed their tools and stopped for the day, I was still at it, breaking down walls.

The muscles in my back and arms had gone past the sore stage and were numb.

It was nice not to be sleep-deprived anymore. Yesterday, I ran ten miles to exhaust myself and slept through the night.

The physical exertion of demolition would help on the same level.

Thirst had me dropping the sledgehammer, and my abused muscles writhed like hell. Even getting to the makeshift table was torture, and after draining half the bottle of water, I said out loud, "You won't accomplish anything else tonight. It's time to go home."

"I agree."

My heart lurched into my throat when I heard the voice behind me. Grabbing the aluminum reusable water bottle, I spun and hurled it in the speaker's direction.

A feminine yelp told me I'd hit my target, but that didn't stop me from grabbing the sledgehammer.

"Hey, chill out!" The woman, with a huge wet stain on the front of her shirt, glared at me.

"Who the fuck are you?" I demanded, heart racing. "How did you get in here?"

"Your crew didn't lock up, Sherlock," she said in a sour voice. "You should probably mention it to them tomorrow."

I blinked, surprised by her matter-of-fact response in a somewhat irritated voice. "Yeah, I'll do that. You didn't tell me the answer to the first question. Who are you?"

“Gianni Eckerle.” She offered a thin smile. “James probably never mentioned me, but I’m his sister.”

She moved deeper into the lobby, skirting the piles of debris.

“You can’t be in here,” I told her warily. “It’s a construction site.”

“Don’t worry. If I get hurt, I won’t sue you or James.” She gave me a sidelong look. She reached the middle and spun in a slow, thoughtful circle as she took in the surrounding disaster.

I saw beyond that disaster, but not everybody could.

It surprised me when she gave a thoughtful nod.

“I’ve seen your work,” she told me. “This place will look amazing.”

Frowning, I crossed my arms over my chest. “It will be beyond amazing. Why are you here?”

She glanced at me. “I wanted to meet you.”

“Why?”

She didn’t answer right away. She made it to the counter I hoped to save, covered with heavy drop cloths to protect it. Placing her elbows on the surface, she leaned back and met me eye to eye.

“To see if you’re worth it.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” Crossing her legs at the ankle, she shrugged. “He’s torn up over you, you know. I’ve never seen him like this. It pisses me off. So...I wanted to see if you’re worth it.”

The words were a stiff jab, straight to the heart, and I looked away so she couldn’t see the effect.

But apparently, she saw damn deep.

“Seems like you got a thing for him.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said, shaking my head. “We’re way too different.”

“There’s that old saying...opposites attract?” She pursed her lips as she studied me.

“This goes deeper than me being a morning person while he’s a night owl,” I snapped. “This bullshit article might ruin me. I’ve been working my ass off to keep my business going. I don’t think he gets it. My sister and I are at odds because of him. I locked down my social media after people called me a whore and sent me dick pics. How did he respond to all that? “He’s surprised I’m worried about what people think about me.”

“Okay, yeah. We have problems that guys won’t get...if we never tell them. Some will never get it...but James will listen if you explain.”

My misery was just as intense as earlier. “I tried that. To James, it’s as simple as not caring about public opinion.”

“I doubt it’s that simple.” Gianni sighed. “James isn’t great with words. But then again, he’s never had reasons to learn social skills.”

“And that’s my fault?” I glared at her.

She pursed her lips, then slowly smiled. “No. However, if you let James go because of his poor people skills and because you’re afraid to face obstacles in life, that will be your fault.”

“Excuse me, I’m not afraid,” I snapped.

“Aren’t you?” She shrugged. “Okay, my mistake. I guess James is the only one torn up over this.”

She shoved off the counter and started for the door.

“I didn’t ask for any of this,” I shouted at her back. “I’m doing my best to deal with it.”

She swung around and met my gaze. “You think James asked? Don’t you think he’s doing his best to fix this shit?”

I opened my mouth, then closed it and looked away. “His idea of fixing it is not to worry about what people think. Not even my sister! I’m terrified my parents will see that damn article. My dad will have a heart attack—a literal heart attack, and James just tells me I shouldn’t worry what people think!”

“Oh, honey...”

To my surprise, her face softened. “You really don’t think James is trying to fix this?”

The certainty in her voice caught me off guard.

“I...how?”

She sighed and looked up.

“Be patient,” she muttered before looking at me and crooking her finger. “I want to show you something.”

I walked with her through the doors of the old hotel.

Outside, the Texan heat knocked my breath from me. Squinting into the bright light, I removed my hard hat.

Gianni waved at somebody.

I tried to find out who it was, but nobody paid us any attention.

The door of a parked car opened, and a lean man got out, his face bemused.

“Come here,” she yelled.

As he stopped in front of us, my mind searched for clues.

“Lenny, tell Ms. Siegler why you’re here.”

He cocked a brow. “He won’t like it.”

“I sign your paycheck,” she pointed out.

With a sigh, he shrugged and looked at me. “James Ryson hired us to keep you safe while we try to figure out who wrote the blog post.”

“James’ legal last name is Ryson,” Gianni said, giving me a beatific smile. “He uses Maximus in business.”

I ignored Gianni. “What do you mean, James hired you? To do what?”

“Security,” he replied. “You’re not in immediate danger...for now, but he didn’t want to take a chance. It is just a temporary measure until we find out

who is behind all of this. You can trust us; we will find out. I've never seen him so pissed."

"Thank you, Lenny." Gianni patted his arm and gestured to the car. As he turned and walked off, she shifted her focus to me. "Now...tell me again how James is not trying to fix this?"

TWENTY-FOUR

MAXIMUS

THE MESSAGE FROM GIANNI HELD MY INTEREST FOR LESS THAN FIVE SECONDS. No one at her private investigation firm could figure out who wrote that fucking blog post, took those pictures, or leaked the information that made a small Houston society webzine go viral.

The webzine article was down, thanks to the power of high-dollar lawyers. But the blog post and screenshots all over social media? It was all still out there.

No shit I could do about it. For now.

If only everything had been as easy as the webzine. As soon as “defamation” and “lawsuit” were mentioned, the owner cringed in fear.

Nothing talked like the threat of taking somebody’s money.

I deleted the text from my half-sister and tossed the phone to the padded seat next to me. I could not stand the quiet inside my home, and I moved out onto my patio. Even here, I felt trapped and restless.

Useless.

Never have I felt so powerless to solve my problems before. I fucking hated it. Neither my money nor my influence could solve the main issue that gnawed at me.

Tina.

My phone buzzed with a message notification, but I ignored it.

Dropping on the padded bench, I picked up the bottle of Scotch I'd brought with me and topped off the highball on the accent table. The ice had mostly melted, but I didn't care, just as I didn't care that I was stupid, drinking, and brooding.

Gianni's ringtone blared in my ear. I scowled and tossed back the Scotch, a 21-year Glenfiddich that deserved much better treatment. I didn't give a fuck about that either.

Grabbing the phone, I accepted the call. "I'm about ten seconds from hurling this piece of shit into the trash. Leave me the fuck alone."

"Wow, you're a surly bastard tonight," Gianni said, her mild tone mocking my anger. "Look, I was just checking to see if you were at home or the hotel."

"Why? I don't want company."

"Because my guy mentioned seeing one of your precious little escorts at your hotel. Probably looking for you. I figured you weren't in the mood for company and wanted to give you a heads up."

Swirling the Scotch in my glass, I sighed. "I'm home, so don't worry about it. I appreciate you looking out for me."

Hey, I'm not looking out for you. It's the poor escort. You're toxic these days." She paused for a moment. "I'm only teasing you."

Putting down the glass of Scotch, I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Yeah, Gianni, I'm getting off the phone. I'm tired, okay?"

I didn't wait for a response and just hung up. Kicking my feet up onto the table, I stared at the vast expanse of sky overhead, dotted with a million stars.

The deep navy color hurt to look at because it made me think of Tina's eyes.

But I couldn't look away either.

Lulled by the quiet music found only in nature, I closed my eyes and let my mind drift for a minute or two.

My damn phone rang.

Again.

Jerking upright as the screen lit up, the bright flare made me wince as my eyes adjusted.

Had I fallen asleep?

Maybe...

“Hello?”

“James...um, hi.” Tina’s voice was soft, hesitant, and the most beautiful sound I’d heard in days. “I...um...am I interrupting anything?”

“No.” Even if she had, it wouldn’t have mattered.

“Ah. Good. Um...you...” She stopped talking.

I heard her drag in a deep breath and let it out unsteadily.

“Are you okay?”

“I think.” She laughed, the sound edging up at the end, a sign of nerves I hadn’t ever seen from her. “Listen, I’m at your place—”

I stood to my feet, the last vestiges of sleep gone. “What? Where? The hotel?”

“No. I’m...at your house. Gianni texted after she made sure you weren’t at the hotel. I want to talk—”

“Gianni...did...what?” I’d been tricked by my sister. “Hold on. I’m coming to the door.”

“Wait!”

The panic in her voice froze me in place.

“Why?”

“James, I’m nervous, okay?” She huffed out a breath before continuing. “I’ll explain, but first...we need to clear up a few things before we move forward.”

“Before moving forward with what?” I demanded.

She hesitated, then replied quietly. “Us.”

“You said we should keep our distance,” I bit off.

“And you told me not to give a fuck about my family’s opinion,” she replied in a level tone. “Did you mean that?”

Closing my eyes, I lifted my face to the sky. “No. Look, I can be a giant ass sometimes.”

“My family’s important to me, James. Okay?”

“I know that.” I knew from the first time I’d met her. When she’d helped Dina at the rehearsal dinner, anybody who saw the two sisters together could spot their bond.

I envied them—their loyalty to each other.

I hadn’t done shit to earn that kind of loyalty from Tina.

But I wanted it anyway.

“Okay,” Tina said. “Can we maybe discuss all of that...later?”

“Yes. I’m on my way to the front door now.”

“Um. Well, okay, but...that’s not where I am,” she said.

A square of light fell across me from the windows on the second floor.

Slowly, I lifted my head.

Tina stood there in the window. I couldn’t make out her features, not with the nimbus of light framing her, but I’d recognize her figure anywhere.

And the room she was in...

My mind hazed over.

I strode but had no memory of doing so, leaving the patio, climbing the back staircase, and walking down the hall to the private bedroom, outfitted to my satisfaction.

Until recently, there had been nobody I'd wanted in that room.

The night I'd brought Tina to the mansion, we'd slept in a room most would assume was the master bedroom. However, this room was hidden deep in the private part of the mansion because it had so much of me, and I didn't share myself that easily. It was my actual bedroom. Nobody knew about it except Gianni. I owned the house—I owned several. Out of all my possessions, this room was the only one that felt truly mine. It was more than just my bedroom.

Here, I would let my guard down.

I would let my fantasies play out. It was the place I'd imagined bringing a sub I trusted.

Tina.

But did I trust her? Could I let my guard down for her? I hoped.

I pushed the door open and watched as she slowly turned to face me. The neurons in my brain exploded one by one.

The only clothing she wore was a white shirt that was open on the front, exposing the inner curves of her breasts, the flat plane of her belly, and the honey-gold curls between her thighs.

“Tina.”

“James...” She took a deep breath and the dark circles of her nipples pressed against the white cotton, tight and peaked. I had to tear my eyes away when she spoke again.

“This... Dom thing, it's not just a kink for you. It's part of who you are,” she said hesitantly. “Isn't it?”

“Yes.” The word came out gritty, my voice hoarse as if I hadn't spoken in so long, I'd forgotten how.

“But just in the bedroom, correct? You don't want to control me outside of here?”

Why was she asking this? My heart was racing so hard that it all but knocked me out.

“Tina, I don’t want to control you except in the sexual relationship. That’s how Dom/Sub relationships work.”

With another ragged breath, her nipples stabbed into her shirt, and I couldn’t stop myself from watching them. I wanted to bite them, lick them, pinch them until she was moaning and begging for mercy. When I continued speaking, my voice was even rougher. “In a Dom and sub relationship, the sub has the most control. She can stop it whenever she wants. It doesn’t matter what the Dom does or how much he wants her. “She uses her safe word, and that’s it.”

“I’ve read about it,” she said. “About safe words and all. I’m not sure how far I’d want to go. But...I want to be with you.” Another deep breath—and this time, she noticed my fascination with her tits. I could tell by the way her cheeks colored and the lambent heat in her eyes.

“Somebody mentioned this was your actual bedroom.” She licked her lips and did some subtle movement that had the gap in her shirt widening. Now the lapels of the shirt caught on her nipples, and I was ready to rip the damn thing off.

Somehow, I managed a level response. “Somebody, huh?”

“Yes.” She looked at me thoughtfully, her eyes on mine, and did another wiggle, a roll of her shoulders; then hips, leaving her breasts bared and her pink nipples drawn so tight, I wondered if she was sore.

“Somebody also mentioned I’d hurt you.”

Her eyes darted to mine, then away as her words yanked my head back into the conversation, away from her delicious tits.

Lust clouded my brain, but the look she gave me, the words...I dragged in a breath and scrubbed my hands over my face.

“James?”

“I heard you,” I muttered. It had hurt, the way she shoved me out, not even giving me a chance.

“It’s okay,” I told her, forcing the words out. “We both fucked up.”

She reached up and touched my lips, her dark blue eyes holding mine.

“Maybe you should punish me.”

The words had the same effect on me as if she had kneeled and put my cock in her mouth.

I was already hard and erect, ready to fuck her until we were both sweating, empty and drained.

But those words...

Reaching up, I caught her chin. The muscles in my hand spasmed too much, and I had to force myself to relax. A dozen images, a hundred, all of Tina submitting, pinwheeled through my mind.

“You’re going to let me punish you?” I asked in a whisper, making sure I understood.

“It only seems fair.” She bit her lower lip, and I could see the nerves in her eyes. But there was also determination...and heat.

“Do you have any idea what punishment means when you say that to me, Tina?”

She angled her head to the side, the action leaving her elegant neck bared and vulnerable. “No, but I trust you.”

Lowering my head, I bit her lower lip, just enough to sting.

She gasped, but instead of pulling away, she pressed closer. So close, I could feel the tight buds of her nipples. I reached up and pinched one lightly, then harder, until a mewl of need escaped her. I eased the sensual hurt away, then repeated it on the other side. Her tits could become an obsession, full and lush and firm, and so sensitive.

“What if I decide I want to spank you?” I asked, tugging on a swollen nipple.

Her breath hitched out in a shudder, then broke again as she answered, “Okay.”

“What if I tell you to get on your knees and suck my dick until I say you can stop?” Just the image had my cock jerking in demand.

“Okay.”

I damn near lost it.

“Are you sure?” Crowding her back against a nearby armchair, I caged her up against it, arms bracketing her in place. “If I push you to your knees right now, tell you to open for me, then push my dick down your throat, if I fuck your mouth until I’m ready to come...then pull out, let you catch your breath...and start all over again? If I decide to do that as your punishment?”

“Okay.” She was panting now, her face flushed and eyes fogged with desire.

Dipping my head, I bit one swollen nipple. She arched up and cried out, high and sharp. I slid my fingers into her cunt and twisted three times fast. She clenched tight around me, but when she went to grab me, I stopped and stepped back.

She moaned in frustration as I pinioned her wrists, trapping them at the dip of her spine, just above the lush swell of her ass.

“I think you might enjoy being punished, Tina.” I grazed her lower lip with my teeth and sucked on it lightly. Lifting my head, I skimmed my free hand along her side, the curve of her waist, the swell of her hip. “But I’m still not sure you understand.”

“Then tell me,” she said, rising onto her toes and pressing her breasts into my chest. “Make me understand.”

“I want...everything,” I said. “I want you to submit and give me everything I ask.”

“I...” She swallowed, then gave a nervous nod. “As long as it doesn’t involve other people. I...I’m nervous, but I’m curious, too.”

“No other people. But if I say get on your knees, then I want you on your knees. If I tell you not to come, then you don’t get to come.” I cupped her ass.

“And as to that punishment...I think I want to bend you over, maybe over this chair here, or a table. I’m not sure. But I want to bend you over, tie you down so you can only squirm...so you’re helpless as I spank this perfect ass. And once it’s blushing and pink for me, I’m going to fuck it.”

As I said the last part, I sank my fingers against the cleft between her cheeks, making sure she understood just what I wanted to fuck.

Her lashes fluttered, and she whimpered, then sagged, as if the words had stripped her strength.

Decision made.

She gasped.

I kissed her, short and rough, before biting her lower lip, then nuzzling my way to her ear. “That excites you. Have you had your ass fucked before?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“And how was it?”

She didn’t answer.

“Tina. Answer the question.”

“I...liked it, but I felt like something was missing.” She met my eyes as she made that admission, her cheeks coloring.

“You won’t feel like that tonight.”

TWENTY-FIVE

TINA

HE HADN'T BEEN MAKING CONVERSATION WHEN HE TALKED ABOUT BENDING me over a piece of furniture.

Face hot, body immobilized, I pressed my cheek to the cooling leather under me. This piece of furniture was a glammed-up, padded sawhorse with small platforms for my knees and another set that folded out from somewhere for my arms.

He'd restrained me with padded cuffs at my ankles and wrists, but even if I could have moved, I wasn't sure I had the strength or the coordination.

Baring myself to James had taken everything out of me, and I felt like a puddle of goo.

James stroked his fingers up my spine as he walked around me, checking the cuffs, first at my ankles, then at my wrists, before stopping at my head.

He crouched there in front of me until I could meet his gaze, and he stared at me with eyes that burned through me.

“What's your safe word?”

I told him again, fighting the urge to tell him to get it done.

“This piece adjusts so I can hold your head and fuck your mouth,” he murmured, tracing his index finger along my lip. “Maybe I should do that first. What do you think?”

“Okay.”

“It’s, yes, Master.” He pressed his finger down, the pressure light. “Outside of sex, I won’t ever try to control you. But when we were like this...it’s Master or Sir.”

I stared, uncertain if he was serious, but one look told me he was.

“You can say, yes, Master, I’d like you to fuck my mouth or no, Master, but you call me Master.”

“Yes, Master.” I didn’t even think about it. It came out so easily, as did the words that followed. “If you want me to suck your cock, I’d like that, Master.”

James’ eyes narrowed down to slits. “You’re going to be a delicious little sub, aren’t you?”

“I hope so...Master.”

He stroked my back again. “I think I’ll save fucking your pretty mouth for another night. How do you like to have your ass fucked? Do you require any clitoral or vaginal stimulation to enjoy it?”

My face got red and hot, and I thought I’d self-combust. I gave a jerky nod, and James smiled as if I’d pleased him.

“Watch the mirror.”

I didn’t know what mirror—until he moved.

That was when I realized the focal point of the far wall was a three-paned mirror, the kind you’d expect to see in dress shops.

“Up—my pretty little sub.”

He tugged on my hips, urging my position forward, so my knees took more of my weight. I couldn’t see what he was doing, only the bare muscles of his back as he tugged and shifted—

“Oh!” Intense vibrations reached my thighs. I jerked in response, and he freed my wrists, using a quick-release I hadn’t realized was there, pulling me up onto my knees, so I straddled the horse...and then he reached between my

thighs and positioned the vibrating dildo. He urged me to slide down on it, and I sobbed out loud, already so aroused I was clenching around the toy.

“Bend over,” James said in a calm voice.

I rocked forward, trying to ride the artificial cock snug in my pussy.

He fisted his hand in my hair and leaned forward, his greater weight pushing me down a few inches as he repeated the order. “Tina, you have to be punished. Remember? Bend over.”

I did as he ordered.

“What do you say?” he demanded, tugging at my hair. The short, sharp pain made me clench even tighter around the toy.

“Please, Master.”

“Please what?”

Please what? I didn’t know. Moaning, I rolled my hips as best I could, needing the friction as the dildo pulsed and shook inside me. A small external piece snuggled precisely against my clitoris, and I clenched the muscles in my thighs to deepen the contact.

“Tell me to punish you, Tina.”

“Punish me, Master.” I’d do anything if it meant he’d make me come and end this urge.

He pulled away.

I cried out in distress, no longer able to feel him anywhere close to me.

“James?”

No answer.

Plaintively, I whispered, “Master?”

“I’m going to paddle you, Tina. This happens when you displease me.”

I didn’t even have time to brace myself or feel fear before a lick of fiery heat struck my exposed ass.

I jolted, unsure if it hurt...or felt good.

Hands clenching, I pressed my face to the leather padding under me.

“Another, Tina.”

I cried out this time, but I still wasn’t sure how it felt.

“Another,” he rasped, and his voice was throatier, rougher.

But it didn’t come.

I whimpered.

“Are you ready, pet?”

“Yes,” I moaned.

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, Master!”

Again, I cried out. It was pleasure and pain, and I loved both sides of it.

“James, please!”

He tangled a hand in my hair and bent over me. “Please what?”

Dazed, I met his eyes. “I...please. Make me come, please...please....”

He threw something down. I couldn’t see what, only knew it happened because of the movement I glimpsed in the mirror as he let go of my hair and moved away. Greedily I watched, staring at his back muscles, his lean hips, as he circled around me, then stopped behind the horse.

He unzipped his trousers and pushed them down enough to free his cock, wrapping his fist around the heavy length.

“I can put a condom on,” he said. “Do you want me to do that, Tina?”

I shivered, knowing he wasn’t asking as a Dom, but as my lover.

“No. I’m clean. If you say you don’t need it, I trust you.”

“I’ll take care of you,” he whispered, holding my gaze in the mirror for a long, poignant moment. Then he stroked his hands across my hips and moved closer. “You’re so fucking wet, it’s running down your thighs, baby. It’s tempting to ignore the rest of your punishment and just fuck you. Do you want me to forget your punishment?”

“No, Master.”

A hot, dirty smile twitched his lips before he turned away to grab something.

The pulsating vibrations of the dildo increased, and I cried out, grinding against the part pressed tight to my clit.

“I’m almost jealous seeing you work yourself against that dildo, Tina. But then I think about this....” He pressed two fingers, cool and slicked with lubricant, to the clenched opening of my ass. “All I can think about is how you will feel as you stretch open around me. Show me you want me there, Tina...show me you want me to ram my cock inside this tight, hot hole.”

I whimpered and pushed down on his fingers.

I hadn’t lied. I enjoyed anal sex, even as I’d always found the experience somehow lacking. It was so taboo, and the idea of it always appealed more than the actual act.

Until now.

James twisted his wrist, screwing two fingers into my ass while his gaze held mine captive in the mirror. His free hand pressed against the small of my back, holding me still for his invasion, which only made the sensual agony worse since the vibrations against my clitoris were almost too much.

He withdrew and pushed in again, working the lubricant deeper. Again, again, with gentle movements, denying me the full penetration he’d given just moments before.

I protested with a moan and moved back onto him, following him until I was fucking myself on his hand and the dildo affixed to the horse.

An orgasm was so close...

He pulled away, and I moaned. “No...please...”

“You aren’t coming until I have that tight ass wrapped around my dick, Tina. Watch.”

In a sensual fugue, I did just that, staring as he slicked lubricant over his cock until it gleamed, then oiled more into his palm, which he rubbed against my sensitive tissues, right where he planned to impale me.

“Watch,” he ordered again, taking care to place his hands so they wouldn’t obstruct my view, as he tucked the head of his swollen, fat cock against me.

I shivered, lips parting in anticipation and a little nervousness at the size of him.

“You don’t want to tighten up on me, baby,” he said, one hand tightening on my hip. “It will feel like glory to me, but it will make it tougher on you... so....”

He rocked, slow, subtle movements that had him working a little deeper each time, movements that stretched and inflamed me until I was mad with it.

“James...”

He spanked me. Hard, the flat of his hand coming down on my ass with enough force to tear a startled cry from me.

“Master,” he corrected, his voice gentle in contrast to the rough strike.

My breath hitched up, trapped in my throat as I stared at the red imprint of his hand on my ass.

“James...”

He grunted, eyes meeting mine before drifting to the imprint of his hand, which he traced with one finger.

“You’re going to be a bratty sub....”

“Whatever it takes to make you fuck me,” I said, panting and wiggling as best I could. “Fuck me, James.”

His eyelids drooped.

He fisted a hand in my hair, gripped my hip with his free one.

And thrust deep, the mingled pleasure and pain setting my synapses ablaze. Buried deep inside me, he spanked me again, then let go of my hair, gripped both hips, and pumped, filling me with slow, deeply penetrating strokes before pulling out so far that only the flared head of his penis remained inside me.

In reflex, my muscles tensed, quivering from such pained, delighted arousal. I didn't want him to pull out.

“Please...Please...pleasepleasepleaseplease...” I begged.

“More?” he asked, breathing ragged. “Harder? Faster?”

“Yes!”

The muscles in his legs and arms bulged as he gave me what I wanted—a full, deep, and rough penetration. While helplessly restrained, I stared at our reflection, the erotic display we made as he drove into me repeatedly. The climax that had been building in me exploded, almost destroying me.

TWENTY-SIX

MAXIMUS

AS I LEANED AGAINST THE LEATHER PADDING OF MY EXECUTIVE CHAIR, I listened to the conference call with only half an ear, most of my attention reliving last night.

Tina, in an open white dress shirt and nothing else.

Bent over and restrained, cuffed to the custom workhorse while I plied the paddle.

Tina, begging me to fuck her, and later Tina, asleep in my arms all night.

I couldn't pick a favorite memory. I'd tried so hard that I had to clear my schedule for the afternoon—all for one purpose, to spend time with Tina.

The intercom chirped.

“Maximus?”

“Yes, Miranda?” The interruption from my assistant was a reminder that I needed to get back to work. I had calls and emails to answer.

“Miles Dawes from Reactionary Inc just called and said he had a personal emergency and won't be able to make the teleconference at noon.”

Okay, a sign.

“Thank you, Miranda. Contact everybody and tell them we'll need to reschedule? Without the input from Dawes and his team, there's no point in holding the teleconference.”

“I’m already on it, sir. After that, I’m leaving for lunch. Is there anything you want?”

Before I could respond, an idea popped into my head. “No, and in fact, Miranda. After you make those calls, take the rest of the day off. You’ve been working your tail off for the past few months to get everything ready.

Her brief pause was the only sign I’d surprised her. “Thank you, sir.”

Ending the connection, I picked up my cell phone.

I still had calls to handle and the emails.

But I would not get shit done with Tina dominating my thoughts.

I pushed her number on the screen and waited for her to pick up.

“Tina Siegler speaking,” she called out over background noise. Her breathing was faster than usual.

“Hello.”

Her breath hitched. “Ah, hi.”

The faint trace of nerves made me smile, but it annoyed me, too. Tina shouldn’t be nervous when I called. I wanted her to expect my calls.

“I’ve just got my afternoon open,” I said as I closed the crowded calendar, glaring at me from the computer screen. “And I was thinking about coming by the site to see how things are coming along.”

Her pause was hardly noticeable; however, I paid too much attention to her to overlook anything.

“There’s not much progression yet,” she said, voice falling into a professional tone. “The first part is always messy, so don’t get your hopes up. I’d hate for you to be disappointed.”

“Since I’ll also be seeing *you*, there will be no disappointment.”

“Um.” She cleared her throat. “Oh. Um. Well.”

The nervousness was back, but she made me smile now. As the background sounds faded, I asked, “Are you leaving the main work area?”

“Yes. I stepped outside for a minute. James...ah, listen, if you want to come by, of course, you can. But the team is here...we have to be professional.”

“I’ll behave,” I said, smothering the sting of aggravation that arose. “I’m just stopping by to check out the site. Being able to see you is a bonus.”

“All right. We’re here all day. Make sure you wear a hard hat once you get inside.” She hesitated a moment, then added, “I’m looking forward to seeing you.”

Instead of answering, I hung up. If I said what was really on my mind, Tina would blush, and if I made her blush, I preferred to be watching.

I HAD zero expectations when I walked into the old Biscayne. The progress they had made surprised me, despite everything looking like a mess.

While there was still a lot of paperwork and licensing to do, the preliminary work had already begun. At this point, everything was still in demolition.

I picked up a hard hat from the table, wondering where I’d find Tina in the chaos.

Music blasted from a Bluetooth speaker on a cinderblock in the large entryway, and nearby, a couple of people bent over a massive hole in a wall—one that hadn’t been there the last time I was here.

I squinted to get a better look.

“Can I help you?”

Swinging my head around, I found a guy built like a tank. Arms crossed over an enormous chest. His face—in contrast to his massively muscled form—was pink.

“Did you hear me?” he said, voice booming from his heavy chest. “I asked if I could help you.”

“Stop yelling, Tank,” a voice called out. “You’re scaring people.”

I nodded at the music. “Can we turn that down?”

Tank’s scowl deepened, but he turned it off. As he stomped toward me, I looked for Tina, but she wasn’t in sight.

“Okay, the music is off.” His voice echoed through the cavernous lobby now that the music wasn’t there to fill it up. “What do you want?”

He emphasized the want, but it seemed like he meant just one thing—get the fuck out of here.

“Are you always so cheerful?”

He blinked.

“Yes—he is.”

I half-turned, catching sight of Tina as she came around a corner, her eyes meeting mine for a moment before she looked toward Tank.

His scowl disappeared; instead, he smiled.

I wanted to tell him to smile at somebody else. The sudden surge of jealousy caught me off guard.

Since when had I ever been jealous of another guy, just because a woman looked at him with a smile brightening her eyes?

I wasn’t sure I liked it.

“...ain’t that right, James?”

Jerking my wandering thoughts under control, I gave her a quick nod. I wondered what I’d just agreed to. As she came to me, her smile widened a fraction more, and I decided whatever it was, it didn’t matter. I’d do whatever to keep her looking at me like that.

“I told you it was a mess here,” she said as she stopped in front of me with a wry grin on her face.

“I’ve been on construction sites before.”

“Somehow, I’m not surprised.” She gave the surrounding area a quick look. “It’ll look like this for a few more days—we have to make sure everything is safe. We’ve got another inspection tomorrow, and if things go well, the actual work can begin next week.”

Just then, a heavy thud filled the room, and she grimaced as she followed my gaze to the hole I’d seen in the wall. It was now three times bigger.

“The former owners put up the drywall,” she said. “There is water damage, so all of this has to be addressed before moving forward. If all goes well, we finish that part of the project this week.”

“We...?”

Arching a brow, she met my gaze. “Yes, me and the crew. I like the physical aspect of the job as much as the other aspects.”

I thought of a hundred things that could go wrong. I almost told Tina *not* to get physically involved, but I stopped myself. Trying to control how she did her job was a good way to fuck things up quickly.

“I think you’ll do a fine job with the demolition,” I said, forcing the words out instead of the ones I wanted to say.

She gave me a half-smile, but the look in her eyes made me glad I’d held back. “I will. And I’m good at it. Don’t worry. It looks worse than it is.”

“Really?” I cocked a brow. “Are you sure?”

She grimaced. “I know, this does...look bad. It’s all a big mess. But...you knew that going in.”

“Yes.” *And I’d do it all over again if she kept looking at me like that.*

She colored under my gaze, and I wished we were alone. I wanted to peel off her sleeveless, dusty pale blue shirt and watch that rosy flush that made her skin go pink down to her tits.

She sucked in a breath, and I met her eyes, watched the need awaken and spill through her. If I touched her now, if I slid my hand between her thighs, she’d be getting wet. I could practically feel that honey on my fingers, and smell it in the air.

And I hadn't even touched her.

"Stop it," she said in a low whisper, the two words so quiet they barely carried.

Because I'd agreed to be professional, I broke eye contact and stepped away.

"You're going to salvage this?" I asked, touching the protective cloth covering the mahogany check-in counter.

"Yes. It's so beautiful. The carvings alone....." She made a happy little sound under her breath as she stroked a hand along the surface. "The repair work will just be cosmetic touch-ups here and there."

"Hey, boss!"

Tina looked over her shoulder, then nodded before meeting my eyes. "They need me."

"Of course. I'll just walk around a bit."

It was evident at a glance Tina was in charge there.

One guy pointed out something, and Tina bent lower, a gloved hand on the grimy floor to support herself. Another guy had his eyes on her ass, and Tank, walking by, smacked him at the back of the head, giving him a dark look.

Grouchy Tank had redeeming qualities.

My phone rang, and I slipped outside.

"Hey, Gianni. What's up?"

"I may have something," my half-sister said without preamble.

Still walking, I tightened my hand on the phone. "About the pictures?"

"Yes." Gianni's breath came out with a hard burst, a sign of how keyed up she was. "The pictures. The articles. Can we meet?"

Looking back through the doors to where I'd last seen Tina, I hesitated for only a few seconds. "Yes. I'm on my way."

TWENTY-SEVEN

TINA

“SO, HOW LONG HAVE YOU TWO BEEN A THING?”

Leaning against my car with a cold soda pressed to my forehead, I frowned. Garcia, Tank’s boyfriend and co-owner of the demolition company, was grinning at me with a smile that stretched across his narrow face.

“What? Who?” Tank’s head jerked up.

“James Maximus,” Garcia said with a grin. “It’s obvious there’s something there. Which is good because—hey!” Garcia’s grin had twisted into a scowl after being slapped across the head.

“I swear,” Tank muttered. “How childish can a man be?”

Garcia’s eyes shifted to his. “What did I say?”

I knew what was going on.

“Guys, it’s okay.” While I said those words, my face heated, and it was hard not to look away. “I’m assuming you both read the article.”

Garcia’s hangdog expression grew sad, and Tank’s face went beet red. He shook his head and took my hand, squeezing it gently.

“That was some awful shit there, Tina. Fucked up, you know. Not that you—we mean, if that’s your thing—” Tank stopped mid-sentence and gave Garcia a pained look.

“What my boy here is trying to say—we don’t give a shit about the club or whatever you do in your private time.” A sweet smile softened the seriousness of Garcia’s features, and Tank nodded, happy to have somebody else doing all the talking for him. “But having your privacy violated like that...it’s rough. We’re sorry.”

I couldn’t tell who blushed more, Tank or me. But their kindness meant the world.

“I should have expected it,” I said, forcing a light note into my voice.

“People are assholes.” With disgust apparent in his voice, Tank patted me on the shoulder. “I hope Maximus’s doing something about that stupid article?”

“Ah...” I thought about my brief talk with Gianni and nodded. “I know he’s trying, at least. Whether anything pan out? We’ll have to see.”

“There’s that old saying...money talks.” Garcia gave an easy shrug. “I don’t think money talks for him—it probably sings. That man and his family got some serious pull. If anybody can sort this out, I’d say he can.”

“I hope so.”

AN HOUR LATER, as I toweled my hair dry, Garcia’s words came back to me. I knew money sang to James. Not just that. Money, power...women.

All he had to do was look at me a certain way, and I’d sing anything he wanted.

“Or ordered,” I muttered, my face heating as I recalled the hot, erotic hours of last night.

I recalled the rough, gravelly tone in his voice and the touch of his hands, a sensory echo that tightened my nipples until they were painful. Remembering the heat in his eyes as he stared at me wearing nothing but the white dress shirt I had stolen from his closet.

Tossing the towel over the back of the battered armchair tucked by the window, I picked up my brush by the dresser. My phone lay there, the surface blank. I itched to check to see if James had texted or called while I was in the shower.

I made myself finish brushing my hair first.

I sighed when I saw the only text was from Dina, and I carried my phone to the bed with me. Sunlight streaming in through the palladium window fell over me, a clear sign it was still far too early for bed, but I didn't get up. I needed to eat something, stretch out muscles sore from the day's physical labor.

Heat gathered in my belly as I—once again—replayed the memories from last night.

What if I push you to your knees right now, tell you to open for me, then push my dick down your throat? If I fuck your mouth until I'm ready to come...

Tightening my hand around the phone, I closed my eyes. I felt my blood pump hotter, faster, and pooling between my thighs, leaving me slick and warm.

I think you might enjoy being punished.

Yeah, that was definitely the case.

I want you to submit and give me everything I ask. If I say get on your knees, then I want you on your knees. If I tell you not to come, then you don't get to come.

“Fuck that,” I muttered. I clutched the phone in one hand, but my other lay on my belly. Thoughts of James and his raw silk whisper made me push my hand between my thighs, gasping at the wet heat I encountered.

With a moan, I arched up into my touch and stroked my clitoris. It was tight and swollen, so engorged, just a few light touches were almost torture.

My phone rang.

Clamping my knees together reflexively, I lifted my phone.

As James Maximus flashed across the screen, I rolled onto my side. The phone rang again. Not now, James. Panicking, I fumbled with it left-handed, but instead of hitting ignore...I accepted the call.

I honestly don't know if it was an accident...or if I'd meant to answer while I had my fingers buried in my pussy.

"Tina." His voice clipped.

A harsh breath escaped me instead of a greeting, and he cleared his throat.

"Are...am I interrupting?"

"Maybe." Face burning, I squeezed my eyes closed. "I'm not sure."

"Now I have to ask. Tina, what are you doing?" His voice was a rasp again, and I wondered if he already knew.

My throat dry, I said, "I just took a shower, and I was thinking of you. On my bed, I started remembering everything that happened last night."

"You're turned on," he said, his voice blunt where I kept hesitating.

"Yes."

"What are you doing? Right now? Tell me."

Opening my eyes, I stared at the ceiling overhead. "I'm in my bedroom."

"Have you touched yourself?"

"Yes." I rocked my hips against my hand. "I'm wet. I'm so, so wet, and I'm empty."

His breath came out in a rough exhalation.

"I called to ask if I could come over. I need to speak to you. Tell me I can come," James demanded.

"Come." My fingers edged against my swollen clitoris, and I whimpered. "Hurry."

"Is the door locked?"

“Yes. But...” Circling my fingers around the engorged nub, I forced myself to think. “Go to the back. There’s a... ceramic dog with a key inside. The alarm code is 1193. I’m in my bedroom.”

“Give me fifteen minutes. Don’t come until I get there, or you’ll get punished,” he said, voice hard.

I dropped the phone and rolled onto my belly, crying out as the friction sent shattering pleasure up my spine.

I couldn’t wait fifteen minutes.

Stretching my arm, I tugged open the nightstand and fished around. My fingers closed over the bottle of lubricant first—I put it on the nightstand, just in case, then dug around until I found what I needed. Fisting it in my hand, I pulled out a pink vibrator shaped like an erect cock—and capable of thrusting.

I fumbled it in place, as a part of me trembled in anticipation of James walking in here...and finding me like this, flushed with need and riding a cotton-candy pink sex toy.

The memory of last night’s punishment had my pussy clenching around the toy as I pushed down on it, and I was moaning at the edge of orgasm by the time I’d seated it fully inside me.

It thrust, the head squirming in a slow circle before contracting and starting all over again.

Stretching out on my belly, legs locked tight at the ankle, I thrust into the toy’s gyrating movements and waited for James.

TWENTY-EIGHT

MAXIMUS

MY NECKTIE ALREADY HANGING LOOSE AROUND MY NECK, I MOUNTED THE steps. A soft moan came from the open doorway at the end of the hall, and I clenched my jaw against a slew of dirty words that threatened to spill out.

Slowly, so Tina wouldn't hear me, I walked along the side and stood in the shadows for a long moment.

Fuck, she was beautiful in her sensuality. Her toned, sleek body flushed with lust, the muscles in her thighs and ass clenched as she pressed her hips into the mattress. Then she lifted her hips, almost reaching her knees this time, and I damned near lost it. I felt my balls drawing up into a tight sac as I caught sight of a sex toy, the pink base lodged in her cunt, the length of it completely buried in her.

One hand was shoved into the mattress to support her weight so she could turn over, but all she did was moan as she ground her hips into the bed harder and harder.

I stepped out of the shadows, moved deliberately louder. "Tina."

She went still at first, then moved with more wildness as I approached, tossing her hair over her shoulder and sending me a challenging look.

"Did you orgasm yet?" I ask softly.

Her face flushed as she met my eyes. She gave a slow nod.

"Once?"

Another nod.

“Twice?”

She smiled.

“Three times?”

She shook her head this time, face twisting with need just before a sob escaped her, and she fucked herself on the toy with abandon. I let her, holding her gaze as I undid my shirt cuffs, then the placket of buttons. Tossing my tie around my neck, I stripped off the shirt and undershirt, let them fall, kicked off my shoes, and freed the button on my trousers.

Climbing onto the bed, I straddled her hips, stilling her feverish movements by simply pinning her weight with mine.

Taking the tie, I looped it around her face, guiding it between her teeth. She didn't resist even a little, following the urges and direction as I moved off her, then nudged her thighs to spread. Kneeling between them, I said, “On your knees.”

She clambered up, and I took the toy's base, tugged, then pushed, giving her some of the friction she clearly wanted, while using the tie in a fashion similar to a bit. Each time she started trying to take control back, I tugged on the tie, forcing her to arch her neck.

“No,” I reminded her.

And she went still—body quivering as she waited for my guidance.

My cock jerked demandingly, and I pressed my thumb to her ass, unsurprised when she flinched away.

“Quiet,” I murmured. Next time, I told myself. “I'll go easy on you this time. But the next time I find you fucking yourself without my permission, I'll have to punish you.”

I pressed against her sensitive entrance as she whimpered.

But it was clear she liked it because she pressed down to follow as I pulled away.

“Not today,” I said, giving her a spank. “You’re too sore.”

Her whole body went pink.

Entranced by the response, I went still.

She quivered, hips working against the toy—it vibrated inside her, I realized. I could feel the way it pulsed inside her. Fucking her anally while she had that in her cunt would be fantastic.

“Your entire body is flushed bright pink,” I murmured, trailing a line down her spine. “Maybe you like being my plaything. Is that it, Tina?”

There wasn’t an answer at first, but then she nodded jerkily, as if embarrassed.

“Good. That pleases me. I’ll reward you for pleasing me.” tugging the tie free from her mouth, I let the ends go. It slid from her silken skin to trap under her as I caught her shoulders and pulled her upright until she all but straddled my thighs.

Guiding her hands to the toy, I said, “Hold on to it. I enjoy seeing what it does to you.”

Nuzzling her neck, I licked and bit and soothed the pliant flesh. “What sort of reward do you want, Tina?”

“What can I have?”

Hand to her belly, I cuddled her more closely to me, then flicked her clitoris.

She jolted and cried out.

“More of that,” I offered. “I can make you come, right here, as you kneel between my thighs with that toy cock inside you. Or...I can lay you out on the bed, spread your thighs and eat this delicious pussy, have you come that way.”

“Yes, please.”

Chuckling, I flicked her clitoris and asked, “Which one?”

She jolted at the contact, her hands slamming down on my thighs and her nails digging in so hard, I felt the bite through the delicate fabric of my trousers.

“James!”

She arched, the movement lifting her tits. It was too much.

“I’m deciding.”

Spilling her off my lap, I caught her waist, then twisted, tucking her into me. She stared at me blindly, hands falling limp to her sides—for two seconds. As I pulled the still-pulsating toy from her pussy, she grabbed onto my shoulders and twisted her hips.

Sprawling between her legs, I cupped her ass and buried my face against her slick, swollen heat.

“James!”

I closed my teeth around the knot of her clitoris, tugged.

And she came, writing against the mattress while her hands fisted in my hair and her thighs clenched tight around my head.

Shoving two fingers into her slick cunt, I twisted my wrist and set off another mini-explosion inside her. And I would not sit by for this one. Getting to my knees, I tore open my trousers, freed myself, then bent back over her.

“Look at me,” I ordered. With one hand gripping Tina’s left knee to the side, I drove into her.

Neck arched, she gripped my sides and keened out my name, the rough intrusion triggering the climax all over again.

I lunged deeper, harder, pulled out, slammed into her again.

She tried to lock her legs around my hips, and I snarled at her, catching her calves and shoving her legs up, ankles and feet high in the air as I pounded into her.

She came again.

I couldn't stop.

The slick, tight, swollen paradise of her, the dazed way she stared at me, her spine undulating and lifting luscious breasts like an offer. Hooking her knees over my shoulders until she was all but bent double, I dropped my weight down onto her and fused our mouths, greedy for every last bit of her.

"I'M THINKING somebody messed up when they explained certain words," she murmured nearly thirty minutes later.

The hot water from her shower pounded down around us, the air steamy and redolent with a tropical scent I now knew was the luscious body soap she used.

I'd only held on another minute or two after I'd thrown her legs into the air. Yet, it had taken a good twenty minutes for my breathing to settle.

And Tina was still trembling.

"How so?" I asked, even though I welcomed nothing that required thought.

"You don't seem to understand what punishment means," she said, tipping her head back. The spray of the shower pounded down on her hair. She was gorgeous. Utterly breathtaking. "I mean, coming in and fucking me until I can't stand straight isn't exactly my idea of a hardship."

"You think I should have spanked you?"

Her eyes darkened, her pupils spiking and swelling until just a thin rim of blue showing.

"Um."

Rubbing my knuckles along the outer curve of her breast, I dipped my head to kiss her. "Punishment isn't about making you unhappy or uncomfortable—and never about pain. Not for me."

Her curiosity was obvious, and since she was still learning about the sensual world where I wanted to lead her, I explained more. "We all take what we

need. Some subs want a bit of pain—others want a lot. A good Dom will give the sub what they need. You...” I tweaked her nipple just hard enough to make her shiver. “You like a bit of an edge, particularly when feeling aroused.

It pleases me you don’t enjoy actual pain. While I need to stay in control, I’m not a sadist.”

Eyes still full of heat but thoughtful now, she said, “Are you always able to figure out what your sub wants so easily? Or am I special?”

The question caught me off guard.

I didn’t like the feeling.

I also didn’t enjoy having her ask me about other women or that I was now thinking about her with other men. This...possessive and greedy need was unlike anything I’d ever experienced before.

“James?”

Smoothing my hand down her back, I said, “I don’t know how to answer that. You say it like there’s an intimacy there, but my past sexual partners may well have been sexually submissive, but they weren’t...mine. I have wanted none of them to be mine.”

It took a few moments before I could label the flicker in her eyes. Was it discomfort?

“I’ve never wanted a woman as mine—never considered the thought of anything resembling a relationship—until I met you.”

“I...” She blinked, lashes shielding the dark blue beauty of her eyes and her cheeks flushed. “Well, that’s...” She tried again, and laughter escaped her. “I’m not sure how to respond.”

“You don’t need to. You’re here. We’re taking everything one step at a time.” Nuzzling her neck, I breathed in her scent.

She shivered, and I realized the water was getting colder. “I think we’ve used up most of your hot water.”

“Ummm.” She sounded lazy and contented, curling closer into me, but she didn’t argue when I broke away and finished washing up.

When we finally emerged from the shower, I pulled on my clothes while she dug up an oversized t-shirt and asked if I was hungry.

I was, but I realized I still hadn’t told her why I was there, and Gianni had been waiting for me to call her back for...shit, three hours.

“I’ll have to pass,” I told her, taking her hand and pulling her close. “I need to talk to you about something.”

The wariness in her eyes was immediate—and obvious. “Oh?”

“It’s about the article, the pictures.”

Her eyes went blank. Before she could push away, I slid my arm around her waist. “Gianni, my sister...does private investigating.”

“Yes, I know,” Tina said tartly.

I kissed Tina, quick and hard, before continuing. “I hired her to look into who was behind it. She found out today.”

“For sure?” she asked softly.

“Yes.” I blew out a hard breath. “Frankly, unless we can prove malice or financial harm, it’s going to be an uphill battle getting the blog post down. And I want more than that; I want an apology and a retraction. It won’t be easy. Defamation is notoriously tricky in legal circles. But we’re not letting it stand,”

“Forget lawsuits for now,” she interrupted. “Who was behind it all?”

“I’ll tell you later. I need to do something first. Don’t worry. We’ll get this handled, Tina. I told you I would, and I always keep my promises.”

THE PRIVATE SECTION of the upscale restaurant in my hotel was empty, save for Simone and me, and the occasional appearance of a server who

discreetly delivered drinks, canapes, and delicious dishes, all designed to entice and delight.

Simone had arrived similarly, dressed in a slinky black dress, the length barely reaching her plump thighs and the front and back dipping low enough that the only thing hiding was her nipples stabbing into the material.

Simone looked sexy and ready to please every man's fantasy.

And then I thought about the thin, worn cotton Tina had been wearing last night when I kissed her, just before leaving her to sleep alone in her bed.

Tina could simply smile at me, and I'd be ready.

So far, Simone had all but planted her ass in my lap. She'd showed me a hundred times over that she'd be willing to do anything, and I wasn't interested.

"This has been lovely," Simone said, her voice throaty and warm, her eyes promising hot, wicked pleasure. "Could we maybe have dessert upstairs...?"

She let her eyes drop in case her words weren't clear enough.

I gave her a calm smile.

She shivered and pushed her chair back from the table, thinking that was a yes.

"We're not going upstairs," I said.

She stilled, her eyes widening. Then, with another patently wicked, sexy smile, she said, "Do you have something else in mind for tonight, lover?"

"The truth would be nice."

She'd reached over to circle a perfectly manicured fingernail over the top of my hand, and I had the pleasure of seeing her reaction—how her fingers trembled slightly, then steadied before she continued her task, tracing one slow circle after another.

"When have I lied?" Her eyes met mine, but fell away a second later. The nervous gesture was minute, gone the next time she looked at me, mild curiosity on her face.

But I knew what I'd seen.

“A better question would be how many times have you lied,” I said, reaching into my suit coat to pull a folded sheet of paper from the inner pocket. “But we’ll start with the email you sent to Marci Hough... a friend of yours who also is a webzine editor. Is any of this familiar to you, Simone?”

“The email...” She shook her head, but I'd seen the flash of guilt. “What email? And how did you know Marci and I were friends?”

Dropping the still-folded piece of paper onto the table between us, I tapped it with my index finger. “Are you going to make me drag this out of you one word at a time, Simone?” I paused and leaned forward. “You know better than most how persistent I can be when going for a goal. If you push me, I won't settle for just getting the truth from you. I'll make you regret that you ever knew me.”

Blood drained out of her face. As she grabbed her glass of wine, her fingers shook. “You're threatening me? For fuck's sake, Maximus. Marci's bosses have been kicking her ass about needing better meat for her articles. I helped her out. It's not like you give a damn what anybody says about you.”

“So, you lied to her about the woman I've been seeing and me? Is that your story?”

Something in my voice must have worried her. She swallowed, her throat working with the action. Unsteadily, she said, “It was just supposed to be a joke. We did not know it would take off as it did. But nobody's hurt by it. It's gossip. Whoever pays attention to that, anyway?”

Leaning forward, I said, “You wanted my attention, Simone. Now you have it, and I want an answer. Yes or no—are you behind the Black Star story about my friend and me?”

“Yes.” Simone hissed. “But so what? You don't go to The Black Star without knowing what can happen. If your girlfriend's having regrets now, then it's too fucking bad. She has to deal with the consequences, just like any other adult who makes bad decisions.”

She drained her wine, but instead of putting the glass down, she grabbed the bottle and topped it off. Dropping the bottle into the ice bucket with a

carelessness that had the ice rattling, she saluted me with her refilled wine.

“Live and learn, Maximus. That’s what my dad always said when I did something stupid. You can pass the advice onto your butch girlfriend.” She sneered, her lip curling as she shook her head. “What on Earth are you seeing in her, anyway? Her muscles are nearly as big as yours!”

Hardly. Amused at the pettiness even as Simone’s words annoyed me for Tina, I said, “I’m just not intimidated by a strong independent woman, Simone. You would never figure that out.”

She stiffened at the insult.

“You bastard...wait. Who the fuck are you, and why are you smiling?” She jerked her head up to glare at the new arrival; her eyes narrowed to slits.

Gianni grabbed a chair from a nearby empty four-top and swung it around so she could sit next to me. She made a big show of presenting me with her phone, which already had an app open. “Just press play, brother dear.”

“Brother...Maximus, what’s going on?” Simone demanded.

A second later, Simone’s voice spilled out of the phone, clear as a bell.

I turned the screen toward her so she could watch the recording my sister had made of her confession.

A slow flush crept across her cheekbones. She opened her mouth to speak, then snapped it shut with an audible click. Finally, she jerked her eyes from the phone screen to glare at me. “What the utter fuck, Maximus?”

“Are you confused?” Gianni leaned in with a falsely solicitous smile on her face. Plucking the phone from my hand, she started the video over—and turned the sound to max before sliding it across the surface to Simone with her index finger. “Watch it again. Maybe it’ll help.”

Simone grabbed the phone and went to throw it.

Gianni was quicker and snapped the phone out of Simone’s hand. “Easy there. If you break it, I’m having the cops haul your miserable ass in for destruction of property, no matter how much Jamie thinks we should give you the benefit of the doubt.”

My sister gave me a quizzical look. “Are we done?”

“I believe so,” I said, my gaze drifting back to Simone’s. “But that’s really up to Simone. Simone, you’ll write to Marci, retracting every word, admit to her you made it all up. You will—”

“Like hell I will,” Simone interrupted, scorn in her voice.

“If you don’t,” I said, cutting Gianni off before she could insert her own two cents. “I’m taking this video to my lawyers in the morning. I have grounds to sue for defamation. And Simone, I will sue. Word will get out to your other clients. Your employer will drop you like a rotten egg.”

Simone worked as a paid escort. But it was really a well-run whorehouse. They took good care of their sex workers, which kept the business out of trouble.

But a sex worker who leaked information and pictures about her clients to the press was a worker who’d soon find herself unemployed. And Simone knew it.

“Why?” she whispered, her voice low and tight.

“That’s irrelevant,” I said, sidestepping the issue. I tossed back the rest of the bourbon I’d ordered before rising. “Finish your meal if you like, but show your face at my hotel again, and I’ll have you arrested for trespassing. Oh... and Simone?”

She looked up, her eyes dull.

“If you cause Tina Siegler or her family any more trouble, I’ll ruin you.”

She shook her head with a pained grimace. Once more, she demanded, “Why?”

“I’m not entirely sure,” I said after considering the matter. “But...Tina matters to me. And I will not let you, or anybody else, cause her harm.”

TWENTY-NINE

TINA

“ARE YOU STILL TALKING TO HIM?”

My sister’s ire scraped over my nerve endings like nails on a chalkboard.

Dina refused to admit that she could be wrong about someone, and I could not convince her otherwise.

It gave me a headache of epic proportions and made me wish I hadn’t answered her call.

“Dina, he wasn’t responsible for those pictures, and he didn’t write that article. He’s just as much a victim in this mess as I am, only he is doing something about it.”

“Really?” The sour note in Dina’s voice was another slap against my battered senses. “Like what? Is he planning to take you to Sluts R Us on your next date?”

“That’s enough,” I snapped.

“Is it?” she demanded.

“I don’t know,” I retorted. Is there anything else you want to say to your sister, or are you satisfied with calling her a slut?”

She sucked in a breath, and I heard Newt’s low, calming voice. I wasn’t ready to listen to what she had to say next. If it wasn’t an apology—and a real one—then I couldn’t deal with it.

“I’m done with this,” I said, cutting her off before she spoke. “It’s been a rough week for me. Thankfully, most of my friends didn’t blame me. None of them called me a slut, either. No, that’s coming from my sister. It’s the rotten cherry on a shit sundae, and I want to just forget about all of this.”

“Tina,” she said stiffly.

“Don’t. The two of us will get into something that we’ll both end up regretting, so just...don’t.” Tears blurred my vision, turning the eclectic prints on my wall into surreal watercolors. “I’m done being blamed and harassed over somebody else’s actions.”

I ended the call and hurled my phone on the nearby armchair. I badly needed a drink.

The phone pinged two minutes later while I was in the kitchen, whipping up a prickly pear margarita from scratch. Since I already knew it was Dina sending me a text, I ignored it. I’d meant what I said. I refused to be blamed and harassed for other people’s mistakes.

A boozy, fruity margarita, maybe two or three, sounded like the perfect remedy.

After ten minutes, there was a knock at my door, and my smile was already in place.

It couldn’t be Dina—even if she’d listened to Newt’s patient advice and wanted to apologize, it would take her twenty-five minutes to get to my place.

And my parents would never come over without calling—Mom thought it was the rudest thing on Earth, dropping by unannounced.

By default, that meant James was at the door. I opened it without even checking.

Big mistake.

The margarita glass fell from numb fingers, and the cold, deliciously sweet icy concoction splattered my lower legs, left bare under the short sundress I’d pulled on after showering.

A pair of well-tooled Italian leather dress shoes now doused in icy pink, while wet splotches stained a pair of chinos with a crease so sharp you could cut yourself.

The bright green polo shirt tucked into those chinos had escaped the margarita dousing.

Dark, intense eyes held a cynical amusement as they took in the mess I'd made, then slowly traced a path up my body before finally locking gazes with me.

"Well, babe, is that your way of saying you missed me?" Cecil Golden, my ex, paused and a slow smile curved across his lips. "I'll just tell you the feeling is mutual."

"Fuck," I said, not bothering to hide my dismay because...well. Fuck.

Cecil Golden gave me a lazy smile, eyes crinkling up at the corners. That smile had once made my heart stutter. Now, I only felt annoyed, maybe even a little angry, when he braced his hand against the doorframe and leaned in closer, clearly ready to unleash his charms.

The way things ended between us, I wasn't looking for a repeat.

Even if James weren't in the picture, I still wouldn't want Cecil back.

"Aren't you even a little happy to see me?" Cecil asked, a playful sulk on his handsome face.

"Am I supposed to be?" I asked, standing in the doorway as he tried to peer past me. "You haven't seen or talked to me since I left San Diego, and now you show up on my doorstep unannounced and uninvited."

"Hey now..." He straightened, his features sobering. "You're still upset with me."

Actually, I wasn't.

IT HAD HURT at the time. Who wouldn't get upset if their boyfriend constantly told them how disappointing they were? In front of friends and

family. After a year of verbal abuse, I suffered such a blow to my self-esteem it took me a long time to recover.

Initially, I hadn't seen it, but he had done me a favor. Imagine if I had married Cecil Golden. It would have been a disaster of epic proportions.

Confident once more, I smiled faintly. "If that's what you want to believe, Cecil, knock yourself out. But...do it elsewhere. I don't have time."

I went to step back, hand on the door.

He stepped closer, reaching out. "Tina, wait."

"I'm not interested, Cecil."

"I know...I...look, can I come inside? Just for a few minutes? There are some things I'd like to say."

The sound of a powerfully roaring engine caught my ears, and I looked past him. At the sight of the sleek silver car approaching the curb, my heart skipped a beat.

I couldn't stop the wide, silly smile that spread from ear to ear.

James was here.

Stress and pain caused by the conversation with Dina dissipated, as did the exhaustion I had felt after seeing Cecil. Everything just felt...better.

The small driveway barely had room for two cars, and Cecil's oversized truck took up every available inch and then some.

Cecil stopped talking. I hadn't paid attention to what he'd said over the last few seconds—nothing I wanted to hear, anyway.

I was busy staring at the silver car and James. As he raised the convertible top and climbed out with unhurried grace, his sunglasses hid his eyes, but I knew he watched me. I could feel the intensity of his gaze.

Cecil noticed my distraction and scowled when he saw James walk around the car.

"Who the hell is that?"

“I’m expecting company,” I told Cecil as his eyes came cutting back toward me.

I hadn’t been, but it didn’t matter. James was here, and I’d much rather see him than Cecil any day of the week.

“New client?” he asked, his tone light. His eyes were anything but that.

I cocked a brow. “No.”

His stare hardened. The smile didn’t fade, though. “I see. Then I guess I’ll be going. Sooner or later, you’ll come around, won’t you?”

I didn’t answer, and after a few more seconds, he gave me a brilliant smile and walked to his truck.

He left my mind just as quickly, and now James had my full attention. I was acutely aware of his gaze traveling across my face, lingering on the skinny straps of my sundress and the scooped neckline that dipped low over my chest.

Because I hadn’t expected a visit, I didn’t wear a bra after showering, and now my nipples have tightened to the point of soreness. The airy cotton of my dress was suddenly too abrasive, and the way his eyes darkened as they lingered on the sharp points told me he’d noticed the reaction.

He glanced at the truck idling in the driveway. He measured Cecil—the pause lasting seconds—and then I got the impression he discarded him, deciding the man wasn’t worth his time.

And he wasn’t.

“Who is he?” James asked as he mounted the steps to my small porch.

“An ex.” I shifted, suddenly aware of how bare I was under the light dress, only a pair of panties keeping me from being utterly exposed. The sticky, cold liquid of the spilled drink puddled around my feet, and I scowled. “I dropped my margarita.”

James crouched down and picked up the glass. Thankfully, a brightly colored one made from molded plastic, rather than anything breakable. I shivered as he trailed a finger up my calf, catching a lingering drop of the sweet

concoction before rising.

Eyes holding mine, he licked his finger.

“Tasty,” he murmured. Once again, he glanced at the truck. “Why is he here?”

I managed a casual shrug. My voice, though, wasn’t casual. The words came out husky. “I’m not sure. We dated when I was living in California. It’s been years.”

We didn’t look at Cecil as he reversed out of my driveway, making the tires squeal. The too-loud engine roared before going into idle. Although I couldn’t see him, I could feel my ex’s gaze piercing me.

“He didn’t say what he wanted?”

“He arrived two minutes before you and said he wanted to talk.” With a smile, I shrugged. “But he didn’t say what about. I don’t know what it could be, and I don’t care either.”

James moved in closer, crowding into my personal space. Seeing the heat in his eyes, I didn’t move. His hand curved around my neck, and I only managed a sharp breath before he pulled me up against him, his mouth claiming mine.

Dimly, I heard Cecil take off, tires squealing yet again and the engine thundering.

But none of that mattered. James maneuvered us into the house, turning so I was pressed against the still-open front door. I moaned into his mouth, softening for him.

But when I reached for him, he eased away, catching my hands as I tried to draw him back to me.

“Hmmm...” He smiled against my lips. “I like the taste.”

“The margarita?”

“No. You.”

“Then have more,” I whispered.

But he nudged me back, a wicked light in his eyes.

“That’s playing dirty,” I muttered. “Kissing me like that and then putting an end to it right as things get good.”

He lifted my right hand, kissed the back of it. “Maybe I’ll let you convince me to change my mind after we talk.”

The undercurrent in his voice had me studying him.

“And what are we talking about?”

He nudged me farther inside, then pushed the door shut. “Do you have anything else to drink besides margaritas? Something stronger. You might want that, too.”

I nodded. “Come on.” I gestured for him to join me in the kitchen.

James rinsed out the margarita glass while I dampened a folded square of paper towels and wiped the worst of the sticky mix off my legs.

The small beverage cart stood tucked into a corner, and although nothing on it was top shelf, it wasn’t rotgut either. Since I knew James liked whiskey and bourbon, I served us a small-batch bourbon I’d grown fond of from Kentucky.

James swirled it around and sniffed it, then took a sip. After a second one, he glanced at me and smiled with approval. “Not bad.”

“I like to experiment.” Shrugging, I added, “Not all of us can afford the 25-year single malts you love, but I’ve found a few decent small-batch bourbons and whiskeys out of Tennessee and Kentucky that are pretty good.”

He sent a smile in my direction and took another sip. Putting the glass down, he let out a heavy sigh and closed his eyes.

I braced myself for bad news, even as a dull headache throbbed at the base of my skull. What the hell could be wrong now? More pictures? Shit. What if there were more pictures? And what could we do if there were? My parents weren’t big on social media—a fact I was now so thankful for, but some of their friends were.

“The pictures and the blog post will be down by the end of the day if they aren’t already.”

The words were a splash of cold water in the face of my panic, and my spiral of thought stalled.

Blinking at him, I tried to process what he’d said.

“What?”

He repeated himself.

“How?”

He managed a half-smile and tipped his glass in my direction. “My sister Gianni found the evidence needed to sue the person responsible for damages.” He paused, then added softly, “If that’s what you’d prefer to do. The damages would be...considerable. You could ruin her life.”

“Her?” My heart lurched into my throat, and I thought of that flash of instinct I’d received, how very...personal it had all felt.

“Yes. You met her. Briefly.” His gaze darkened, becoming unreadable. “That morning at the hotel after we first slept together. Simone.”

With the breath knocked out of me, I shoved upright and stumbled away from the table. On instinct, more than anything else, I made my way over to the sink and turned on the tap, making the water as cold as it would go. Then I shoved my hands under it and bent over so I could splash my face.

The swirling, spinning sensation inside my head didn’t retreat.

“She did it on purpose,” I said. “All to hurt me, didn’t she?”

I hadn’t heard him move, but I knew he was behind me.

“Yes.” He rested a hand on the small of my back, close enough that I could feel his heat.

I resented every inch of the distance between us, but I didn’t close it, my head still reeling from the shock.

“Were you and Simone ever serious?”

“No. I’ve already told you, Tina. I haven’t been serious about any woman. Not in my life. Until I met you.”

Looking up at him, I shook my head. “Yet, it isn’t the same from her viewpoint, is it?”

He turned the sink off and pulled me against him, ignoring my weak attempts to turn away. “My hands are wet,” I told him.

“Shortly, I plan to get other parts of you wet, so I’m not worried about your hands,” he said.

Cheeks heating, I lapsed into silence because how could I object to that?

“Simone and I have never been serious,” he said bluntly. “Maybe she thought otherwise. But she was wrong. As I look back, I can see that Simone had become...possessive. But I never gave her reason to think we were anything more than causal lovers.”

Heart beating in my throat, I whispered, “Like us?”

He laid a hand on my cheek.

“No. You matter. In ways, Simone never had or could.”

My heart did a slow, lazy flip in my chest. Turning my face into James’s hand, I kissed his palm. “You matter too. Far more than my ex or any other guy ever has.”

THIRTY

MAXIMUS

PASSION RADIATED FROM HER EYES AS SHE SAID THE WORDS THAT MADE MY carefully constructed walls crumble.

Tugging her closer, I pressed my mouth to her lips. Hands going to her waist, I pulled her closer, loving the soft, warm strength of her body.

“I want you,” I murmured, nuzzling the sensitive spot behind her ear.

“Then have me.”

This gift of her body and trust would have been enough to undo me even if I hadn’t wanted her with such a pure, primal desire. All of it put together?

Instead of shoving her short dress to her hips and burying myself in her right there, I nudged her back.

“I plan on doing just that.” But I wanted more than a hard, rough fuck this time. Tenderness, something I wasn’t familiar with, flooded me as I cupped her face in my hands. “But...not yet.”

She poked her lip in a playful pout, huffing her breath. “Why not?”

“Because I said.” I nipped her lower lip. “Why don’t you go run yourself a bath? I’ll bring you a drink.”

Her eyelids drooped. “I showered after I got home.”

“Yes, but you dropped your drink.” I wondered what that fruity concoction might taste like if I licked it from her skin. “And when was the last time you

took a long lazy bath?”

Her eyes widened slightly, head cocked as she pondered. “It’s been...a while.”

“Then go run the water. I’ll be up soon.”

She gave me a considerate look, then with a hint of a smile, she said, “Alright.”

I’d finished making my calls just a few minutes after the water stopped running.

Opening the fridge, I found a pitcher of some cherry pink beverage. One sniff told me it had to be the drinks she made—the scent of tequila was unmistakable. I poured a fresh serving into the plastic glass she’d washed out and left drying in the rack next to the sink.

She’d left the door cracked, and I nudged it open, leaning against the doorframe.

Steam billowed out.

She had her head resting on the curved edge of the bathtub, turning it to look at me with a lazy smile. “Is that for me?”

“Yes.” I walked over and sat on the edge of the tub, offering it.

She took it, eyes on me, as she sipped at the pink beverage. “Yum.”

“The only way I’d be inclined to try it would be if I licked it off your body—drop by drop.”

She bit her lip and wobbled the glass teasingly. “I don’t mind.”

“Behave. I have a delivery on the way, so I’ve only got a few minutes.”

“Delivery?” She straightened in the tub.

My mouth went dry as her breasts lifted free from the water, droplets rolling down to cling to her nipples before slowly releasing. I checked my watch. I had a few minutes. Reaching out, I took the margarita, passed it to my free hand.

Heat filled her eyes as I guided her to her feet.

“I thought you had a delivery coming.”

“I do. But first, I’m going to get you all hot and wet for me, and then I’ll leave you for a couple of minutes.” I’d kicked my shoes and socks off earlier, preparing for the seduction I had in mind. Now I was glad because it made it that much easier to swivel on the edge of the tub and put one leg into the water.

“Your pants,” Tina murmured.

“I don’t care.” Dipping a finger into her margarita, I brought it out and painted the cold liquid over her taut nipple.

She gasped, goosebumps pebbling her flesh. A second later, she was moaning, her hands pushing into my hair as I pulled her closer and closed my mouth over the swollen tight pink bud, sucking, scoring it with my teeth.

“Delicious,” I breathed as I pulled back.

Tina gripped my shoulders, her nails pricking even through the material of my shirt.

“More,” she demanded.

I obliged her, this time pulling an ice cube from the glass. “You look a little warm all over. Let me cool you down.”

She cried out as I circled the ice cube around her nipple, over it, across it. This time, when I leaned in to lick her, I didn’t grip her against me. Instead, I used the ice cube to keep painting a trail down her body.

She gasped when I reached the curls between her thighs, moaned as I rubbed it over her clitoris. I put the glass down blindly, hoping it stayed where I put it because Tina was trembling so hard now, I worried she might collapse against me if I didn’t support her.

“Spread your thighs.”

She shifted them apart a bare inch, but it was enough.

She jerked and cried my name as I pushed the ice cube into her cunt.

“You’re still so hot.” Pulling her down to straddle my lap, not caring about the water or anything else, I hooked the back of her neck and slammed my mouth to hers. I swallowed down her whimper, slipping my hand back between her thighs. The ice cube was melting—I could feel the slick heat of her body’s natural wetness mingling with the cold water. I used it to tease her clitoris, felt her muscles clenching as she drew closer and closer to coming.

“Please.” She tore her mouth from mine, her head falling back. “James... please....”

Scissoring two fingers inside her pussy, I twisted them. The ice had made her silky tissues cooler, but she was already burning again, and it was enough to drive me out of my mind. Only a few threads of control remained—that and my promise to myself that I’d seduce her this time. Circling her clitoris with my thumb, I worked her to orgasm as I clenched my jaw against the urge to tear my trousers open and thrust into her right there.

She cried out, her hands clutching at my shoulders, her eyes fluttering closed.

Although my cock pounded in eager demand, the feel of her sagging against me as the climax ended, her body all loose and wet and hot from her bath, was the best damn feeling in the world.

SHE WAS STILL WEARING the blue silk robe they’d delivered. I asked her to wear it while we ate our dinner, which they also had delivered. Stepping into her room, she turned to me. She swayed closer, the dim light from the late summer sun shining in through a narrow gap in the curtains.

That light was the only illumination, save for what little made it in from the windows in the hall behind us.

I kissed her, but caught her hands before she could touch me, guiding them to the small of her back.

“James...” Her breath hitched in her chest.

I bit her lower lip. “Behave.”

She licked her tongue over the small hurt, eyes hot with lust. “What if I don’t want to?”

“Tina...” Laughing despite how my dick was now hard as iron, I smoothed my free hand down her side, resting my fingers on her hip. “I believe you want me to punish you.”

“Maybe.” It came out breathy and unsteady.

“Then be good. I’ll give you what you want...later. But for now, I want something.”

Her eyes widened when I showed her the blindfold, but she closed them as I went to put it in place. Her cheeks flushed with arousal.

“What are we going to do?” she asked.

“It’s not what we are going to do,” I told her. “It’s what I am going to do... and what you are going to let me do.”

“What am I going to let you do, then?” she asked, a smile toying with her lips and no sign of reserve or fear.

Fuck, she was so perfect. Perfect for me.

“What will you let me do?”

She reached out, her hands coming to grip with my waist as if the blindfold was no barrier. “Almost anything, I think.”

“Almost?”

“Almost.” She was confident in the response, her smile never fading. “Even though I doubt you’d ever ask me to do something I wouldn’t like, I’m still going to hold that ‘almost’ in reserve.”

“You’re smart.” I stroked my hands down her arms, enjoying the feel of the material gliding over her silken skin. “Show me what a good little sub you are.”

As I took Tina’s hand, I led her to the far side of the bed, where the mat waited for her. “Watch your step,” I said.

She slowed, and I studied her face as she slid her toes along the thick pad, pursing her lips in thought.

“Are we redecorating?” she asked.

“Just a bit. There’s the mat and this other piece...Here. Let’s take the robe off first. You know how dirty renovation work can get.”

She laughed softly, hands going to the belt.

I stopped her, nudging her hands down to her side. “We’re playing with a new toy tonight, Tina.”

“Yes, Sir,” she said, voice hitching, while the flush on her cheeks spread lower, down her neck, to the upper part of her chest.

I stripped the robe off, laid it over the foot of the bed, then took her hand once more, guiding her forward. “Bend over...feel it?”

Her hand stroked over the sex rocker, the padded stool with a curved bottom outfitted with an attached six-inch dildo. Inside the toy’s head was a vibrating bullet. I had the wireless remote in my pocket. Her mouth parted as her fingers found the cock and curved around it.

“I thought I might be the toy tonight, and here you are giving me one,” she said.

“This toy suits several purposes. Kneel.” Once she did, I hunkered down behind her and guided her hands to the small, raised area in the front, padded so it would remain gentle on her skin, but with an opening that would serve as a grip if she needed it. “You can hold on to this if you need the support. And later...”

I grabbed the straps that could hook onto the bottom of the rocker. There were several ways I could bind Tina. The rocker’s height and sturdiness were ideal for many positions, even if I wanted to hogtie her. With its curved bottom, I could remain perfectly still, using only my grip on her to drag her back and forth over my dick.

And that, I decided, might just be one way I would have fun with her tonight before giving her the best damn orgasm she’d ever had.

THIRTY-ONE

TINA

IT WAS ANOTHER HOT DAY AT THE CONSTRUCTION SITE. TANK AND HIS CREW had left for lunch, heading to a food truck a few blocks over. I had stayed, mainly because I'd been avoiding my phone all morning. Mom called again, but I didn't want to talk to her in front of the guys.

Dina and I were fighting, and that was why Mom kept calling—our fight had spilled into our parents' lives. I knew it in my bones. Hopefully, she hadn't heard about the photos.

The quiet of the building surrounded me as I climbed the stairs to my makeshift office and settled on the stool to place the call.

"Hey, Mom."

"Baby." Love and warmth filled her voice, but I still caught the hint of strain. "I hope I'm not disturbing you. I forgot you were working when I called earlier."

"It's okay. I'm taking a break." Sweat beaded on my forehead. We'd brought in a couple of portable air conditioning units, but the heat outside was brutal today, and they could barely keep up. "How are you doing?"

"Oh, fine." She hesitated only a moment before continuing. "I'm worried about Dina, though. Is everything okay with you two?"

Swallowing the knot in my throat, I sidestepped the question. "What do you mean? I talked to her the other day, and she sounded fine." A small white lie and guilt twisted my guts inside out.

“It’s just...I talked to her earlier, and they’re not planning to come to the family picnic on the Fourth of July. She never misses it. Do you have any idea *why*?”

Dina...

I bit back what I wanted to say, but I *would* tell Dina she was acting like a spoiled, bitchy brat, and she needed to stop.

“No, Mom. But I’ll talk to her, okay?”

“Tina, thank you.” Her sigh of relief made me feel worse.

“No problem. Listen, I need to eat something before my crew comes back.”

“Oh, of course! Make sure you’re taking care of yourself, okay. I love you.”

Putting my phone on the improvised table, I closed my eyes. Dina had never acted this way before. I couldn’t understand why she did so now. She had no right to punish our parents just because we were fighting. It had to stop. I wouldn’t let her hurting our mom just because she didn’t like the guy I was dating.

Dating didn’t cover what was between James and me.

Just thinking of him made my heart quiver, and I smiled, welcoming a distraction from the ache inside.

“Tina?”

The sound of his voice right after thinking about him sent my quivering heart racing. Standing, I moved to the dusty railing and saw him in the lobby, holding a giant boutique-styled paper bag in one hand.

“Hi,” I called.

He looked up, and the smile he gave me turned my knees to putty.

He held up the bag and arched a brow. “Thought you might want some lunch?”

The name of a trendy Italian restaurant adorned the bag. Pursing my lips, I gave him a thoughtful look. “Well, I *did* bring lunch. But a ham and cheese

sandwich with chips sort of pales compared to La Rosa. Come on up.”

As he climbed the stairs, I grabbed the box of wet wipes I kept on hand and wiped one across my face hurriedly, then another across my neck and hands before clearing up some space on the makeshift desk.

“Where’s everybody at?” he asked, taking the other stool next to mine.

“They went to a food truck a couple of blocks away—Garcia knows the people who run it, and they’re trying to build up name recognition.”

James placed the bag on the table. “Have you had anything from there?”

“Yes.” Huffing out a breath, I placed a hand on my belly. “Food that good should be illegal. It’s a good thing they’re not on this street. I’d have to run 10 miles a day to burn off all the calories I’d be consuming.”

“What’s the name?” He pulled a couple of foil containers from the bag, checking the writing on the lids.

Cocking my head, I said, “Kabob Hob. Why?”

“I’ll tell my people to try it out. If they like it, I’ll have them post about it on our social media.” He glanced at me before returning to the task at hand.

Slipping off my stool, I went over to him and kissed his cheek.

He stilled.

“That’s nice of you.”

He put his hand on my hip and tugged me closer. “If it makes you smile like that, I’ll have my people hit every food truck in the city and post about them.”

Laughter bubbled out of me, and I hugged him, some of the stress inside me fading away under the pleasure of having him here.

“That’s better.”

I tipped my head back. “What is?”

“You are smiling. Laughing.” He pressed his lips to my brow, then nudged me back so he could start opening containers. “You had shadows in your eyes when I came up the steps. Is everything okay?”

I debated what to say if anything. Were we in the kind of relationship where we shared personal things? “It’s family stuff.”

“Want to talk about it?”

Part of me did want to, yes. But I shook my head.

“No.” Managing a strained smile, I cut into the pasta dish. “I’d rather forget about it for a while, to be honest.”

“If you change your mind, I’m here.”

“Thanks.”

We ate in serene silence for a few minutes, and I ate almost half the pasta. The food was delicious.

As I put my fork down and placed the foil-lined lid on my leftovers, I smiled at James. “That beats ham and cheese any day.”

“Glad to hear it.” He crooked a finger at me.

My mouth went dry as I caught sight of the lambent heat in his eyes. Slowly, I slid off the stool and went to him.

He hooked his hand in the front of the tool belt I wore and tugged me in closer. “I have this vague memory of my sisters rambling on about hot guys wearing just jeans and tool belts. I never got it until I saw you wearing one.”

The feel of his knuckles pressing into my belly sent shivery, warm streaks of need bursting through me.

“Is that so?”

“Hmmm.” Eyes on my mouth, he gripped my ass with his free hand, molding the flesh, kneading with absolute confidence. “Matter of fact, I’m thinking about stripping these jeans off you and bending you over the stool right here. How long do you think your crew will be gone?”

My mind short-circuited.

“Tina?”

“Um...” Blinking and thinking through the sensual fog, I picked up my phone and checked the time. I had asked Tank when they would return. “We’ve got a good twenty minutes. They walked to the place—*ohhh...* hmmm...”

James crushed his mouth to mine, swallowing the rest of what I’d been saying.

With quick, clever fingers, he undid my jeans and shoved them down until they were a few inches below my hips. With no warning, he reached down and slid his fingers between my thighs. I tried to spread my thighs and couldn’t, the sturdy denim of my jeans an effective restraint.

James spanked me, the flat of his hand coming down on my ass with a sharp sting. “Be still. I want you just like this, Tina.”

“Yes, Sir,” I whispered against his lips.

“Good little Kitten.” He circled his thumb over my clitoris, smiling as I jerked. But when I tried to push against his hand for more, he stopped. “Turn around and bend over. Grab the legs of the stool.”

Panting, I did as he ordered. My heart skipped a beat as I heard the rasp of his zipper. With shaking hands, I gripped the legs of the stool. He did nothing for long, long seconds, and I flushed at the sheer vulnerability of my position.

“How do you feel right now, Tina?” he asked softly.

“Exposed.”

“Does it bother you, exposing yourself to me like this?” He smoothed his hand down the curve of my right ass cheek.

“I...” Swallowing, I considered the question for several long seconds before breathing out the answer. “In a way...yes. But it’s not a *bad* way.”

He traced a finger down, pressed against the sensitive patch of skin between my pussy and ass. “What kind of way, then?”

“It...” I had to clear my throat. Blood roared in my ears, and the cadence of my heart seemed deafening. Still, I made myself answer. “I like it. It turns me on knowing you’re looking at me and seeing how wet I get when you touch me, that you’re already hard and that you want to fuck me.”

“Am I hard, Tina? Do you know I am? For sure?”

“Yes,” I breathed out.

He didn’t speak again. Instead, he pressed the swollen head of his cock against me and pushed inside. I moaned, pushing up on my toes to ease the pressure. It didn’t help. With my legs pinned together, he felt *huge* inside me, and I loved every single second of this slow, torturous possession.

“What are you feeling now?” he asked.

“You. Just...you.”

He gripped the tool belt at the small of my back and thrust into me with lazy grace. “Yeah, I can see the appeal of the belt now. But...we need to....” He rammed into me hard, and the stool supporting me wobbled. “Make a few... adjustments.”

I cried out as he pushed his free hand into my hair and pulled, yanking almost *too hard*—*almost*, because the thrill that jolted through me as he snarled my name was so, so intense, I nearly came just from that.

“Let go of the stool,” he said in a stern voice.

I didn’t even question him. I let go, and then he swung me around so I was facedown against my workstation. Something smooth and soft protected me from the rough surface, and I belatedly realized that James had taken his suit coat off, spread it out over the table. Likely just for this.

He slammed into me again.

The plywood slid forward a few inches. I grabbed onto the worn wood of the railing as he pulled my hair again and jerked me back onto his cock with his grip on my belt. The bite of the leather into my flesh, the sting in my scalp, and the too-tight sensation of his cock stretching me combined into a wave of bliss so intense, I thought I’d pass out before I even had a chance to come.

Then James let go of my hair and spanked me.

The orgasm tore into me, the pleasure shredding me, destroying me, undoing me completely.

THE CREW HAD JUST ENTERED through the doors by the time my heart slowed. They caught sight of us, and James greeted them with friendly politeness while I simply waved, not trusting myself to speak just yet.

“You might want to stay here for a few more minutes if you don’t want them to realize I just fucked you,” James said, a gleam in his eyes as he looked at me.

“No kiddin’.” Huffing out a breath, I grabbed my water bottle and drained it. Giving him a dark look, I pointed out, “It’s not particularly flattering to see that you’re all calm and collected.”

“I’m not.” His gaze dropped to my mouth, lingered. “I’m just better at wearing a mask.”

My breath caught in my throat, hitched. “Oh...”

He leaned in and kissed me, the tenderness of it so complete that he melted me all over again.

When he straightened, I tucked my head into his chest to hide the emotions raging inside me.

“I’ve got a charity benefit Saturday. It’s a formal thing. Would you be interested in coming with me?”

Pulling back, I looked into his eyes and saw echo of the emotions I felt raging within.

“I’d love to.”

THIRTY-TWO

MAXIMUS

ASKING TINA TO JOIN ME FOR THE BENEFIT WAS ON IMPULSE.

I attended only a few charity events a year, but I donated to many organizations. Growing up a paycheck or two away from homelessness shapes your perspective on life, so with the means and power that wealth brings, I now help where I can.

This one was special. As a board member, I even sat in on a few of the meetings. All-In was an organization based in Houston that focused on helping single parents living near or below the poverty line. I don't know if my mother would have reached out for help, but ever since I became involved with All-In, I've seen the difference they make in people's lives.

I had no problem admitting that this organization was vital to me on a personal level. While I avoided interviews and charity events like the plague, if it involved All-In, I swallowed the bitter pill and went because I knew it made a difference.

However, I had never brought a date before.

Did Tina have anything she could wear to such a formal event?

I knew she was struggling to keep her business going, so I'd made sure she had access to capital, but she wouldn't use that to buy a dress for a formal.

The solution came to me right on the heels of that, and I reached for my phone.

“Well, *hello*, brother dearest,” Zoey said, her enthusiastic cheer carrying through the phone.

Zoey Roberts was another of my many half-siblings, and she was fiercely independent and stubborn. She’d only been in preschool when I met her, and it had been impossible to keep her at a distance even then.

“Zoey. How are you?”

“I’m just fine, and you hate small talk, so don’t bother. What do you need?”

Laughing, I said, “That’s one thing I love about you, Zoey. You always get right to the point.”

“Awww...thank you! But who are you? My brother James doesn’t hand out compliments like that.”

I frowned—but not because of what she’d said. She was right. I wasn’t the sort that handed out compliments.

“Maybe I’m just trying to soften you up since I want a favor.”

“No need,” she said airily. “I already love you more than most, so I’ll probably say yes.”

“Can you make me a dress?”

“When you say *make you a dress*, do you mean make it *for you*? Or for a woman?” she teased.

“Zoey.”

“Okay, okay...but...I’m still wondering if you’re an imposter. Who is this dress for, and what’s her style?”

Leaning back in the chair, I considered the question for a few seconds, then talked.

Almost every minute, Zoey would ask for more details or clarity. Her boutique in Houston was one of the best in the state. Not surprisingly, since she graduated at the top of her class from The Fashion Institute of New York.

“Okay...” Zoey murmured after grilling me for what felt like hours.

In reality, it had only been maybe ten minutes, and I suspected some questions were to satisfy her nosiness.

Her last comment threw me.

“So...this woman. Tina. You seem to have become rather attached to her, dear brother.”

I opened my mouth to deny the claim, but I couldn't even form the words.

“You're speechless,” Zoey murmured. “I don't think that has happened before. Does she feel the same about you?”

Does she feel the same? Tina? Did she feel anything for me?

Shit. The question hit me square in the chest, and I realized *why* I couldn't deny the claim.

It was the truth.

“Enough with the twenty questions, Zo. I need to get back to work. You let me know if you need anything else to get the dress done.”

I ended the call before she could say anything else.

THIRTY-THREE

TINA

THE CALL FROM MOM PROVED TO BE A WAKE-UP CALL.

The lunch with James and the realization that we were going into uncharted territory together added to my decision. My big sister and I needed a talk.

I had been brooding over Dina's words and her anger, which had rubbed over my raw, bruised emotions. So, after taking a shower to wash off the sweat, dust, and grime of the day, I poured myself a glass of wine and sat down with my phone as I wrote her a text.

I hoped she was as tired of the tension between us as I was.

I missed my big sister.

"THANKS FOR MEETING ME," I said, as Dina took the seat across from me.

"You know I love the lunch menu here." Her smile was strained and stilted. "How have you been?"

"Alright. Sweating a lot." I grimaced even as I said it. It was summer in Texas. Of course, I would be sweating. It was hot. "We're in the early stages of demolition in the hotel I'm renovating. Portable air conditioners can only do so much. I have to shower off about an inch of sweaty dust every night."

“I sympathize. We had an outdoor wedding on Sunday, and we were all melting by the time it was over.”

The server appeared to take our order, and a strained silence settled between us once she left.

Not able to stand it anymore, I said, “We need to address this...problem between us.”

Dina’s cheeks turned red, and she looked away. “It’s hardly *my* problem. It’s you who’s ruining us all by dating a toxic guy.”

“If I thought the guy I was seeing was going to be harmful to my family, do you honestly think I’d keep *seeing* him, Dina? Do you think that little of me?”

Her gaze flew back to meet mine. “That’s not...of course not...” She stopped, averting her eyes once more. “It’s not always easy to see problems when you’re close, sweetie. And you’re too close to this. To him.”

I blew out a breath. “I never get so close to anything that I can’t tell if someone is destroying my family. If I *ever* thought James would behave that way, I’d end things in a heartbeat.”

“You’re already acting like someone you’re not,” she said in a heated tone. “Those pictures—”

“Those pictures *aren’t* our fault,” I said, cutting her off. “And Dina, you know nothing about my sex life, so stop lying to yourself.”

Red stained her cheeks, but she didn’t look away.

“You’re telling me you don’t regret being in that club with him.”

“No. I don’t regret it.” I could feel the heat rising. “You wouldn’t get it, and that’s okay. But...I *enjoy* being with Maximus. Not just for the sex, either, but that...well. James treats me as his equal, and he respects me. He doesn’t criticize me or put me down, unlike my ex. He always made me feel like I was the saddest fuck he had ever encountered.”

Her eyes widened slightly. “I had no idea. You’ve never told me why you and Cecil ended things.”

I picked up my sweet tea and took a sip, my throat almost painfully dry. “I was embarrassed. You know I haven’t had the best luck with guys.”

“You intimidate the hell out of most of them.” Some of the tension had drained away, and she met my eyes without her earlier disapproval. “That’s not the case with James?”

“No. It’s not. Dina, he’s a nice guy. Hell, Garcia is almost ready to nominate him for sainthood for helping his friend’s business.” I picked up my phone and opened a picture from Garcia depicting a long line in front of his friend’s food truck. “James had his admin people tweet about it on their social media. That’s the result. He didn’t benefit from that.”

She nudged the phone back across the table to me, not speaking.

Sighing, I grabbed it and dropped it back in my purse.

“It’s just, I don’t want you getting hurt, Tina, or used.” She darted a look at me. “I’m your big sister, and I love you. But understand, it’s always the woman’s reputation that suffers when things go wrong. And James Maximus has a huge public image and reputation. You know that.”

“Yes. I do. But I knew that when I got involved.” I touched her hand. She didn’t pull back. “Dina, I like him a lot. You don’t have to approve, but I’d appreciate it if you didn’t let this impact our family. That’s not being fair to anybody.”

“Have you and Ned been rehearsing the same speech?” She forced a laugh, and her shoulders slumped as she closed her eyes. After a few seconds, she opened them again and met my gaze. “I’m sorry about what I said to you on Friday. I didn’t mean any of it. I’m just...I reacted badly. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.” My eyes burned as she turned her hand over and laced our fingers together.

“Don’t expect me to go on double dates with you and that guy, though. I’m... not comfortable with men like him, Tina. I hope you understand.” She wouldn’t look at me as she said it, and her voice trembled a little as she spoke.

“That’s fine. I’m not quite ready to take James to the family picnic yet.” A nervous laugh escaped me.

I loved my family beyond anything.

But James was becoming important to me.

Very important.

THIRTY-FOUR

MAXIMUS

TINA: JAMES!! THIS DRESS!! ♥♥♥

The text from Tina left me smiling.

James: Don't send me pictures. I want to be surprised when I see you.

Tina: I WAS SURPRISED WHEN I SAW ME.

The all-caps response made me laugh. It was weird how easily I could laugh with Tina. Firing off another response just as Miranda knocked on the door, I called out for my admin to come in.

The phone chirped out another text notification, and I had to turn the screen down so I wouldn't feel tempted to check Tina's response.

That, too, was another weird thing. Tina had a way of invoking reactions in me, from laughter to distracting me from work.

The laughter was acceptable. Distractions from work? Not so much.

I smiled at Miranda as she approached, and I nodded for her to sit next to me. She stopped in her tracks and stared at me with surprise on her face.

"What's wrong?" I asked when she didn't say anything.

"Ah...nothing." She moved to the chair and sat, her iPad at the ready, a stylus in hand.

"Miranda."

She smoothed her reddish-brown hair back and sighed. “Nothing’s wrong, Maximus. It’s just...well, I’ve worked for you for almost eight years, and I can count on one hand how many times I’ve seen you smile like that.”

I blinked. “I smile.”

“Not like that,” she said, a hint of amusement in her voice. “I hope she works out for you.”

I fumbled for something to say.

Miranda glanced at her notes. “Having been open for a month, the hotel has already exceeded the expectations of the board. Which, I assume, is no surprise to you, Maximus, since everything you touch turns to gold.”

It was an old joke and nudged me back on track.

“Have you sent the data?”

“Already in your email.” She gave me a sunny smile. “That’s why you pay me the big bucks.”

A DINNER MEETING with several acquaintances had kept me tied up most of Friday evening. I would have canceled if I hadn’t been the one arranging the gathering a month ago.

Of course, back then, Tina wasn’t in my life.

I’d be seeing her on Saturday. I could wait a fucking day.

I thought about that when I fell into bed after midnight, taking in the Houston skyline just beyond the windows of my hotel suite. I had opted to stay in the city, even though I was closer to Tina here.

My actual home felt empty without her, as if I’d chosen it, knowing one day she’d help fill the silent halls.

I didn’t have the same problem with the penthouse suite at my hotel. It was impersonal, devoid of anything that made it homely, since I’d only planned

for this as a place to sleep after long days.

But when I closed my eyes, I could almost smell the scent of her hair and skin on the sheets and pillows.

WHEN TINA OPENED THE DOOR, my brain went blank.

Shimmering, brilliant sapphire blue wrapped around her curves, the color picking up the deeper cerulean of her eyes and making them glow as she offered me a smile I couldn't return. Not yet. First, I had to pick up my jaw off the floor.

The thin straps revealed Tina's toned arms and shoulders, displaying her strength rather than softening it, while the low neckline plunged in a vee over her plump breasts. The fabric gathered around her waist, giving the impression that it wrapped around her. My sanity might be at risk if I learned it did.

My eyes caught a sparkling rose set into the dress, either a decoration or perhaps as a closing mechanism. I wanted to reach for it and discover for myself which one it was.

But if I did, we'd never leave the house.

Letting my gaze continue the tour of her body, I sucked in a hard breath at the seductive details of the dress—Zoey had outdone herself.

Inches below the rose, the dress's material parted in a split high on Tina's left thigh, baring her leg, revealing the sleek, sexy length down to her strappy heels with sparkling bands over her instep, alternating in red, white, and blue.

"We need to go," I said bluntly. "Lock the door and come out now, or I'll have to pin you against the wall, push up that skirt and be inside of you in under fifteen seconds."

Her lips slicked a rich, bold red, curved. "Oh, well, now you're tempting me."

“Tina...”

She grinned but turned and grabbed something from inside the door, then shut it. I heard the *chirp-chirp* of her house alarm activate, then watched as she slid her keys into her small purse. Once she started down the steps, I offered my hand.

“Are you wearing panties?” I asked, as she accepted my hand.

“If you want to call them that.” Amusement and heat filled her eyes. “You probably already guessed that I’m not wearing a bra. Just little stickers that give support.”

I had to force myself to walk back to my car.

“You’re trying to make me nuts.”

“How am I doing?” she asked, a teasing note in her voice.

I opened the door, and she slid inside before answering. “The way that dress hangs, it’s easy to nudge it out of the way, pull your thong aside and push my cock into you. I just have to find a private spot at the event. Think about that while I consider your barely-there panties.”

“INTERIOR DESIGN....” Althea Rigby, the CEO of the charity’s main sponsor, studied Tina with sharp hazel eyes. “Have you worked on anything I might have seen?”

In her late eighties, but as active as some people in their twenties or thirties, Althea had beamed when I introduced her to Tina, telling me it was high time I had brought a smart girl to one of her charity soirees.

As a widow without children, she donated most of her money to philanthropic organizations. We’d met through the literacy group that was tonight’s beneficiary.

“Here, I mostly work with small businesses and homeowners,” Tina said, “but in California, I worked in a larger firm and had many well-known

companies using my services.”

“Are you any good?” Althea gave Tina a probing look.

“Yes, absolutely,” she said, unfazed by the direct question.

Althea gave an approving smile. “I like you. It’s very common for women in our male-dominated society to downplay their accomplishments. Don’t ever be afraid to let yourself shine, Tina.” She gave her a pat on the arm. “I’ll have my assistant look you up...I might call you.”

She then turned to me and tapped her cheek.

Tina looked surprised when I kissed Althea’s cheek, but didn’t say anything.

“She’s an amiable lady,” I said, feeling a little self-conscious. “I can’t say that about many people.”

Her lips curved in a beautiful smile, eyes gleaming as she stepped closer. “It’s sweet.”

Laying my hands on her waist, the delicate material of her dress warm against her skin, I raised a brow. “I’m not sweet, Tina.”

“Don’t worry.” She laughed, her head falling back so she could hold my gaze. “I won’t tell anyone that you have this big fatal flaw.”

Lips twitching, I stroked her through the material of the dress, my thumbs barely able to detect the faint line caused by her panties. “Fatal flaw, is it? I can already see the headlines.”

Tina laughed, and I wrapped my arms around her, maneuvering the two of us over to the side of the ballroom so we wouldn’t be in the way of couples and small groups gathering to talk or mingle.

“You’re a brat,” I told her.

Shoulders still shaking with her laughter, Tina looked up. “And you’re adorable.”

Not being able to control myself, I dipped my head and covered her mouth with mine.

Around us, the ball carried on. The sun was setting, and the doors to the ballrooms were flung open long ago, allowing guests to move freely between the opulent interior and the well-lit terrace.

Her lips parted, hands coming up to fist in the lapels of my suit.

Tongue sliding out to tease mine, she moaned as I slid my hand down to cup her hip, pulling her in tight against me.

Someone nearby cleared their throat.

I might have ignored them, but we were at Althea's house, so I ended the kiss and lifted my head to look into Tina's heat-drenched gaze.

"You still haven't found it?" she exhaled.

I stared at her, confused.

"The 'private' spot."

I remembered what I'd taunted her with earlier at her house, dipped my head and murmured in her ear, "Don't tempt me."

"I'm not. I'm pouting." To back up the words, she poked her lower lip out playfully.

"You're driving me crazy."

But instead of nudging her away, my gaze landed on a large, elaborate clock. We were less than fifteen minutes away from the fireworks display.

Offering my hand, I waited for her to take it.

She did, brows arched. "Where are we going?"

I didn't tell her.

Not yet.

THIRTY-FIVE

TINA

I ASKED HIM TWICE MORE AS HE LED ME THROUGH THE MONSTROUS HOME.

I already knew this was Althea's house, and the easy friendship between her and James was clear, so it was no surprise he knew the house. Still, I was a bit surprised when he led me to a small, private, roof-top garden with just a few minutes to spare before the fireworks started.

"How did you know this was here?" Tipping my head back, I stared up at the stars and breathed out an appreciative sigh at the display of stars, unrolling like diamonds on velvet of deepest blue overhead. We were far enough outside the city that the light pollution was non-existent.

"I've been out here many times, but there are still rooms I haven't seen, believe it or not." He nudged me up against the railing and nodded at the crowd three stories down. Their voices carried over the music, a mélange of sound that I couldn't pick apart no matter how much I tried. "I bet you could scream, and nobody down there would even hear."

I shivered, the feel of his cock against my ass. But I didn't let myself respond...yet. "You know, some could construe those words as creepy."

James bit my ear. "But not you?"

"Hmmm...not sure. I might need to think about it a bit." He placed a hand on my left side, fingers brushing over the closure that held the wrap-style gown together.

When James' sister, Zoey, had told me he had asked her to make me a one-of-a-kind gown to wear to the charity, my initial instinct had been to say no. Then I thought about the appreciation I would receive from James wearing a dress like that, and I'd accepted. As Zoey showed me several design options, she spent hours measuring me and selecting materials.

I was amazed at the final result, and seeing James's eyes on me when I stepped out, soothed over another ragged wound I still carried from Cecil.

Easy access was another benefit of the dress.

I sucked in a breath as James toyed with the closure before smoothing his hand down the fabric covering my thigh and tugging it up. Closing my eyes, I gripped the rough surface of the stone railing.

A soft whimper left me as he brought the skirt up and over, leaving my backside exposed, save for the delicately made material of my panties. He smoothed them down until they fell to my ankles in a puddle. I was about to step out of them when he stopped me.

"No. Like this. Lean forward, Pet."

Pet. Whenever we were about to have a sexual encounter, he used words like that. Most of the time, I was okay with it.

Today I hesitated. James's sudden stop had given me just enough time to clear my head and realize how exposed we were. "What about security cameras?" I asked. "Any..." My voice trailed off, uncertain how to explain.

He nuzzled my neck as his hand came around to cup my right breast. "No cameras. Don't get embarrassed, but earlier I asked our hostess if there might be a private place where I could whisk you away."

My cheeks heated, but I also smiled. Turning my head, I whispered, "What are you going to do to me, sir?"

His mouth came down on mine, hard and demanding.

The kiss ended only seconds later, and he nudged me forward, positioning my hands on the railing, so it looked like I was merely bracing my hands on it. I shivered as James pushed my dress higher, twisted the material, and

secured it so it didn't slip back down.

"Keep your legs together, Pet. I want to feel you good and tight around my cock, understand?"

"Yes," I said, my breath hitching out of me as he pushed two fingers slowly into me.

"Yes, what?" His voice was a dark, sinful temptation.

I bit my lip. Then, "Yes, James."

He chuckled. "I think you *want* to be punished." He twisted his fingers and screwed them deeper into my pussy. "*Do* you want me to punish you, my delicious little Kitten?"

"Maybe." I bit my lip to keep from crying out as he withdrew his fingers, then sank them back in, all the way, roughly. It was *almost* enough to push me over—I was that hungry for him already.

Almost.

He shoved his hand into my hair and yanked, and I cried out. As he drew his fingers and covered my mouth, the taste of my hunger was now on my lips. "Not so loud, Pet. I don't want anybody to hear us and come looking."

I tensed, despite the pleasure.

"A sub has to trust her Dom, Tina. Do you trust me to take care of you?"

Slowly, I nodded.

"Good girl. Open your mouth. That's it...now...lick my fingers." His voice roughened as I did so, and that sound made me squeeze my knees together. A gut-deep *need* for him overwhelmed me. I suckled on his fingers harder, imagining it was his cock. He knew. "You want my cock, don't you?"

I nodded awkwardly, the best I could with one of his hands in my hair, the other in my mouth.

Then I was free, and he spun me around, big hands cupping my face and lifting my mouth to his as he claimed my lips, kissing me as if he wanted to devour me. He broke the kiss only long enough to say, "Unzip me. Take my

cock out.”

While fumbling through the task with shaking hands, I freed him, feeling the silky warmth of his hard, heavy length. Pumping him hungrily, I moaned into his kiss. James let me play for only a few seconds before pulling away.

He swung us around, his hips now against the railing.

“Do you want my cock in your mouth?”

I nodded desperately.

“Then ask. Say, *Sir, please let me have your dick in my mouth.*” He gave me a hungry, sensual look.

I followed the instructions. “Sir, please let me have your dick in my mouth.”

“Good job.” He shifted position slightly in a way that had his erect penis thrusting forward just a bit more. “Bend over and suck me. Don’t kneel. I don’t want your pretty dress or your knees getting scratched up.”

I did as he ordered, bending over straight from the waist, almost overbalancing thanks to the high, skinny-heeled shoes on my feet. James immediately steadied me. I opened and took him in my mouth, one hand going to his hip to balance my weight.

He let me control it for a few seconds, but then he pulled me off.

“*James...*”

He tugged me upright, then nudged me backward. “Sit.”

I sank on the table.

He grabbed my head. “Open, Tina. Take my cock.”

I did, stretching my lips wide to take as much as possible.

He pushed deep, withdrew, then surged forward, already knowing my limits from previous encounters.

He groaned and muttered my name. His penis jerked in my mouth. I scraped my teeth over the thick vein on the underside and sucked harder.

“Fuck,” he snarled.

Then he hauled me off and yanked me to my feet.

“James!”

“Be quiet,” he said, voice rough as he spun me around, so I once more faced the railing.

Overhead, a fountain of color exploded as the fireworks display began.

James nudged me forward until I was braced over the stone support, just as I had been earlier. He spanked me. Hard. I jerked and cried out, my spine arching at the unexpected discipline.

“Thighs together,” he said, growling in my ear. “I told you that earlier.”

Whimpering, I replied, “Yes, sir.”

He gripped my hips, and then I felt the head of his cock pressing against me. Hips jerking forward in response, I moaned. He spanked me again. “Be still. You’re my little fuck-toy tonight, my obedient little submissive, and if you want to come, you’ll be still.”

His rough order, his harsh voice, flooded my brain with delirious desire. Or maybe it was the fireworks? Both? I had no idea.

“Yes, master.”

James wrapped his arm around my waist to ease the pressure just enough.

His cock swelled, then pulsed inside me while more explosions of brilliant red and shimmery white erupted overhead.

I whimpered, my knees instinctively tightening in response to the sensual pleasure that pulse sent through me.

He bit my ear, then nuzzled me. “What did you say, Pet?”

“Master. Please...master...” I moaned, shivering now as his cock continued to pulse and throb inside me, teasing me until it was almost torture. “Make me your toy. Punish me. Fuck me. I want to please you.”

He shuddered.

“You do.”

James gripped my hips and, with no comment or teasing, drove in hard. I bit my lip to keep from crying out, grabbing at the stone under my hands.

“You feel so *fucking* tight like this,” he muttered, his voice guttural.

He spanked me, and kept thrusting, riding me hard until he pulled a second orgasm from me.

His low growl came just as the fireworks finale turned the sky into one dazzling display of red, white, and blue, his cock jerking as he came. Only his supporting hands kept me from collapsing right there.

THIRTY-SIX

MAXIMUS

I WOKE UP WITH TINA'S HAIR TICKLING MY CHIN AND HER ARM WRAPPED possessively around my waist. Her breasts felt soft on my skin, and I realized I was smiling.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd woken up smiling.

Stroking my hand up her back, I toyed with the ends of her hair, just enjoying the moment.

"You think soooo loud sometimes," Tina mumbled.

Her voice caught me off-guard. Turning my head, I kissed her brow. "Sorry. Did I wake you?"

"No." She yawned. "I'm a morning person most days, anyway. What time is it?"

I looked at the clock on the nightstand. "Late for a morning person. Almost ten."

That got her attention. She pushed up onto her elbow, hair ruffled and eyes still heavy with sleep. "Really?"

I pointed at the clock.

"Huh." Then she gave me a slow smile. "Somebody kept me up pretty late."

"Wonder who?" I tugged her down and kissed her.

Before I could roll over and take things any farther, she pushed me away. “Sorry...bathroom.”

I let her go reluctantly and sat up. My phone chimed, and I picked it just as the bathroom door closed shut behind her. I saw several texts, most from my family. I groaned, remembering the family picnic was today, and I’d stupidly agreed to go this year.

Gianni: Did you ask her?

Zoey: Hey, I like your girl. Ask her to the picnic!

Dragging a hand down my face, I considered the idea. Gianni had been nagging me all week, and Zoey had hinted at it. I’d been noncommittal.

Tina slipped out of the door behind me, buttoning my dress shirt from the previous night. I cocked a brow at her. “Stealing my clothes?”

She stuck her tongue out at me. “You fled with me and wouldn’t let me return home to get spare clothes. It’s only fair. Formal gowns aren’t exactly comfy to sleep in *or* lounge around in.”

“Since I’ve never worn one, I submit to your superior knowledge.” I glanced at my phone once more, eyed the message from Zoey, then looked at Tina. “Are you doing anything today?”

As she dropped into a nearby armchair, she shrugged. “I was hoping you would order room service for us. I’m starving. Besides that, I have no other plans.”

“I guess I can feed you since I *fled* with you.” I searched for a menu. “If you want to order two breakfasts—just whatever you’re in the mood for—I’ll feed you.”

I leaned back onto my elbows as I watched her think. Her expressive face was one I could see myself watching, with pleasure, for years to come.

I wondered where that thought had come from, even as I was thinking it.

Years?

I didn’t do *years* with relationships.

“You want to go to a family picnic with me?”

Her head jerked up, eyes locking on mine. “What?”

“A family picnic. Gianni mentioned it, and I thought you might have fun.” Keeping my voice casual, I added, “I already agreed to go, so I can’t back out. But if you’re there, it won’t be so bad.”

“You make it sound like you’re walking the plank.”

“Big family things aren’t my style.” I grimaced. “And considering how many siblings I have, all family events are a big thing.”

She cocked a brow.

But I didn’t elaborate.

After a few more seconds of study, Tina’s lips curved. “I’d love to go.”

“YOU WEREN’T KIDDING....”

Tina sounded a bit overwhelmed after Scot left us to grab another beer.

We found some chairs, and I waited for her to take a seat before I asked, “About?”

“What you said this morning—how every family gathering is a big deal.” She looked out over the sea of people gathered on my father’s huge, park-like lawn.

So far, she’d only met the twins, Rosie and Sienna, and their older brother, Parker, plus Scot. She already knew Zoey and Gianni, but I figured I’d give her a break before introducing her to anybody else just yet. Sometimes, even I got overwhelmed, and I’d known most of these people for twenty years now.

“They can be intimidating,” I said softly.

“They’ve all been nice.” Tina offered a smile as she tucked her hair back. “It’s just....”

She waved a hand at the crowd. “There’s *so many*. How does your dad keep everybody straight? Birthdays? And...”

I didn’t bother hiding a smile. “It’s okay, Tina. My father, Connor Maximus, is married to his fifth wife. He’s had many affairs—I’m the product of one of them.”

Her gaze fell away.

I took her hand, lifted it to my lips.

Her eyes slowly returned to mine. “Do you...are you two close?”

“No.” I lowered her hand but didn’t let go. “My mom was a waitress. She met Connor, and they had an affair, but it ended long before she knew she was pregnant. Money was tight for mom. She worked two jobs most of the time I was growing up. I knew nothing about my dad—she never told me. Then she was diagnosed with cancer—it had already progressed pretty far, and she passed away within a month. A social worker pulled my birth certificate, found the father listed, and contacted him. Connor, who was out of the country, dropped everything when he heard about me.” I glanced toward the terrace where my father sat listening to Rosie and felt reluctant respect for him. “He remembered my mother, but knew nothing about me because she never contacted him. Fortunately, he found me before I could spend a single day in the system.”

“James, I am so sorry.”

Looking up, I found Tina watching with shimmering eyes, tears that she blinked back the moment our gazes locked. “Hey...”

She turned her head and brushed her fingers across her eyes. “Ignore me. I’m fine.”

Instead, I pulled her onto my lap.

She squeaked and shoved at my shoulders. “James! People are going to see us!”

“And if they do?” I slid my arms around her waist and rested my head against the back of the chair. Nobody had asked questions about Tina. If they did, I would not tell them anything. Our relationship—and it felt like a relationship—was nobody’s business.

Tina huffed out a breath but settled against me.

“You’re angry with him.”

I didn’t ask who she meant. I didn’t have to.

As I glanced at my father again, I gave a one-sided shrug. “Not so much now, but yeah. I couldn’t even look at him at first. All my life, I had resented my father for leaving my mother and me to fend for ourselves. But...” Sighing, I closed my eyes, head once more falling against the padded cushions covering the Adirondack chair.

“You said he didn’t even know about you. That makes me think your mom never told him.”

I opened my eyes and met her. “She didn’t.”

“So, it wasn’t exactly his fault. I mean, yeah, he could have followed up, but...your mom could have told him. It’s obvious how much he loves all of you.” Tina’s lips pursed as she took everything in and added, “Although I’m not sure how he can keep everybody straight.”

I laughed and tugged her close. Just as I went to kiss her, though, a voice called out.

“I’ll be damned. James brought a woman to a family event.”

Sighing, I looked over and saw yet another sibling—a step-sibling, to be exact, then squeezed Tina’s thigh. “Ready to meet another one?”

Her lips curved. “Absolutely.”

She went to stand, but I held on to her waist just as Damen Workman dropped into the chair Tina had left empty. “Damen, this is Tina. Tina, this is Damen, one of my step-brothers.”

“Hi, Damen.”

He nodded at her. “Hello.”

As he turned curious eyes to me, I held up a hand. “I’ve already dealt with the inquisition from others. Don’t be nosy.”

“Don’t be nosy,” Damen said, almost as if to himself. “My brother brings a woman to a family event—for the first time, but I can’t be nosy.”

I rolled my eyes. “Did Laz come?”

“Hell, no.” He huffed out a breath and stretched his legs in front of him as he settled more comfortably into the chair, resting the beer he had in his hand on the broad wooden arm. “You know that guy. He can’t pull himself out of his work long enough to shower more than three or four times a week. He sure as hell will not do it long enough to hop on a plane and go visit family.”

“Sounds like Laz.”

“I JUST WANTED to tell you I like her.” Zoey leaned against the counter, her hands resting on the edge. “Tina is *gorgeous*—man, those *legs*. I’d kill for legs like that. But she also isn’t somebody who’ll put up with your bullshit, either.”

I agreed with her about the legs, although I kept that quiet.

Out loud, I said, “We’re just friends, okay?”

“Uh-huh.” Zoey rolled her eyes. “Go on and tell yourself that if it makes you feel better. But you have never asked me to make one of your girlfriends a dress before. I’m glad she liked it, though.”

“We both did.” Memories of the minutes we’d spent in the rooftop garden while the fireworks exploded overhead threatened to distract me, but I gently nudged them aside. “Tina loved it. She mentioned it more than once.”

“She was an inspiration to design and dress, built like an Amazon with stunning curves, strength, and grace. But you haven’t told me why you hired me to make her such an expensive gown. If it’s not because she’s special to

you, then what is it?”

“We’re just friends, honestly. Tina has a promising interior design business, however, she’s still trying to establish it, and her funds are limited. I didn’t want her to feel like she had to buy a dress just because I invited her to the gala, but I wanted her to wear something nice.”

Zoey’s smile spread over her face. “I’ve already said it once, but it was my pleasure to do the dress for her. She rocked the hell out of it, too.”

“Yeah.” When she first stepped out on the porch, the shimmering blue caressed her curves like a lover. “She did, didn’t she?”

“So, just friends, though. Uh-huh.” Zoey gave me a sarcastic look.

“You’re a brat,” I told her.

“Guilty as charged.” She spread her arms wide and gave a playful bow.

“I should go look for Tina,” I said, making my tone brisk.

“Zoey, I am grateful to you for designing the dress for her. Her outfit was stylish and *very* appropriate for such an important event. It was one less thing I had to worry about. I can’t imagine Tina would ever have owned an outfit like th—...what’s the matter?”

Zoey’s eyes widened, and this time, there wasn’t any humor in the warm brown depths, just panic. And a warning.

I glanced back and saw Tina.

Her face was pale, expression blank. Save for her eyes.

The look in her eyes was...bleak, sad, and hurt.

What the fuck?

“Tina?” I asked, taking a step toward her.

She turned and strode away, tension showing in every line of her body, from the stiff set of her shoulders to her long strides.

“Tina!” I called after her.

She flinched and shook her head, moving faster now.

Hesitating, I looked back at Zoey.

She only glared.

I was used to that, always pissing off one of my brothers or sisters.

But Tina...

I started down the hall, only to stop because I had no idea where she'd gone. Deeper into the house? Out to the patio?

Bewildered, I turned to Zoey, who had moved to stand next to me. "What was that about?"

"Seriously?"

As she spoke, I stared at her incredulously.

"What?" I demanded.

"You're asking what that was *about*?" She closed her eyes and lifted her face toward the ceiling as if asking for patience. It didn't work. A few seconds later, she was just as irritated as she had been earlier. "Think, James! Your new girlfriend, who is struggling to keep her business open, just walked up and overheard the *worst* part of the conversation."

"Which was?" I turned the conversation over in my head, but I couldn't think of anything that would cause problems.

Thanks, Zoey. I am grateful to you for designing the dress for her. It was one less thing for me to worry about.

What was wrong with that?

Maybe I'd mentioned her struggling business, but that was stating a fact. Tina was too logical to be upset over a simple statement.

"You are *such* a guy," Zoey said, aggravation in her voice. "You made it sound like you had to *help* her look nice for the event last night, James. How do you think that made her feel?"

“I didn’t say that.” My voice snapped. “It was a formal event, and she’s still scrapping by. Do you think she had a formal designer gown hanging around?”

“You don’t *need* a designer gown to clean up just fine for a formal event.” Zoey rolled her eyes. Arms crossed over her chest; she glared at me. “And *you*, you big lunkhead, jabbed at her pride. You better fix it.”

“Enough.” The word came out short. “You’re blowing this way out of proportion.”

Her eyes searched mine, and she huffed out a breath. “Be stupid, then.”

As she sailed past me, my phone vibrated. I ignored it. I needed to find Tina—and not because I had to prove Zoey wrong.

I started toward the library, checking each room on the way.

Tina wasn’t in any of them.

By the time I headed to the patio hoping to find her there, I was pissed. Two of my siblings started toward me, only to catch sight of me and stop.

Gianni just arched her brows and turned away.

Scot angled his head to the side. “What’s up?”

“Nothing,” I bit off. “Everything’s fine.”

Everything wasn’t fine, but I didn’t have time to explain.

I took a step to walk past him, then stopped. “Have you seen Tina?”

“Not since the two of you headed inside a little ago.”

With a muttered thanks, I cut a wide path around the lower level of the deck. The family was there, gathering in small groups or lined up to serve themselves from the feast that awaited. Tina was nowhere to be found.

I remembered the rush that went through me when I first saw Tina in that dress. To say she was stunning would be putting it mildly. Zoey’s words came back to haunt me. *You jabbed at her pride.*

“Horseshit,” I muttered. Tina knew I thought she was gorgeous. I’d sure as hell told her that plenty of times.

Frustrated, I headed to my car. The possibilities of where I might look had run out.

My phone chirped out a notification as my FIAT Spider came into view. Tina’s name appeared on the screen, and I stopped in the middle of the path to open the message.

I had to read it twice before it made sense.

“The fuck?” I scowled and read it a third time.

Tina: Called a cab. Heading home.

That was it.

I stared at the screen, willing another message to come through, but nothing happened.

I turned on my heel and strode back to the house, where I came across Zoey on her way out through the patio door.

The expression on my face made her huff out a breath. “What’s the problem *now?*”

“What the fuck is this?” I shoved the phone at her.

She skimmed it and held the phone back out. With a pretty, dimpled smile, she replied. “This, my dear brother, is a text. I’m surprised you haven’t learned about them yet.”

“No, smart-ass.” I snatched the phone from her hand, clenching it in my fist as my mind raced over what had happened in the last twenty minutes.

I DIDN’T STAY LONG after the talk with Zoey.

Tina filled my thoughts.

I texted her before leaving. I took the long way home, confident she would respond, and we could talk about this, hopefully at her place.

That didn't happen.

Pissed off now and uncertain what to do, I went straight home. But I made the mistake of going *home* instead of to the penthouse suite in the city.

I stripped out of the clothes I'd worn to the picnic to take a long shower. I told myself it was to wash away the sweat of the hot day. In reality, it was to wipe off the faint scent of her I kept picking up, perhaps from my t-shirt, perhaps from my skin.

I changed into a loose pair of lounge pants and went out to the extended wooden deck that ran the length of the porch.

I dropped into a chair on the deck and let my head fall back. Staring at the endless expanse of sky, I brooded over the message I probably *should* send.

I even typed one several times over.

But in the end, I deleted it all.

THIRTY-SEVEN

TINA

I SLUMPED IN MY OFFICE CHAIR, THE WEIGHT OF MY WORK RESPONSIBILITIES weighing heavy on my shoulders. It wasn't quite ten on a Tuesday, and I already felt like I'd worked an entire week.

Half the shit I needed to begin the next phase of the project at the hotel was either on backorder at the suppliers, or the paperwork to get the crews started had been delayed.

I also had several inspections lined up, and until they were complete and passed, there was only so much I could do.

I stared blankly at the calendar on my desk and my mind wandered to James and what he'd said to his sister, Zoey.

Zoey, with her simple yet elegant fashion sense, and pretty smile, with sparkling eyes to match.

He had asked her to design a dress for me so that I would have something appropriate to wear to a formal event, as if I couldn't come up with a suitable gown on my own.

My head hurt just thinking about it, so every time those thoughts bubbled to the surface, I pushed them out. I couldn't do my job and think about him.

To make an already shitty day worse, this morning I'd discovered a slight problem with my usual caffeine dose—I was out of coffee. At home *and* at the office. A low-level headache had been teasing me since I opened my eyes, and every minute that passed without my favorite brew made it worse.

Of course, if I could stop crying or brooding over James, maybe I could sleep better at night. If I slept better, I wouldn't need so much caffeine to get through the day. If I didn't drink so much caffeine, I might rest easier. It was a vicious cycle.

And here I was, thinking about him *again*.

Leaning back in my chair, I rubbed my temples to ease the brutal ache pulsing at my temples.

“Focus, Siegler. You've got work to do.”

A smooth bell tone sounded as the door opened.

Opening my eyes, I straightened and fixed a smile in place.

It wobbled, then faded as the man came inside, a hesitant smile on his handsome face.

“Hello, Tina.”

Leaning back in my chair, I tapped the pen I'd been holding on the arm of my chair. “Cecil.”

My voice was ice cold.

He stood in the door, looking uneasy and nervous.

He didn't say a word. After thirty seconds of silence, I finally asked, “What are you doing here?”

Cecil's handsome face folded into a pained frown. “Ouch. I deserve nothing better, though. I've been a total ass to you, haven't I?”

My reply was to raise my brow.

“Yeah.” He blew out a slow breath and lowered his gaze. His gaze landed on mine again and he held up something I hadn't noticed—a cardboard drink carrier boasting two coffee cups. He gestured with it as if making a peace offering.

Greed unfurled inside me.

It must have shown on my face, because a hint of humor appeared in Cecil's eyes. "I thought maybe you could spare me a minute or two if I brought the appropriate bribe. And caffeine in the morning has never been a miss with you."

"True." I held out a hand.

He placed the carrier on my desk and removed a cup. After checking the markings on the side, he passed it over. "There you go...three creams, two sugars."

He remembered. That wasn't a major surprise. Important dates and that kind of thing. He was good at keeping track of them. On our six-month anniversary, he took me to the restaurant where we had our first date. Romance was never an issue for him.

"Mind if I sit?"

I tipped the paper cup to my lips, relishing the first taste and gestured for him to have a seat, then said, "Go ahead."

Cecil settled in the chair, hitching up his trousers, then crossing his right ankle over his left knee. He sipped his coffee; his posture relaxed. His eyes were partially veiled by thick lashes. "Hmmm...excellent coffee."

I couldn't argue. I took another hit of the life-giving brew, the caffeine already rushing through my veins. I didn't *quite* feel human yet, but there was a hint of relief in sight now. "Thanks for this. I keep forgetting to buy more coffee for the office."

"No problem." He offered a half-smile. "Consider it an apology, of sorts."

"An apology for...?"

Cecil's gaze fell away. "Well, there's a lot of shit I need to apologize for. Things between us didn't end well, did they?" He shot a quick glance my way before returning to ponder his coffee. But he didn't give me a chance to reply before he continued. "I'm sorry for that. But...specifically, I was talking about how I dropped in on you unannounced the other day. That was a crap thing to do, especially with how we ended. I'm sorry."

The apology caught me off guard.

“Thanks,” I said, settling on the simplest way to handle it because I wasn’t entirely sure *why* he was here. I pinned him with a direct look and asked, “So, why *did* you come over? And why are you here now...other than to apologize? And bring me coffee, of course.”

He smiled ruefully. “I left the company. Didn’t like the direction they’ve been moving in for the past six months, So I decided it was time for a clean break.”

“And you thought the best place to start over was in Houston?” Dubious, I studied him.

“Hey, some suburbs in Houston are considered the best neighborhoods in the country. Prime real estate, great investment potential.” He winked. “And after San Diego? Shit, the cost of living in California is so fucking high now, I can’t afford to live there. I’m not sure where I want to settle, but I’m giving Houston a chance as a first choice.”

“And you’re in my office because...?”

A slow smile curved his lips. There had been a time when that smile had made my heart flutter. Now I could only think how practiced and fake it looked. “I’m job hunting, of course. I handled it badly, coming to your house the other day. Instead of assuming our history gave me a pass on being professional, I should’ve just kept things all business.”

“Job hunting,” I said.

He inclined his head.

I blew out a hard breath and pursed my lips. “Cecil, I’m still getting established. I barely have enough clients to keep the lights on right now. I’m not making enough money, at present, to hire a second designer.”

Cecil shrugged. “We can always do it on a per-project basis. You and I always worked well together.”

We had worked well together. For a while. That *for a while* was the problem, though.

Checking the time, I mentally worked through the schedule for the afternoon. “Tell you what. I’ll think about it. Right now, I’m in the middle of a big job, and I have to run to the construction site. I’ve got an inspection before the crew can start working on the next phase.”

“How exciting,” he said. “Would you mind if I came along?”

“THIS IS MARVELOUS.” Cecil spoke softly, as he stood next to me, his head tilted back to take in the high ceiling. They had removed the light fixture for refurbishment and repair, but both of us knew how to look beyond that and see the finished project as it should be—*would* be.

He flipped through the binder that held the project specifications, stopping when he reached the images for the Italian marble that would soon cover the rough concrete under our feet.

“I like,” he murmured, nodding in approval. “Very art deco.”

“I know.” I grinned. As I looked over the lobby, I felt some of the stress from the past few days disappear. The space was empty save for the two of us. The demolition crew had finished up the past Friday, making way for the next stage, and things would move faster once they approved the inspection.

Cecil read my atrocious scrawl with the ease of a longtime co-worker. “Who’s handling this project?”

I was glad I hadn’t turned back to Cecil before he asked that question. I didn’t want him to see my face. “A local guy—family money, but he’s pretty big in the hospitality industry. It’s the first older property he has ever purchased to renovate. This will be a boutique venue, too, so it’s a new project in several ways.”

I pursed my lips and surveyed the area one last time. “I have to get ready for the inspector. Let me show you out.”

“I think you’re doing amazing work here,” Cecil said as I walked with him to his car.

“Thanks. It might be the best job I’ll ever have the privilege to do.” It sounded kind of...lame, saying it out loud, but it was the truth.

Cecil leaned against his black truck and pulled a pair of sunglasses from the breast pocket of his dress shirt. Sliding them on, he said, “I can see that. I’m kind of jealous.”

“Like you don’t have some impressive jobs in your portfolio.” I smiled.

“Well, I do hate to brag...” He feigned buffing his nails.

“Uh huh.” Snorting, I glanced at the car pulling into a spot a few yards down. When a portly older man climbed out, I dismissed him.

Cecil sent me a dashing smile. “Hey, listen...I was wondering if I could take you to dinner tonight.”

“Ah...You must be joking?” I half laughed. My phone buzzed. I glanced at it, hoping, again, that it would be James. But it wasn’t.

“Just dinner between friends, Tina.” He offered a smile. “We haven’t talked in a while. I’ve missed you.”

THIRTY-EIGHT

MAXIMUS

I WASN'T IN THE BEST FRAME OF MIND WHEN I TURNED ONTO THE NARROW street that led to the small lot behind the Biscayne hotel. The detached parking garage was slated for demolition so reconstruction could begin in the coming weeks and currently, it was blocked off.

Several days had passed since the picnic, but Tina hadn't responded. I had only reached out once, determined not to crawl.

If she'd stop being so stubborn, this would all be over.

It was my right to stop by the hotel and see how she was doing. I wasn't crawling back.

So, I'd stopped working an hour earlier and headed to the Biscayne before she finished her workday.

Thanks to the regular updates Tina sent to Miranda, I knew there was an inspection scheduled this afternoon, and I timed my arrival to coincide with the end of it.

I planned to ask her to join me for dinner. We'd talk, and I'd clear the air. She might feel a little silly for reacting as she had, but I'd just brush it off.

This stupid misunderstanding would not bring everything to an abrupt halt between us. I wouldn't let it.

I nosed the car into the narrow spot behind the Biscayne with more speed than necessary, causing the tires to squeal. I slammed the brakes and

wrenched the keys in the ignition with enough force that I wouldn't have been surprised if the key broke off.

I noticed a lifted black pickup. I frowned, trying to peg where I'd seen it before.

The back door to The Biscayne was locked—not unexpected. I fished the keys from my pocket, mentally rehearsing what to say.

Hey, Tina. Look, this is probably nothing, but if I hurt your feelings Sunday, I'm sorry.

That was easy enough. Right?

She'd smile, maybe slide her arms around my neck. I'd kiss her, and everything would be fine.

The door opened with a burst. I had to sidestep to avoid having it slam into me.

Then I saw her, and it felt like I'd taken a blow, anyway.

“Tina.”

Seeing her had the same impact as always, a punch to my chest making my breath come harder, which I didn't mind at all. A smile was already spreading across my lips.

It died a sudden death as my eyes zoomed in on the hand on her shoulder.

A guy's hand.

Tina stopped in her tracks. She fixed her gaze on me as I fixed mine on the man behind her.

Recognition clicked. This guy. The truck. And Tina, wearing a colorful sundress, standing on her porch as this dickhead stormed off. The unhappy set of her eyes as she watched him climb into the truck, then the way her lips curved as she looked at me.

Anger stirred as the guy eased close to Tina, the movement blatantly male, blatantly possessive.

“Who are you, and what are you doing on private property?” I demanded.

Tina shifted, putting her body in my line of vision. Her words were calm but pointed. “He’s here with me. Cecil is a colleague, and I wanted his input on the plans for the Biscayne.”

My eyes flew to hers, but there was no answer to her sharp tone. Her expression was coolly polite.

“Did you want to come in and look around, sir?”

That *sir* pricked me like needles, and I almost snapped the hold I had on my temper. Almost. I managed to throttle down and give a polite smile. “No.”

“Then if you’d let me pass...?” Tina returned my smile, but there was an edge, a sharpness to the curve of her lips I hadn’t seen before.

What the *fuck*? Had Zoey been right?

I met Tina’s gaze with sobering clarity, and the answer was likely yes. My half-sister more than likely was right because that glitter in Tina’s dark blue eyes held both anger and hurt. And I was the one responsible for those emotions.

Feeling lost, I stepped aside and let Tina exit, as well as the guy who stood close to her. I could read body language, and he’d made sure he was in her personal space on purpose. Her *colleague*. My ass. He gave me a smug smirk as she locked the door, but the smirk faded to a polite smile the second Tina turned to face us.

“Was there something you needed, Mr. Maximus?”

Mr. Maximus—

I clenched my jaw, struggling to keep a sharp reply behind my teeth.

“Nothing’s wrong.” I forced a smile and hoped it wasn’t as brittle as it felt. “I need to talk to you, though. I thought I’d catch you at the end of the workday so we could grab dinner.”

With only a few feet between us, Tina was wedged between the door and her *colleague* to her side, blocking her retreat from that avenue. I stood in front

of her and could see her eyes shoot to my left, assessing her space for a possible exit. Common sense and courtesy both dictated I move.

I didn't. I shouldn't have been surprised when Tina moved closer to her friend, but it was still a blow to the gut. He shifted position, allowing her to pass before falling into step with her.

I wanted to punch something—preferably *him*.

“I've already made dinner plans, Mr. Maximus. Cecil and I have some catching up to do.” She gave her companion a warm smile. The blue of her eyes was cold enough that I felt it in my bones. “It's for the best, though. After all, I'm hardly dressed properly to stand by your side, right?”

Her words were a slap, and I couldn't stop my flinch.

Cecil touched the small of her back, then offered his arm.

She accepted, and they walked toward his truck.

“Tina.”

While Cecil opened the door for her, she looked at me. “Yes?”

I froze, a million things trapped in my throat because I didn't know what in the fuck to say. How could I know what to say?

“You should go to your club,” she said, her tone cool when I failed to find the words. “I'm sure you can find many women with the right sense of style and pretty enough to stand at your side. Or kneel.”

She climbed into the truck's cab without another look.

Cecil smirked as he sauntered around the truck, looking quite pleased with himself.

Asshole.

He opened his mouth as if to speak.

“Say a word, and I'll knock your teeth down your throat,” I warned.

His eyes widened, and the smirk faded. It returned, a fraction less gloating, but he kept his mouth shut.

That was good because I was so pissed. I would have loved to pummel his surgically correct, perfect nose with my fist.

THIRTY-NINE

TINA

“SO, THAT MAXIMUS GUY...HE’S THE OWNER OF THE SITE YOU’RE renovating?”

I shifted uncomfortably in the chair across from Cecil and nodded.

The little bistro was all white-tablecloths-and-candles. I’d been here before with Dina, and the maître d recognized me, offering a warm smile. I’d taken the seat by the wall, so my out-of-place attire wasn’t immediately obvious, but *I* knew I wasn’t dressed for this place, and that made all the difference.

“He doesn’t seem like a hotelier,” Cecil said, his tone musing. “Especially for the sort of work you’re providing. Really rough around the edges.”

It was stupid of me to feel insulted on James’s behalf, especially after what had happened Sunday. But I wanted to tell Cecil to shut the hell up.

I offered a half-shrug instead and grabbed the wine list.

I flipped it open, and Cecil said, “Oh, I had a bottle in mind for us to try.”

I refrained from gritting my teeth and said, “We usually have pretty different tastes in wine. Might be better to each order a separate glass of wine.”

“Trust me, you’ll love this.” Cecil gave me a broad smile.

The sommelier approached and started her spiel, only for Cecil to cut her off with a question about whatever wine I’d supposedly love. They didn’t have it. Cecil scowled at the sommelier’s response. “Really? I think an

establishment like this would be intent on keeping the wine cellar stocked with the best wines possible.”

“We do, sir.” She inclined her head. “But we pride ourselves on serving meals—and wines—that are all sourced from the great state of Texas. Would you care for some suggestions based on that wine?”

Cecil’s smile was tighter this time. “I think I’ll settle for scotch instead. Whatever the house label is.”

“Of course.” As she turned to me, Cecil muttered under his breath.

“What about you, ma’am?”

I requested a glass from the wine list, a vintage I’d tried before. Once she left, I shot Cecil a narrow look. “You don’t need to be so rude.”

His shoulders jerked, cheeks flushing. I stiffened, half expecting a sharp retort. But he took a deep breath and nodded. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I just...well, you’ve had a busy day and that unpleasantness at the site...I wanted tonight to be good for you.”

He reached across the table and brushed his fingers over mine, his expression softening, warming to one I knew well.

Shit.

Under the guise of checking my phone, I withdrew my hand. “Any meal I don’t have to cook for myself is good, Cecil.” I kept my response easy. After taking a sip of my water, I tucked both hands into my lap. “Why don’t you tell me about the projects you did after I left California?”

His face lit up.

There was one thing guaranteed to distract this man—an invitation to talk about his favorite subject.

Himself.

“AMAZING,” Cecil all but moaned before slipping another bite of the Chocolate Passion Cake into his mouth.

Cecil had edged closer to the *more-than-friends* line throughout the meal. It was apparent now that I’d made a big mistake agreeing to come here with him.

“This is a great little place, isn’t it?” Cecil slid the fork from his mouth and licked the tines slowly as he waited for me to answer.

“I like it.” Keeping my voice brisk, I methodically cut into my dessert.

When Luis, our server, appeared with the ticket, I popped up. “I need to use the restroom, Cecil.”

I hurried in that direction, mentally calculating my portion of the ticket. I deliberated on whether I should just catch a server and pay, so I could slip away *now*, or face rejecting Cecil later tonight.

It only took a short time to use the restroom, but I decided as I stared at my reflection. “I’ll do this the smart way.”

I counted out the bills in my wallet and included enough for a tip. Cecil was a stingy, *greedy* asshole, on top of his other, not-so-redeeming qualities. Cash in hand, I opened the door and stepped out, checking for Luis. With a sigh of relief, I caught sight of him coming around the corner. He smiled in greeting, but frowned at the cash I held out.

“For my half, plus the tip.” I gave a short nod. “Can you let my dinner companion know I had to go?”

A sympathetic smile curved his lips. “Of course.”

I moved to step around him, and he angled his head to the side. “There’s a side exit. For employees, but the manager won’t mind if you use it. It’s...less busy.”

“Thanks.” I looked over my shoulder in the direction he’d nodded and breathed a sigh of relief.

“No problem. Have a good night, ma’am.”

I almost made it.

Two steps and I would have been out of sight, down the hall toward the employee-only exit.

Cecil's voice rang out. "Hey, Lou, I meant to ask if I could...Tina?"

Sighing, I turned to face Cecil.

He frowned, glancing up at the exit sign.

A cool look flashed in Cecil's eyes, turning his affable expression into one of snide derision. I *hated* that look. Toward the end of our relationship, I'd seen it too often. How had I forgotten that?

"Is there a problem, Tina?" Cecil demanded.

"Sir." Luis stepped between us.

Cecil stepped forward to shoulder him aside. Luis evaded easily, keeping his broad, stocky form in front of Cecil's as a barrier. "Sir, if you would, kindly let the lady be."

"If you would, go fuck yourself," Cecil snapped, jerking his gaze from me to glare at Luis.

I set my jaw and moved forward. "Luis, it's alright."

"Ma'am—"

"No, Luis. It's okay. I'll talk with him outside. Cecil, have you paid?"

His lip curled as he looked at me. "Typical. You get an expensive meal, and as soon as I pay, you try to ditch me."

Luis opened his mouth to speak, but I laid a hand on his arm. "I'll take that as a yes. Go outside. I'll be there in a minute."

Cecil balked.

"Either go outside *now*, or I'll ask this nice man to call the cops."

"Bitch," he muttered, almost too low for me to hear.

Once he was outside, I looked at Luis.

“Ma’am, let me call a cab. You can wait in the manager’s office if you wish.” He offered a smile. “We’ve done it before.”

“It’s okay. I’ll be fine.” I patted his arm. “I just wanted to tell you to keep the money I gave you. You earned it, putting up with him all night.”

His eyes widened. “No, I couldn’t—”

“It’s a tip. Keep it.”

He tried again to talk me into waiting for a cab, but I shook my head. I’d need to deal with Cecil eventually, and I’d rather do it here in a public area than have him show up at my house or business again.

I found him in the small parking lot at the end of the block.

A headache pulsed at the base of my skull, the muscles of my shoulders and neck knotted tight.

As I approached, Cecil remained leaning against his obnoxiously big pickup truck. The truck was definitely an extension of his personality. He struck a pose with arms crossed over his chest, and a sneer twisted his usually handsome features into an ugly mask.

“You *always* have to make a scene, don’t you, Tina?” He paused for a second, not giving me a chance to respond, but continued. “We were having a perfectly nice time, but you had to bitch about the wine, bitch about the appetizer, bitch about the temperature of your steak.”

“That was you, *honey*,” I said, cutting in.

He shoved off the side of the truck, sucking in a breath. But the expected explosion didn’t come. He turned away, breathing out in a controlled fashion before taking another breath, slower this time, deeper. After a few repetitions, he turned back to me, looking almost...normal.

Then he smiled.

It was nothing more than a flicker, one that barely reached his eyes.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart,” he said. “I’m all messed up around you. I have been ever since things ended between us.”

He came toward me, close enough that I could smell the spicy aftershave he wore. When he reached out to touch me, I backed away.

Tight lines appeared around his eyes, but he replied in a level voice, “I guess I messed up pretty bad, huh?”

“We’re not getting back together, Cecil.”

“Why not?” Tone cajoling, he said, “We were good together, baby.”

I sidestepped him again, careful to move *away* from the truck. I would *not* let him trap me against it.

“We were good together as long as I didn’t piss you off,” I said coolly. “Then I made the mistake of outshining you at work.”

“You never outshone me.” His eyes narrowed as he glared at me. “You might have flashed your tits at clients and gotten more jobs than me, but that’s just being a tramp, not *outshining* me.”

A hot blush washed over my cheeks at the accusation. It was one I’d heard from Cecil before. However, the sting was far less this time.

“It’s probably hard for you to recognize when clients are impressed, Cecil,” I said, offering a smile with false sweetness. “After all, the jobs you worked solo were mostly average. Rather like you.”

Rage lit his eyes, and he reached for me.

I sidestepped and lifted my arm, striking the inside of his wrist as he tried to catch me, using enough force to send a good, numbing jolt straight up to his shoulder.

“Bitch,” he snarled, face flushing a deep shade of red.

“You lay your hands on me...you’ll regret it.” I leveraged my warning with a soft voice. I was *nobody*’s punching bag.

“Is there a problem here, folks?”

Cecil whipped his head around. “Mind your own fuc...”

His words trailed off, drying up on his tongue as he came face to face with a police officer. It was almost funny enough to punch through the fury that wrapped around me.

Almost.

The uniformed officer started toward us, eyes moving between Cecil and me.

“I think we’re good now, officer,” I said, glancing at Cecil with a hard look. “I’m just getting ready to call for a Lyft.”

The officer nodded. “If you’d like to take care of that, I can wait here.”

I moved away from Cecil, feeling the hot burn of his gaze on the back of my neck. I didn’t give him the satisfaction of looking back.

As I opened the rideshare app, I heard the cop speaking, his voice low and easy.

Cecil bit off a short, “*Of course.*”

He slammed the truck door thirty seconds later, and I wasn’t surprised. I refused to look in his direction. I’d already made one big-ass mistake with him tonight. More than one, and I wasn’t about to keep making them.

I wanted to go home, have a stiff drink, and forget the entire fucking day.

FORTY

MAXIMUS

“YOU *STILL* HAVEN’T APOLOGIZED?”

Gianni gaped at me from the comfortable armchair she had angled to face the couch. I was pretty sure it was the same chair she had since she moved into this bright, cheerful condo about a year after starting her investigation business. It was the one piece that didn’t fit, but she claimed it was her “thinking chair,” and she loved it too much to give it up.

“I still don’t get it. What the fuck I’m supposed to apologize for?” My words came out sharp.

I didn’t give a fuck whether Tina had money. I had more than I needed in a lifetime. And she already knew I thought she was beautiful, didn’t she? I’d told her a million times.

“You’re a lost cause. A sorry, sad, lost cause,” Gianni said softly, shaking her head as she stared at me. “How can a guy as smart as you be so damn stupid?”

“You’re really helping, Gin,” I shot back. “Thanks so much.”

I shoved to my feet and paced the open space of her condo. Despite its expansiveness, I still felt caged in.

“I can’t believe she threw me over for that bastard,” I muttered. “He’s the ex she told me about—treated her shit. Why would she do that?”

“Well, you said she introduced him as a colleague. Maybe it was purely business.” Gianni lifted a brow.

“You didn’t see how he looked at her.” I paused at the windows that covered most of the western wall, offering a fantastic view of the horizon. I crossed my arms over my chest. The rage burned hot and bright again every time I remembered the way Cecil had let his eyes glint over Tina when she hadn’t noticed. “He wants her back.”

“Then I guess you need to show her you’re the better man.” She paused, then added, “You *are* the better man, James. You just need to man up and prove it—to both of you. Apologize, honey.”

YOU ARE THE BETTER MAN, *James*.

My sister’s words rang in my head an hour later as I sat in my car in the private underground parking lot provided for members of the Black Star.

I didn’t know why I was here.

Tina’s comment about going to my *club* had gotten under my skin. And Gianni’s words about me being the better man had rubbed me the wrong way.

I’d never thought about that before—being the better man. Caring about people came with complications I didn’t want.

Until Tina.

“Shit.” I climbed out of the car and strode to the private entrance, exclusively for VIP members. One of the club’s security staff opened it for me while I was still several feet away.

“Hello, Maximus. Welcome to the Black Star.”

I gave a quick nod and kept walking, right past the club’s concierge. She’d arranged many pleasantries over the years since I joined the Black Star, but I wasn’t in the mood for company.

Not unless it was Tina.

You still haven't apologized?

Swearing, I pushed into the lounge and went straight for the gleaming black bar. Lila was staffing it, dressed in an elegant black dress that fell in a straight column to the floor. Her lips, red as a rose, curved in a warm smile when she saw me.

“The usual, Maximus?”

I nodded and took a high-top chair at the bar rather than a booth. In a booth, one of the subs might approach, and that was the last thing I wanted. There was an unwritten rule that those at Lila's bar weren't looking for a companion. A rule I rarely took advantage of, but tonight, it was just what I wanted.

Putting a glass of Glenfiddich 25-year scotch in front of me, Lila cocked her head to the side and considered me. “You look like a man with a lot on his mind.”

“Do I?” Taking the glass, I swirled the scotch, then took a sip.

Lila pursed her lips. “Hmmm. I can't say I've ever seen you like this. Is everything okay?”

I glanced away; the lie lingering on my lips.

But when I looked back at her, I couldn't make the words come.

Instead, what came out was something I had no intention of discussing.

“Can I run a hypothetical past you?”

Lila's ebony brows rose. Her smile was lovely, her warm brown skin smooth and ageless. She could have been anywhere from thirty to fifty, the fine lines fanning out from her eyes that deepened ever so slightly when she smiled. “Maximus, part of my job is listening to hypotheticals. Lay it on me.”

So I did, repeating the conversation I'd been having with Zoey, right up to the point when Tina appeared.

“She overheard me,” I said, staring into my scotch.

“Well, to be totally honest, I’d probably throw my drink in your face. You basically made it sound like she couldn’t clean up on her own without your money and your rich, fashion-smart sister helping her. That sting.”

“But that’s not what I said.” Gripping the high-ball glass in my hand, I stared into the amber liquid. It offered no answers, no absolution.

“But she wasn’t there to hear everything.” Lila’s sympathetic gaze met mine when I looked up. “She only heard that last part...and it sounds to me like neither of you have spoken to clarify any of it, have you?”

Shit.

THE ASSHOLE’S pickup truck wasn’t in the driveway when I pulled up in front of Tina’s house.

That was a good thing, because I was sure I would handle that well.

Heart pounding, I climbed out of my car and started up the walk, only to stop and close my eyes. Mentally, I walked through what I needed to say. Maybe I should—

“Stop it,” I muttered. “Just get it over with.”

Blood roared in my ears as I took the next step until I was finally at the door. I didn’t give myself time to think about it before I hit the doorbell.

Tina’s eyes widened when she saw me, mouth parting.

More than anything, I wanted to close the distance between us, cup her cheek, and kiss her.

But I had to put things right between us.

“I’m sorry,” I said, the words coming out of me like rocks crunching over broken glass. “I don’t know how much you heard when I was talking to Zoey, but I think you heard the worst part, with no context from the rest of the conversation. I’m *not* ashamed of you—not in any way. I asked Zoey to make the dress because I wanted you to have a dress that’s as beautiful as you

are—I wanted you to have that gift, but I also didn’t want you to stress about what to wear. You were already busting your ass with your business. I didn’t want to detract from that because of a last-minute invitation.”

Tina’s lip trembled a moment before she firmed it, her gaze falling away from mine.

“Tina?”

She gave a jerky nod and turned away. “You can come in if you want.”

I could breathe again.

After moving inside, I closed the door carefully as she settled in an armchair that could have been the twin to Gianni’s. Her eyes moved in my direction, then away as she drew her legs up to her chest.

“I’m sorry I hurt you,” I said, forcing the words out.

She gave a stiff nod; her gaze focused on the coming twilight, already casting the living room into shadows. “Thank you. I...I probably should’ve stayed and given you a chance to explain. I’m sorry I jumped to conclusions.”

“You don’t owe me an apology,” I said.

Her phone chirped out a notification, and she flinched. Her eyes dropped to the mobile on the windowsill, and her mouth tightened. Not in anger, though. It was as if she was trying to keep her lip from trembling.

“Are you okay?”

She darted a look in my direction and shrugged. “Mostly. I guess.”

But her voice, and her expression, suggested otherwise.

“Why am I having a hard time believing that?”

FORTY-ONE

TINA

WHY AM I HAVING A HARD TIME BELIEVING THAT?

Closing my eyes, I drew in a deep breath while struggling to find the right way to answer James.

Was there a right way to answer?

I stood and said, “Cecil’s my ex.” I retrieved my phone from the windowsill, skimmed the text from him, then deleted it. I tossed the phone onto the cushion of the armchair. “We dated for a while. He moved in with me, and things were good. Then I got a promotion, started getting selected for larger jobs with higher-profile clients, and he...didn’t take it well. Our break-up was ugly. Not too long after that, I put in my resignation. Being around him was just too toxic. He showed up a few days ago at my office. He was apologetic and polite, and then he asked if we could go to dinner—just as friends catching up.”

Blood heated my cheeks. Embarrassed, I diverted my eyes from James. “I was stupid enough to believe him.”

“He put his hands on you?”

I met his gaze. “Yes. Turns out that the asshole wasn’t interested in rehashing the good times. It was just an excuse to get back into my bed.”

A weighted silence stretched between us as he closed the distance. With a gentleness that made my heart clench, he traced his fingers down my cheek.

“Did he hurt you?”

“No.” My voice caught on the single word. I cleared my throat, tried again. “No. I’m fine.”

He tilted my chin, eyes studying my face, the curve of my jaw, my cheeks, taking in each feature as if searching for signs of a bruise he might have missed.

“He didn’t hurt me,” I said, catching his wrist and squeezing gently. “He tried. But I stopped him.”

Something in my voice caught his attention, and his gaze returned to mine.

“I spent five years taking karate.” Hitching up a shoulder, I grinned. “An asshole like Cecil is child’s play.”

“Tough girl.” James looked proud, but the fury hadn’t faded.

Rising on my toes, I pressed my lips to his cheek. “Damn straight,” I whispered against his skin. “Don’t ever forget.”

When I would have pulled away, his hands wrapped around my waist, holding me close. I’d already felt the slow, liquid burn of want settle in my belly at his nearness, but feeling him against me changed it into a brilliant, flaming supernova. Leaning into him, I rested my hands on his shoulders and waited for him to kiss me.

But just as he lowered his head, a strange tension fell over him.

“James?”

“I’m not sure if this is what you want or need tonight,” he said haltingly, staring off to the side instead of looking at me. “After what happened earlier...”

I cupped his face in my hands, guiding his gaze back to mine. “I want you. If you want me...”

“If?” He moved, crowding me against the wall in a way that could have made me feel claustrophobic. But it was James, and when he surrounded me like this, all I felt was wanted...needed...protected. Maybe I didn’t need a man’s

protection, yet it was strangely arousing, regardless. He slid his hands down my body, grasping my hips, then continuing until he caught the back of my thighs. He lifted me and let my weight come down, settling against the hard ridge of his heavy cock.

“If I want you, Tina?” He bit my earlobe, tugged, then scraped his teeth along the line of my neck. “I can’t imagine *not* wanting you. I want you now. I’ll want you tomorrow. I’ll want you in a year, in a decade. I’ll want you a hundred years from now.”

He rocked against me and I whimpered as sensations splintered through me.

He kissed me, a little rough, a little wild, and all male.

I burned for him...from the inside out.

He broke the kiss, and I whispered, “Don’t make me wait. Not tonight. I just want to forget.”

His eyes bore into mine for a passionate moment, then he nodded, lowering me to the ground. I froze, afraid I’d melt into a puddle if he let go.

“Take off your panties,” he said.

I did. I reached under my sundress, pushing them to my knees, then letting gravity take over. Once on the floor, I kicked them aside. I ran the back of my hand along the front of his jeans, feeling the hard, heavy length of him. “Can I?”

“I’ll let you run the show tonight,” he murmured, pushing into my hand. “Consider it part of my apology.”

I searched his face, uncertain, but the small half-smile on his lips assured me.

“You’re letting me be in charge, hmmm?” Stroking him more boldly, I pretended to consider the idea. By no means was I shy, but the thought of taking charge and giving him orders of a sexual nature made my cheeks flush with heat.

He must have sensed something, because his smile took on a wicked slant. “Yes. I’m not going to do a thing without your say-so. I’m not going to touch you, kiss you, shove my face against your delicious pussy so I can eat you out

until you tell me. I won't pick you up and fuck you against the wall until you tell me. And I'll keep on fucking you until you tell me I can come."

Then, as if to prove himself, he put both hands on the wall just above my shoulders.

The smile he gave me was a pure sensual challenge.

I'd always loved a good challenge.

With an eager smile, I unfastened his jeans, staring into his eyes all the while.

I had the zipper half open when I paused and looked down. The sundress I'd slipped into after my shower was comfortable and light. And nearly falling to the floor. Smiling into James's eyes, I said, "I'm a little hot."

His pupils flared as I tugged the stretchy bodice down until it was below my breasts, leaving them bare while the rest of my body was covered.

"That's better," I told him. "But I bet you're hot, too."

Nudging him from the wall, I caught the hemline of his shirt and pulled it off over his head, my nipples brushing his chest as I rose onto my toes.

He hissed, and the sound caught me off guard. He was always rigid, always in control. I took a step back to see him more clearly and studied him.

A smile tugged at his lips.

"You're in control, Tina. Not me. I don't have to hide what you're doing to me...not tonight."

I leaned against the wall and hooked my fingers in his belt loops. "I'm not so good at hiding what you do to me...or what it does to me being near you." Holding his gaze, I tugged him closer, then trailed one finger down his length, his briefs barely able to contain him. "What it does to me when I touch you."

His eyelids drooped at the rough, shaky admission.

"Don't worry," he murmured. "You're not being graded."

With a soft laugh, I finished unzipping him. "Well, *that* is good."

I worked his jeans and briefs down together. His cock sprang free, and I closed my fingers around the heavy length.

But when he pushed into my hand, I said, “I thought you would not do anything without my say-so.”

“I think you’ll do better at this than you think.” He locked his muscles and went still under my hands, groaning as I tightened my fingers and began to stroke.

Liquid heat gathered between my thighs, and I clenched them together, groaning at the empty ache inside.

“You’re aching for me,” he said gruffly.

“Always.” Through my lashes, I watched him.

“I can make it better. Tell me what to do.”

Despite the vicious hunger, I couldn’t help but grin at him. “You’re not doing this *I’ll-let-you-be-in-control* very well.”

“That’s because I want your shoulders on my thighs and my face in your pussy,” he said, voice barely more than a growl now.

And that ache between my thighs turned to a throbbing pulse.

“Yes,” I whispered.

“Tell me.”

From the corner of my eye, I could see the hard, bunched muscles of his biceps, the brutal hold he had on his hunger. That hunger spilled into me, and I lost my shyness.

“I want your mouth on me,” I said, breath ragged. “Between my thighs. Licking me.”

James leaned in, pressing his mouth to my ear. “Where?”

“My pussy, James. Put your mouth there and make me come.”

He caught me by the waist and moved, a strange twirl of our bodies, almost like a dance. But it made sense after he went to his knees and simultaneously boosted me up by grabbing the back of my thighs.

“Lean back,” he ordered.

He’d moved, so that I was against the shallow bay window in my living room.

I glanced to the side and saw the slats of the blinds were closed. Mostly.

James glanced at me, his hands sliding over my thighs in a sensual caress. “No one can see,” he murmured. “Not with the lights out and the blinds nearly shut. But if you want to close them...”

“I want your mouth on me.”

He positioned me until my upper legs draped over his shoulders; the movement pushing my dress up to my hips. His eyes slid to the window, then back to me. “A person would have to be in your front yard, practically in the flowerbed to see that you have those pretty tits bare for me.”

His words painted an erotic image that knocked the air out of my lungs. Before I could catch my breath, he pressed his lips to the inside of my knee, then higher, inching his way up with kisses. His breath teased my skin as he said, “I’m going to devour you, lick your delicious cunt, play with your clit, drive you crazy until you beg me to make you come.”

I whimpered, then cried out as he finally reached his target, his tongue flicking over my clit.

Strength failed me, and I went back on my elbows, head falling back.

James took advantage of the position, pushing my thighs up, high and wide, opening me for his pleasure and dipping his tongue out to trace and tease my clit.

I was primed, quivering and shaking, ready to climax after what felt like mere seconds.

But just when I was hovering on the edge, he changed his rhythm.

I cried out in denial, tightening my hold on him with my thighs.

“Tell me to make you come, Tina,” he said softly, the words muffled against my skin where he nipped my inner thigh. “Or...”

“Damn it,” I groaned. “Or what?”

“Or I could tease you more, then turn you around so I can fuck you from behind.” He nipped my thigh again. “The height here is perfect.”

Shivering at the erotic suggestion, I bit my lip, then said, “That...the second one, James.”

FORTY-TWO

MAXIMUS

SHE WAS SHAKING BY THE TIME I TURNED HER AROUND. SHE ROCKED HER HIPS in an instinctive action that spoke to how much she wanted me inside her.

I wasn't any better off.

I nudged her until she was flat against the cushion that ran the length of the bay window. Gripping my cock, I fit the head to her entrance, hissing as her hot, wet core kissed the tip. Moving both hands to her hips, I held her steady and thrust, deep and hard, possessing her completely.

She arched up with a cry.

Holding on to her hip with one hand, I pushed her back, keeping my fingers on her neck.

"I think I'm done letting you be in control, baby," I told her, each word squeezing out of me. "I want to fuck my beautiful little sub. Tell me you want it, too."

"I want it, James."

I let go of her hip and spanked her ass with a sharp crack. "Want what, pet?"

"I want you to fuck me, James. Please." I slammed into her on the please and she cried out, bouncing up onto her toes at the impact, another broken, stilted plea falling from her lips.

“Good girl...” Buried in the silken fist of her pussy, I flexed my hips and shuddered as she spasmed around me. I slapped her ass again, harder this time, and felt her pleasure in the way she clenched tight around my dick. “You can come whenever you want, baby. I’ll go hard with you tonight. You’ll like that, won’t you? Tell me you like it when I go hard.”

“I like it hard, James.” Her voice hitched the second part of the sentence, barely a rasp.

I pulled out and stroked deep into her again before bending over her. “I didn’t hear you.”

“I like it when you go hard with me.”

“Like a pretty, delicious toy. Are you my toy, Tina?”

“Yes.” Her lids lifted, the midnight of her eyes clouded with heat. “Play with me, James...please.”

Hot, deep possessiveness exploded through me as I straightened, resuming my demanding hold, one hand at her nape, the other at her hip, adjusting my stance so that my thighs pinned hers together. It made for a tighter penetration, although, *fuck*, she was already tight.

I withdrew slowly, letting her feel every inch, stopping when only the head of my cock was inside her. Again, I filled her, relishing every whimper and moan. She bucked and jerked under my grip. I used my body to trap her. She could not do anything but enjoy the pleasure I was giving as I withdrew again.

“*James!*”

“My toy, baby,” I punctuated the words with another smack of her ass.

She bucked, a long, broken cry escaping her. Her pussy clenched around me at the same time, the fist of it gripping me from base to tip in an unending caress.

My cock jerked in response, and she moaned, her hips rolling.

The sight and feel of her, combined with my need for her, removed the grasp on my control. Shifting my hands to her hips, I hauled her closer to me, her

balance precarious now as she went to the tips of her toes and scrambled with her hands from something to steady herself.

She didn't have a chance to get steady.

As her fingers closed around the cushion, I slammed into her.

A harsh cry tore out of her, her pussy fisting over me again.

Another hard driving thrust.

Another, another, each one punctuated by a weak cry until she clenched around me one final time as her climax hit.

After she was shuddering in the final throes, I let go of my rigid control and allowed myself to come, the need and want for this woman, for *all* of her, nearly overwhelming me.

AN HOUR LATER, after a shower and a quick sandwich, we curled up in her bed. I had a glass of scotch. She was sipping a light pinot grigio. The TV was on but muted.

I was content, happy in a way I hadn't been in... maybe ever.

But something was missing.

Until I came to her condo and she confided in me about her ex, I hadn't realized I needed *more* from her. From us. For there to *be* an us.

And there couldn't be, not as we were now.

We avoided discussing anything resembling a serious relationship outside of a sexual one. Or how we felt about each other—and some of that was my fault.

I hadn't intentionally established boundaries, but neither had I explained that I felt we were moving past a physical relationship. Nor made it clear I wanted more than that.

“I grew up broke,” I said softly.

Tina eased back and straightened, her eyes connecting with mine. She didn’t speak.

I tipped the glass to my lips and felt the warm scotch on my tongue. I stared off into the distance, not even sure why I’d started with that.

“My mom sometimes had to work two jobs just to keep a roof over our heads and food in our bellies. After cancer took her, I met Franklin and my life turned. Suddenly, I had money, a cell phone, designer clothes, all the food I could eat, but...” I gave her a humorless smile. “None of it made me happy. I just wanted my mom back.”

Tina didn’t say anything. Instead, she linked our hands.

I rubbed my thumb over the soft skin of her hand. “I’m not ashamed of you. I couldn’t ever be. I...hell, I just wanted you to have something gorgeous, unique. Something that made you feel as beautiful as you are to me. You came to the benefit because I asked, and I invited you at the last minute. So giving you a dress to wear seemed...natural. You could’ve worn jeans and a t-shirt, and I would’ve been proud to have you at my side.”

She pressed the back of my hand to her lips. “I’m sorry I jumped to conclusions.”

“I’m sorry, I was too arrogant to reach out and ask what was wrong.”

“I guess this relationship is a learning experience, huh?”

She had no idea. Straightening, I put my scotch on the nightstand, then took her wine and set it next to the scotch.

“Yes.” Cupping her face in my hands, I leaned in for a kiss. Her lips were soft and hinted of wine. I pulled back and held her gaze. “And I want it to be more.”

A shaky breath escaped her, her midnight eyes locked with mine. “More... how?”

“Exclusive. Long term.” I ran my fingers down her neck and said, “I’ve never had that with anybody, Tina. But I want it with you.”

She answered with a kiss.

Before she could pull back, I cupped her neck and held her close, nipping her lower lip. “I also want to claim you...as my sub.”

She eased back, brow furrowed. “Haven’t you claimed me...like a dozen times?”

Chuckling, I stroked her neck once more. “This is a more...public thing. I’ve never wanted to do this, but I want that with you. It’s a collaring ceremony at the club.”

“Collaring?” She wrinkled her nose.

“A collar, from a Dominant to his submissive, Tina—it’s a way of announcing our commitment to each other.” I felt the rapid beat of her pulse as I moved my thumb to stroke her wrist. “If you’re not ready, if you don’t trust me enough, or if you don’t think we know each other well enough yet...”

“No.” She was smiling as she leaned in and pressed a kiss to my lips. “As long as there’s no public display of nudity and I’m not expected to do anything in front of people, other than let you put this...this collar on me, then...okay. You already know I’m yours.”

Those last words shook me to my soul.

I rolled her onto her back on the bed and covered her smiling mouth with kisses.

You already know I’m yours.

I kissed a hungry path to her ear and murmured, “And I’m yours.”

A few hot kisses later, I had her legs spread and wrapped around my waist as I pushed inside her. She was hot and wet, her breasts crushed under my chest, and her eyes locked with mine as I pinned her wrists above her head.

“Mine,” I whispered as I stroked deep inside her.

“Yes.”

It wasn’t enough, not yet. I shifted both wrists to one hand, and cupped her breast in the other, teasing her nipple until it was stiff and hard. “All of you,

Tina. You're mine...every inch of you. Heart and soul and body."

She shuddered as I drove deep.

"All of me, James. You have all of me."

Groaning, I kissed her, and she softened under the hard, driving thrusts until we were both straining toward climax.

And when it was over and I was laying with her in my arms, her breath soft and even in sleep, I smiled.

I wasn't entirely sure why, except that I honestly was happy in a way that I'd rarely felt. No, even happier than my old definition of happiness...and it was a feeling I could get used to.

I rubbed my cheek against her hair and closed my eyes.

FORTY-THREE

TINA

STARING INTO THE MIRROR, I DRAGGED IN ANOTHER BREATH AND HELD IT.

After a count of ten, I let it out.

I repeated those calming breaths for one minute.

The woman staring back had an overly bright glitter to her eyes and cheeks, which remained flushed. No amount of deep breathing exercises would help now.

James was waiting for me at our private booth, and in less than fifteen minutes, this “collaring” ceremony would begin. I was about to make a permanent *public* commitment to a man—and to let everyone know.

Man, if anybody had told me this would be my life a year ago, I probably would have suggested they seek therapy fast.

But it felt...right.

It felt good.

Even with me being so nervous now, as I checked my hair and make-up.

At least this time, James hadn't been involved in selecting the dress, nor had he asked Zoey to design it. I found a vintage boutique specializing in retro-style clothing. The dress was stunning and far bolder than anything I'd ever imagined wearing.

The front and back panels were delicate ivory, giving it an almost demure look with a draping neckline and a back that plunged nearly to the small of my back. The color and front neckline, however, were where all attempts at demure ended.

The straps were tiny golden chains, dozens of them, some with simple chains, others embedded with glittering rhinestones that caught the light. On the sides, similar chains held the front and side panels together. A traditional bra was out of the question, so I wore an adhesive bra, one that plumped my breasts together and made my cleavage look amazing.

There was no way I could wear panties under the dress, but something told me James wouldn't mind at all.

He asked me not to wear a necklace, although I'd figured it out after looking up what to expect from a collaring ceremony. After finding the dress, I stopped at the salon to have my hair, make-up, and nails done, letting the chatter of the shop distract me from my nerves.

It worked for a while, but now, alone in the ladies' room, I had nothing but my thoughts and nerves.

This collaring ceremony...it was a public commitment. A *permanent* one. Did I know James well enough? Did we have the kind of relationship to be together forever?

My breath tripped out of me uneasily as I asked the question I *really* needed to know—did I love him? Did he love me?

The door opened, and two women entered.

I plastered on a polite smile, and they smiled back, moving to the open seats at the make-up counter provided as a service to the members.

No more time to brood.

Rising, I headed for the door.

But the question still hovered at the back of my mind.

Did we love each other?

Over the past few days, I researched relationships in the BDSM community. I wanted to make sure I knew what I was getting into. I learned that while many couples—or threesome, moresomes—were involved romantically, sometimes, that romantic aspect didn't come into play. It left me feeling hollow inside, the idea of being tied to somebody I didn't love. As for James...I would not fool myself. I knew he cared about me, but he had a barrier around his heart that was solid as steel.

When I returned to our private booth, James was waiting for me. My heart did a slow, dizzy spin inside my chest at the smile he gave me.

I had my answer.

James tugged me to him for a soft kiss, and I pushed the lingering worries from my mind. Maybe he didn't love me. But I was falling in love with him. And I needed this, him, in my life.

THERE WERE several stages in the central area of the Black Star. When James asked what I wanted for our ceremony, my main requests were that I didn't want to be on the big stage and keep everything simple.

He'd introduced me to Lila from the club. She'd agreed to handle the ceremony and suggested a couple of websites for us to get ideas.

Now, as James led me up the stairs to the smallest platform in the public area, I was glad he'd asked for Lila's help. She nodded at me, looking coolly elegant in an evening gown of deep blue, one well suited for any formal event.

Music played over the speakers. After we stopped in front of her, the music gave way to a beautiful, rich cello piece I'd chosen as Lila and I discussed the final details last night.

A wedding isn't so different from this, Tina, she'd told me.

A shiver ran over me as I turned to face James. The look he gave me was so possessive, so...intense. It felt like he owned me already. And I liked it.

Lila lifted a hand, and the music faded to a whisper. As if rehearsed, the crowd responded and turned toward us.

Nerves leaped inside me, but before I could panic, James took my hands.

“Good evening. I’m happy to welcome the members and guests of the Black Star to a most important occasion. We’re honored tonight to share the union between Maximus, a longtime member, and his sub, Tina.”

James tucked a stray lock of hair back from my face.

His gaze locked with mine, and Lila’s voice faded into the background. Nothing around us mattered when he looked at me like that.

“...James and Tina.”

At the mention of our names, James turned to Lila, breaking the spell. I took a deep breath and focused on her as well.

She gave us both a smile and said, “The two of you come before us tonight to exchange these vows between a Dom and a submissive, yes?”

“Yes,” James said, his voice clear and steady.

I nodded, my throat tight and constricted.

“James, you may begin.”

We faced each other.

“Tina, you have given me the gift of your submission, and now you are ready to accept this collar as a public sign of your devotion to me.”

He nodded toward Lila, and she looked to her left, where a dark-clothed man stepped forward with a black velvet pillow. Lila presented the pillow with the collar to James.

James took the collar and held it between us.

I saw it for the first time and gasped at its beauty. In the form of a necklace, it was made of gold and glittered with diamonds. A tiny, open padlock hung from one end.

I closed my eyes as he slipped it around my neck, the open ends with the lock falling on my chest.

“This collar is a public sign of our commitment to each other, of yours to me, a sign of your trust, of your acknowledgment that I will always be there to care for you, your needs, both physical and otherwise. It’s a sign of your willingness to submit to me, to let me care for you in all ways. I commit to placing you and your needs as the most important priority in my life. Do you accept?”

He held out a hand, and I placed mine in his as I knelt before him, holding my gaze on his. “James, I accept your collar, this sign of your commitment to me, and mine to you. I commit to accepting your place in my life as my Dom, to letting you care for me in all ways. I promise to accept and respect you, to yield to your authority as you have requested.”

James stroked a hand down my hair, then clicked shut the tiny golden padlock.

It was a faint sound, but the quiet in the club at that moment amplified it. I heard the click and felt it echo through me.

James extended his hand and helped me to my feet.

I turned to the pillow Lila held and took a small key suspended from a simple golden chain.

“I give you this key, sir, as a sign of my devotion to you, sir.” A slow smile curved my lips as our eyes connected. “By accepting this key, you agree to respect the relationship between us, to value me as a person, to respect my worth and intelligence, and never seek to destroy what makes me who I am. Do you accept?”

“I accept.” Then he dipped his head, which was a deviation, according to both him and Lila, from what would be considered a typical Dom’s actions. It was a sign that he understood and respected my independence outside the bedroom. After I slid the chain into place, he cupped my face in his hands and kissed me.

“With the exchange of the collar, lock and key, James and Tina have made their public commitment to each other.”

I heard Lila, but the words barely registered.

And when the others in the club clapped and cheered. I didn't register that, either.

The feel of James' mouth against mine made me forget everyone else.

As he pulled away, I had to force my fingers to release him.

He traced a finger over the curve of my lip, and the possessiveness in his gaze made my heart race.

As the ceremony concluded, he held out his hand and led me down the steps.

People stepped out of the way, clearing a path for us, and I realized I had no idea what came next. We hadn't discussed that.

Was there some sort of reception following a collaring ceremony? I figured it wasn't out of the question, but that would be...weird given that I didn't know these people.

But James led me outside to the underground parking garage where he'd parked earlier.

"Where are we going?" I asked, my voice breathless.

He gave me a single, hungry look. "Home. Because if I have to look at you much longer wearing that dress and my collar, I'm going to lose it. I'm going to go crazy if I don't get my hands on you, and soon. And we better be in a private place once I touch you...otherwise, I'm going to forget that neither of us is into voyeurism."

My cheeks heated.

I stopped asking questions.

I was hot for him already, and if he kissed me or even touched me, I'd forget I too wasn't into voyeurism.

FORTY-FOUR

MAXIMUS

I WOKE WITH A RAGING HARD-ON AND SOFT, SILKY HAIR SPREAD ACROSS MY chest.

I was also a little chilly because Tina was a blanket thief.

Smiling, I caught the edge of the blanket and tried to tug at least a corner in my direction. That only resulted in her mumbling in her sleep and rolling away from me. And she took *all* the blankets with her. Most them were bunched under her, covering her haphazardly.

My pulse quickened as I propped myself up on an elbow to take in her erotic display, the curve of her spine, the flare of her hips, and the one thigh lifted.

Hunger punched through me as I envisioned how easy it would be to push into her, take her like that.

Smiling, I opened the nightstand and pulled out a bottle of lubricant, then moved to stretch out against her, curving my body to hers.

She moaned as I rubbed against her, the head of my cock finding her heated entrance. She was already wet and ready for me. With a flex of my hips, I took her fully, completely.

“James...” she gasped, coming awake as I withdrew slightly.

“You’re a blanket thief, baby,” I said, my voice still rough from sleep.

“Wha...*oh*...” She clenched down around me as my cock pulsed, stroking deep into her pussy.

Shifting, I pushed up and knelt behind her without breaking our connection. I caught her top leg and hooked her knee over my forearm, opening her fully and making her vulnerable to me. I rolled my hips against her, groaning as she clenched down tight around me.

Her hands fisted in the sheets beneath her. “James...*oh*,...there, please...right there...”

I deliberately changed my angle and smiled when her eyes flew open so she could glare at me.

“Bratty sub,” I said, and smacked her ass.

She cried out, the liquid heat of her pussy spasming around me.

She was so sweet...so sweet, hot and perfect.

But then, maybe I wasn't in the mood for a sweet, hot, perfect fuck.

Pulling out, I climbed out of bed and walked around to her side. “Sit up.”

She gave me a bleary-eyed look, her lips pursed as if she was considering denying me.

Closing my hand around my cock, I stroked idly and waited.

Her gaze dropped to my hand, and she watched, lips parted, as I repeated the rough caress.

Slowly, she sat up, the twisted and tangled blankets falling away to reveal flushed tits and those tight, perfect curves.

I grabbed the blankets and pulled them away, glad we slept in this room—*my* room, not the boring room where we'd slept the first night.

“Who do you belong to, Tina?”

She lifted a hand and stroked the golden padlock nestled in the hollow near her throat. With a timid smile, she replied, “You.”

“Good girl.” I moved to the bed and took her hand, tugging her off the bed, then urging her to her knees. “Open.”

I barely gave her the time to comply before fisting my hands in her hair and thrusting into her mouth.

She moved, and I tightened my grip. “No. Be still,” I ordered. “I’m going to fuck your mouth, then your pussy, then your ass. You’re going to take it. And when I move to your pussy and your ass, you’re going to love it. Aren’t you?”

She gave an awkward shake of her head as best she could with my dick in her mouth. When my cock bumped the back of her throat, I didn’t pull out this time. “Swallow, Tina...swallow my dick. I want to feel your throat, baby.”

She tensed at first, jerking instinctively, then, slowly, she did as I ordered, and I groaned at the delicious sensation. Forcing myself to retreat before it became too much, I pulled out and let her catch her breath.

“Again,” I demanded, fisting my cock and pressing the tip to her lips again. This time, I kept my hand in place, marking her limit, while the other tangled in her hair, holding her in place as I did as I’d promised—fucking her mouth roughly.

When I knew it was too much, I pulled out and urged her to her feet. I swept her up in my arms and placed her on the bed. “Stay.”

Last night, the possessive need I had manifested in a desire to love her gently and sweetly.

Today, it was the exact opposite.

I surveyed the room, taking in the tools and furniture. Everything was outfitted to serve a use if I ever found a permanent sub. I recalled the fantasies I’d had involving Tina and realized it wasn’t all that easy to figure out where to begin.

Tina shifted behind me.

I didn’t want her to cool down, so I went to the display of toys and tools on the far wall and removed a simple spreader bar, then grabbed wrist cuffs.

Her cheeks were already pink as I started back to her.

“I love how your blushes start at your tits and work up,” I told her.

She went even redder.

“Stand up.”

She did so, still not speaking.

I turned her around and put the wrist restraints on, securing them at shoulder level, with the chain running behind her back. These restraints had a longer connecting chain than others, giving her a limited range of movement, which eased issues with blood flow. “Face the bed.”

Once she’d done that, I kicked one ankle gently, widening her stance until I could put the spreader bar in place.

Her breathing was ragged by the time I rose to my full height and moved behind her. She fisted her hands, whimpering as I cupped her breasts from behind.

“Now...how do we get started?” Skimming my fingers down her side, I murmured, “Do I bend you over the bed and fuck you like this?”

“Yes, sir. Please.”

I chuckled at the eagerness in her tone.

“Tempting...” I nudged her closer, let her move over the bed, but before she was flat, I tangled my hand in her hair. “But I don’t think so. Maybe...”

I nudged her to turn, smiling as her lust-fogged gaze collided with mine.

“This.” I boosted her onto the bed and laid her back, her hands helpless next to her head and legs spread wide by the bar at her ankles. “Lift your feet to the bed, Tina.”

Her muscles strained, but she managed it with relative ease. I retrieved a couple of thin chains from the nightstand at my side. Her eyes widened as I connected the wrist restraints to the spreader bar, leaving her completely exposed, vulnerable, with her pussy open and ankles in the air.

I pushed on the spreader bar, taking care not to abuse muscles still warm from sleep.

She whimpered as I leaned down and kissed a path to her core, then licked, spreading her folds from top to bottom with my tongue.

Stabbing at her clit with my tongue, I reveled in the rough cry of my name on her lips.

She jerked when I did it again. I let go of the bar to cup her ass and lift it slightly, stealing what little leverage she had. "Be still, pet. You don't want to interrupt my breakfast...I might punish you, and not the way you like, either."

Her answer was a stream of long, filthy curses. But she went still, quivering in anticipation.

I made the mistake of glancing up at her. The sight of my collar on her, the padlock glinting in the morning light, her body bound for me, breasts rising and falling with every ragged breath was too much. I surged to my feet, caught her hips, hauled her to the edge of the bed, right onto my cock.

She screamed, the penetration rough and hard. Holding her hips in a savage grip, I drove into her again, harder.

"James!"

I stared at her face, flushed with need and her lids heavy over her eyes as she squirmed and flexed around my dick.

Letting go of her hips, I grabbed the spreader bar instead and pushed down, forcing her knees to her chest and opening her even more.

She flew apart.

I clenched my teeth against the urge to come and thrust into her silky pussy again and again.

While she was coming down from her second climax, I caught her hips and eased them onto the bed before stepping away.

I grabbed what I needed and dropped the items on the bed. I released the chains that bound her hands. I brought them forward, clicking them into place with a shorter length this time, guiding her legs until her knees bent with wrists between her open thighs.

Hazed eyes met mine, and she blinked, looking sleepy and sated.

I picked up the sex toy I'd recently bought with her in mind and slicked lubricant over it before turning it on.

She arched with a ragged sob as I pushed it into place. The flared nodule in the middle held it in place as it vibrated, the penis-shaped extension thrusting into her as the external "butterfly" fluttered against her clit.

"Do you like your new present?" I asked, standing in front of her now as I poured lubricant into my palm.

"I...I...*oh!*"

She jerked against the restraints, her fingers straining as if she wanted to grab the teasing toy working its magic in her pussy.

She couldn't. I hadn't allowed her that much give with the chains.

Cock, now slick with lube, I added more to my hands and slicked my fingers over her anus. "I'm going to fuck your ass now, Tina. Hard. Are you ready?"

"Yes!" she all but shouted.

Smiling, I tucked the head of my cock against the tight hole and watched hungrily as it yielded to me—as *she* yielded. She went still, shivering and tense, body gleaming with a flush as I filled her.

Halfway, she tensed. I stopped and withdrew, then pushed into her again. She tensed again, so I gripped her ankles and rocked against her, letting her acclimate to my possession. "Open for me," I said, staring into her eyes. "Give me everything...you know I won't hurt you."

She shuddered and jerked. Through the thin membrane separating me from her pussy, I felt the vibrations. "I feel that toy in your cunt, Tina. It's fucking you good, isn't it? Do you like it?"

“Yes,” she said, a whimper following the confession.

“I’ll fuck you better. Relax...”

She clenched instead, a loud cry escaping her. “Harder, James...*please!*”

I froze, not sure I’d heard her right.

But then her eyes flew wide and locked on mine. “Harder...*please...now...*”

I drove into her, not fast, but relentlessly, the soft tissues of her anal sheath yielding to me. When I withdrew, it was to her pleading moans for more.

“Do you want more, Tina?”

“Yes...James, please, *yes!*”

I slapped her ass. “You’re my sub, Tina. When I’m fucking you, you don’t call me by my name unless I give you permission.”

“Yes,” she sighed, squirming to deepen our connection. “Yes, master...I’m sorry.”

I went rigid, eyes boring into hers.

A teasing smile flirted with her lips, and I cursed. She was teasing, pushing, but I didn’t care. Holding her hips in an iron grip, I drove into her, harder this time, and she cried out in pained pleasure. “Yes...*yes...please...*”

“Call me *master*, pet,” I ordered.

“Master, please...*please!*”

Setting my feet wider, I pulled her hips closer. I slammed into her, feeling the final sweet yielding off her muscles as she opened and accepted my domination over her delicious body.

Two strokes later and she came, hard, a rush of liquid flowing from her cunt despite the toy pulsing inside her.

I pulled out, flipped her onto her stomach, spread her cheeks with my palms and pushed inside her snug ass while she was still caught in her climax. It set her off again, her muscles quivering and clamping tight around me.

“Harder!”

I unleashed the grip of control I’d barely clung to and fucked her fully, completely, with not even a shred of control.

And when I came, the orgasm was so powerful. It left my head spinning, more than a little.

“STILL SORE?”

Tina sat in my lap, her head on my shoulder while the hot water of the jacuzzi bubbled and frothed around us.

We’d taken a shower, then I picked her up and carried her to the small, glass-enclosed space where I’d had a jacuzzi built into a natural stone basin. Tina told me it looked like an oasis, and I had to agree.

With her in my arms, it felt like paradise.

“Just a little.” Her lips skimmed my cheek, and teasingly she added, “I don’t know if I’m going to be up for that kind of rodeo for a few days, cowboy. But this is the best sort of soreness ever.”

“Cowboy, huh?” I looked down at her to find her grinning.

She pursed her lips. “The best damn cowboy.”

I laughed at that and kissed her.

We lapsed into silence, comfortable with each other. To be honest, I’d never been with anyone this easy to *be* with. People, women specifically, might call me difficult to be with or even high maintenance. But Tina made it seem otherwise.

I stroked my hand up her back. “Do you want to do anything today?”

“Hmmm.” After a moment, she said, “Waffles.”

“You want to *do* waffles? That’s a kink I’m not familiar with, baby.”

She poked me in the side. “Ha, ha. I’m hungry, and I want waffles.”

Then she threw a leg over my lap, straddling me. “Do you have a waffle iron?”

“No.” I didn’t even have to consider it.

“James...” She placed her hands, palms down on my chest, a patient exasperation on her pretty face. “You have a kitchen that could put a five-star Michelin chef to shame. And you don’t have a *waffle* iron?”

“Baby, the only things in my kitchen are things I know how to *use*.” Pressing a kiss to the sensitive space behind her ear, I nipped her earlobe. “That means a couple of skillets, a can opener, a couple of spatulas and...um, I don’t know a bunch of other stuff.”

“Uncultured brute.” She gave me a playful swat.

“Guilty.” I kissed her, running my fingers through hair that had yet to dry from our shower. “How about we get dressed and go into town? I know a place that has a fantastic brunch, then we can shop for these so-called ‘cultured’ waffle irons, pick up groceries, and you can make waffles tomorrow?”

FORTY-FIVE

TINA

I WOKE UP FEELING THE URGE TO GO FOR A NICE, LONG RUN, ALL THE ENERGY in my body begging for an outlet.

A smile curved my lips, then grew into an all-out grin as I cuddled with James. His body was cooler than mine. I'd stolen the blankets again. After wiggling, I could untwist them and toss the heavier one over him.

He didn't wake up.

The scent of him filled my head, and I shifted to rest my head on his shoulder. Still asleep, his arm came around me.

The unconscious action made me smile.

My mind had gone and taken this crazy turn. A few months ago, I never would have imagined it—imagined *him* or my reaction to James. Now it was getting harder to envision a time without him.

On the heels of that thought came a sadder one.

Generally, on a Sunday, I'd be deciding what to take to my parents' house for our regular weekly dinner. There, I'd play with my niece and nephew, tease Dina and Ned, and let my mother fuss over me while Dad told her to stop hovering.

I'd visited my parents, but I hadn't talked to Dina much. Not since she'd exploded over James being in my life.

I hated the emotion she'd brought out in me. I felt I had to choose between the man I was falling in love with and the family who'd always supported me.

Time, I told myself. *She just needs time.*

Her biggest concern was James would use me, then drop me and leave me humiliated. When that didn't happen, she'd come to see she was wrong, and we could move on, right?

The dismal feelings sapped the buoyant energy inside, and I lost interest in going for a run. Instead, I burrowed even closer to James and closed my eyes.

WE SPENT the hottest part of the day in the pool and relaxing on the nearby chaise lounges that rested under the protective shade of a cheerily striped cabana.

Despite the shelter and my repeated applications of sunblock, by mid-afternoon, I called it quits. "I better head in, otherwise I'll be redder than a lobster."

James gathered his towel and phone.

"You don't need to come in," I told him.

"I know." He came up behind me and wrapped his arms around me, nuzzling my bare neck, except for the collar. "I have this urge to strip you out of your bathing suit and fuck you senseless."

"Oh...well, if you insist." I smiled, heat already unfurling in my belly.

"I do."

SEVERAL HOURS LATER, I woke alone and disoriented, staring at the TV in front of me. Why was I sleeping on the couch?

We'd gone swimming, had a shower...James had fucked me senseless, just as promised. A late lunch, we'd settled down to watch a movie...and I'd fallen asleep. From the sight of the soft golden light falling in through the blinds, it made me think the day was pretty much gone.

Somewhere behind me, I heard my phone ring, followed by a muttered curse from James.

Yawning, I sat up and twisted to find him standing there with a resigned look on his face and my phone in his hand.

"Guess that was a waste of energy," he teased as I took it.

The ringing had already stopped, but the notification flashed over the screen. A missed call. One of several.

"It was your sister," he said, coming to join me on the couch. "I was trying to dismiss the call."

"Really?" I cocked a brow at him.

"Really." He leaned over and pressed a kiss to my lips, a hard, decisive one. "You dropped off a little before seven, figured you must have been exhausted. I didn't want her waking you up."

"Because I'm exhausted or because it's Dina?" I asked softly.

"Mostly the former, but a bit of the later," he admitted. Reaching up, he pushed his hand through my hair. "She's hurting you, treating you like she has."

I couldn't deny that. But...

Shifting my gaze to his, I said, "You can't fix that hurt, James. This is between Dina and me, and we'll have to be the ones to work things out. Okay?"

His jaw tightened, and he averted his gaze. But eventually, he looked me in the eye and nodded. "Okay."

I leaned toward him with a kiss, then murmured against his lips, "Thank you."

He tried to deepen the kiss, but I nudged him back.

“I need to take care of a few things.” Namely, I had to hit the bathroom. But Dina had called five times and texted twice. I couldn’t avoid her any longer. I had to make this call.

Phone in hand, I went to the bathroom. I didn’t call Dina, though. I needed my head in the right space before dealing with Dina, and my head was never in the right space after a long nap.

Ten minutes later, I headed into the kitchen and poured a glass of sweet tea from the fridge. I sat at the breakfast nook, staring out the window at the spectacular canvas the sunset had made of the sky.

“You okay?” James asked, moving to join me.

“Yeah. Getting ready to call Dina,” I told him with a weak smile. I placed the phone on the surface of the breakfast nook and retrieved my sister’s contact information. I switched the call to speakerphone when the ringing began.

“Tina!”

The strident tone of her voice immediately put me on edge. “Yeah? Sorry I missed your call. I was sleeping. I’ve had a bus—”

“Where *are* you?” she demanded, interrupting me. The words came out shaky and on edge, coming so fast they spilled over one another.

“I’m with James,” I said, mentally bracing myself for the confrontation to come and how to handle it. My plan so far was that Dina would have to accept it, or I’d stop talking to her until she *was* ready.

“Oh, thank goodness. Give me a minute...” Over the phone, I heard her unsteady breathing and then Ned talking to her.

“Dina?”

She didn’t answer, and my unease grew by leaps and bounds.

I picked up my phone.

James slid off the stool, his hand settling on the small of my back.

I could still hear Ned talking, and the soothing words he spoke to my sister weren't doing shit to make me feel better. "*Just breathe, Dina...it's okay. You want me to talk...okay, okay...*"

"Dina, either you tell me what the hell is going on or put Ned on the phone. *Now,*" I demanded, feeling a little sick inside.

She took a deep breath, and I could hear the watery, uneven rhythm even on the phone line.

"I've got it, okay,?" she said.

I had no idea if that was directed at Ned or me, but she kept talking, so I didn't care.

"Tina, there's a fire on your street."

"I... what?" I looked up at James, not sure if I'd heard her right.

"It's your house," she said. "One of your neighbors called me when she didn't get an answer from you on your phone...that woman you've helped with her cats when she goes on vacation? Maryse?"

"No, that's Mavis. Mavis has the cats. Maryse has the big Doberman that likes to escape and terrorize everybody, only he's a big coward who couldn't scare a fly," I said, the words coming out oddly toneless. "A fire? Where?"

"*At your house,* Tina." The tone in her voice was rising in pitch.

James took the phone from me, his touch gentle.

I stared at him, dumbfounded.

He put it on speaker, then set it on the counter before wrapping a supporting arm around me. "Dina, it's James. What's going on?"

There were no snide comments or insults. That was strange. But I couldn't tell if it was weird or not. I was having a hard time processing, though. The entire world felt disconnected.

"Tina's house is on fire. It's on the news," she said. Her voice broke. "It looks like everything will be lost. The firefighters are trying, but..."

Her voice hitched, then broke. “I’ve been trying to call you for almost a half-hour, Tina. I was so scared.”

“I’m fine,” I said, still feeling set apart from everything. Maybe I was in shock. “I’m fine. I’m with James. I’m fine.”

He gave me a worried look.

“Tina...” Dina’s voice came to me over the line.

I stared at my phone on the counter, not sure what to do. An idea finally occurred, and I nodded. “I think I should drive over there. The firefighters might think I’m in the house, so I should let them know I’m not there, right?”

Dina didn’t answer.

And when I looked at James, he only cupped my cheek and watched me, the concern in his eyes deepening.

“I’ll leave now,” I said into the growing silence.

“Tina,” Dina said.

“I’ll drive her, Dina,” James said, not looking away from me. “I’ll stay with her and make sure she’s okay.”

That was probably a good idea. I wasn’t sure if I was okay or not.

I probably wasn’t.

Shit. My house was on fire, for Pete’s sake.

I wasn’t supposed to be okay, right?

“Tina?” Dina’s voice was soft.

“Yes?”

“I love you.”

Frowning at the phone, I said, “Of course you do.”

Then I tapped the icon to disconnect the call. We didn’t have time to talk about any of that, did we?

My house was on fire.

“Tina.”

James took my chin in his hand and made me look at him.

“Take a breath,” he ordered.

“I am breathing.”

“You’re in shock,” he said in a flat, hard voice. “Take a breath. *Now.*”

As his fingers closed around my upper arms, I did as he’d ordered.

And suddenly, the impact of that call slammed into me.

“James...” Fear punched into me, hard and fast.

He pulled me to his chest. “It’s okay, baby. We’ll handle it. We’ll *handle* it.”

But all I could think was, *how?*

FORTY-SIX

TINA

“TINA, THERE’S A FIRE ON YOUR STREET.”

Thirty-four minutes had passed since Dina said those words.

James had taken the phone from me and turned on the speaker so he could talk to Dina. His concerned gaze had held me the entire time.

“Dina, it’s James. What’s going on?”

“Tina’s place is on fire. It’s on the news. It looks bad. The firefighters are trying, but...I’ve been calling you for almost a half-hour, Tina. I was so scared.”

“My home is on fire,” I said softly, looking at the clock, willing the car to go faster. How long did it take for a fire to destroy it all? Would I still *have* a place to live?

“Tina.”

James’ voice was low but steady.

It anchored me.

Reaching out blindly, I took his hand.

“It will be okay,” he said, his words pulling my attention. The lights on the dashboard reflected on him, highlighting the planes and hollows of his handsome face. He shot me a quick look, then kissed the back of my hand. “It *will* be okay.”

“Will it?”

He squeezed my hand. “Yes. We’ll handle this, Tina,” he said as he slowed for the road to my subdivision.

My eyes were drawn to the smoke billowing up in the sky as if a bomb had exploded. There was so much of it. As we approached, the dull orange glow became obvious.

“Is it still burning?” I asked, tugging my hand from James’ to grip the seat.

“I don’t...” His voice roughened, then trailed off.

As he turned into the small, quiet subdivision where I lived, my stomach twisted. He didn’t need to answer. I could see for myself. Small flames licked up into the sky. He cranked the steering wheel to make the final turn, and sirens of another fire truck came screaming onto the street.

It was obvious to me before I even saw it.

“My home’s gone,” I murmured, a hollow feeling settling in the pit of my stomach.

James didn’t respond. There was really nothing to say and he must have understood. I was grateful. I didn’t have the energy to take on anything new, even the simple task of having a conversation. He reached over and rubbed my neck. His fingers soothed the skin above the delicate chain of the necklace-styled collar he’d put on me so recently.

“Are you ready to go look?” he asked after several long minutes had passed.

I hadn’t realized we’d stopped.

I took a deep breath and said, “Give me a minute.”

“Take your time, baby.”

Closing my eyes, I did a mental exercise I’d learned in high school I’d used for shooting competitions. I attempted to clear my mind of everything. But it didn’t work as effectively now, but then again, there was a big difference between focusing on a competition and trying to hold it together when my home was burning to the ground.

“Let’s get it over with.” I squared my jaw. My voice didn’t sound anywhere near steady, but at least I wasn’t crying.

James squeezed my neck gently.

We had to abandon the car. There was still a half-block ahead of us. The police had already established a cordon, the yellow tape looking oddly garish under the flashing red, blue, and yellow lights from various emergency vehicles.

We made it less than ten yards when an officer near the yellow police tape held up a hand.

“That’s my home.” My voice came out in barely a whisper. I stared past him at the angry red glow that had devoured my little home. I’d worked so *hard* on the small place, been so damned proud of it.

“Ma’am?”

I blinked at the officer, not understanding.

“She said that’s her home, officer,” James said, moving to stand closer, his thumb stroking the back of my hand.

“Yes, ma’am.” The officer looked us up and down, then focused on me. “Do you have your ID on hand?”

Automatically, I reached for the phone wallet, only to remember I’d left it in the car.

But as I turned to tell James, he held out the vivid pink case to me.

“I saw it on the console,” he said. “Figured you might need it.”

Nodding, I opened the magnetized flap on the back and held it open to the cop. Man, I hoped he didn’t expect me to pull out the license. My hands were shaking too badly for that much coordination. He flicked a look at it then gave it back to me.

The officer lifted the yellow tape and said, “Come on through but stay with me until I figure out who you need to talk to.”

I didn't particularly want to be closer to the burning remnants of my home, but I ducked under the tape, tightening my grip on James' hand. I'd never been the kind of woman who leaned on a man for comfort or strength. Even with Cecil, I'd never looked to him for support—although James was a million times better than Cecil.

The feel of James' hand tightening around mine was the steadying guidance I needed. We followed the police officer's instructions and stood by his cruiser less than ten feet away.

James leaned against the police car and tugged me into his arms. I let him, but I didn't give in to the temptation to bury my face and hide from the reality in front of me.

Shouts rose into the air, the words unintelligible but the urgency unmistakable.

James tensed, picking up on the increased activity in front of us. Dread wrapped a fist around my throat as several of the firefighters backed away, each of them shouting to another.

A wall crumbled. Glass exploded from the windows and more flames shot into the sky.

"Tina? Oh, thank God you're okay."

Swallowing around the knot in my throat, I saw Mavis, my neighbor, rushing to me, her white-blond hair pulled into a messy ponytail. She was always well dressed, but tonight she wore a pair of red and white polka pajama bottoms and a worn tank top.

As she came closer, her arms were wide open, and she hurled herself at me, holding me tight.

When we broke, I saw her gaze flicker to James. "This is James. My... boyfriend."

I wasn't sure how else to introduce him.

Mavis offered James her hand and a watery smile. "Hi. I'm Mavis."

"Mavis. Do you know who called and reported the fire?"

“Me.” Mavis winced, then heaved out a heavy sigh. The three of us stood shoulder to shoulder, watching as the firefighters struggled to contain the fire that had grown larger since the collapse of the wall. “Normally, I wouldn’t have been home. I was supposed to be at a friend’s house...a baby shower. But I wasn’t feeling well, so I... well...” Her words trailed off and she shot James a look.

“Anyway, I was in my kitchen and I thought I saw smoke in *your* kitchen.” Mavis tried to laugh. It came out sounding more like a sob. “If it was *my* kitchen full of smoke, that’d make sense, but you aren’t the kind who ruins a pot just by boiling water.”

Tears spilled as I reached for her. She shook her head and held up a hand.

“No. No hugs or I’ll start bawling, for real.” She swiped at the tears running down her cheeks. “I ran over there—pounded on the door. It was already hot. From the front porch, I could see in...I could see the fire, Tina!”

She sniffed, then her voice settled. “I broke the glass on the window next to the door, and reached in...” As she spoke, she rubbed her arm.

I looked down and saw the bandage. “Oh, Mavis. You hurt yourself.”

“Just a little,” she said. “I’ll have my boss look at it this week, so don’t fuss.”

She bit her lip and looked away.

“Mavis?”

“The fire got worse soon as I broke that window.” She swiped at the tears again. “Tony is talking to the cops...he’s not on shift now. He pulled into the driveway about the time I broke the window and came running up—saw the smoke pouring out. He grabbed me before I could do anything else. But I was so scared you might be inside...”

I hugged her. “Thank you.”

“Tina!”

Dina’s voice rang out in my ears, and I turned. She pushed through the people gathered at the edge of the cordoned area, but an officer stopped her from lifting the tape to get to me.

I ran to her, James following close behind.

As I caught her in my arms, James spoke to the cop, his tone low.

“I was so scared,” Dina said, her voice a whisper in my ear. “Tina, I called and called and you never answered...I don’t know what I would have done if you’d been inside...I’m so sorry, I’ve been a bitch. I’m so sorry...”

“Shhhh...” Hugging her as tightly as she hugged me, I closed my eyes. “It’s okay. It’s okay...”

The heat of the fire reached us even from yards away and we trembled, clinging to the other.

Finally, we peeled apart, and I met Dina’s eyes, so similar to my own. Offering a weak smile, I said, “Not the way I wanted for us to make up, you know?”

“Yeah, I know.” She sniffed and made another attempt to dry her mascara-stained eyes.

“Tina.”

Hearing Ned’s soft voice, I turned to hug my brother-in-law.

“Thank God you’re safe,” he said as we broke apart. He glanced past me and I turned to see James standing there, eyes on the fire and arms crossed over his chest as he left me to my family.

“James.”

He looked at me and came over only after I nodded toward my family.

I made brief introductions, shooting a glance toward the fire every few seconds. Then Dina surprised me and gave James a fierce hug. He looked stunned, although he hid the emotion quickly.

“Thank you, James,” Dina said. She stepped back and looked him in the eye. “If Tina hadn’t been with you tonight...” Her voice broke on the last words and she tucked her chin to her chest.

“No thanks needed.” James put a hand on her shoulder and squeezed gently, then stepped away so Ned could pull her into his arms.

James came to me and did the same, but he tugged me against him with my back to his chest, so I could look at my home.

“How could this have happened?” I asked softly.

“I don’t know.” He rubbed his cheek against mine. “But we’ll figure it out.”

FORTY-SEVEN

MAXIMUS

HOURS HAD PASSED WHEN AN OFFICER APPROACHED AND ASKED FOR BOTH our IDs. He collected Tina's information, then mine, and questioned us about our activities throughout the day and when Tina had been there last.

Tina asked why they needed the information and the cop brushed it off, saying, "Just routine, ma'am."

Normally, a vague answer like that would piss me off, and I would demand to know more. Right now, I just wanted people to leave her *alone*.

It didn't happen.

The Red Cross showed up, a skinny guy with dreads in a loose ponytail at his nape, and wire-framed glasses. He spoke quietly to Tina as he explained the services available through the charity. She took his name and number, gripping a pamphlet with a hand that went bloodless at the knuckles from her grip.

Neighbors came and went. An older couple brought coffee, others brought bottles of cold water, the chill a welcome relief against throats irritated by the smoke.

The crowd thinned eventually until it was Dina, Ned, Tina, and me. Various emergency workers still milled around, but other than that, it relieved me things seemed to have died down.

But Tina didn't look relieved at all. She looked stressed, and all I wanted to do was sweep her up in my arms and bundle her away from all of this.

I wanted to stand between her and everybody who came rushing up to ask stupid or irrelevant questions without considering how they might affect her. She held up with the dignity of a damn queen—and yet it triggered something inside me that made me want to tear her away, protect her.

I couldn't stop thinking about Dina's words earlier after she hugged me as we watched the fire burn.

“If Tina hadn't been with you tonight...”

I'd almost rather she still hated my guts because I couldn't get that statement out of my head.

I doubt Tina had noticed. She was caught up in watching the destruction of her home, but I'd noticed two different people approaching the officers and the reactions of those cops told me they had concerns.

Each time, the officer in question wrote down their information. Names and numbers, I would assume.

One of them was a neighbor named Randall Greer, who came over and introduced himself to me after checking on Tina. I watched as she hugged the older man affectionately, then continued to stare at the dismal scene, head pressed to Dina's and her back to us.

She didn't see the considerate look on the man's face.

I cocked a brow at him. He hesitated, then said, “I'll call her in a day or so. I need to speak with her about...today. But she's got enough on her shoulders.”

“Can I ask what you need to talk to her about?”

A faint smile quirked his lips. “You seem nice enough, son, but I don't know you. Take care of her.”

He ambled off with a limp, leaning on a carved wooden cane.

Glancing at Tina, I saw she'd missed the interaction.

Even though it was frustrating, it was for the best. I had a bad feeling in my gut and if Greer thought she needed a day or two to steady, then it was

something that would hit hard.

Tina seemed fairly familiar with her neighbors. Anyone who knew her beyond a passing acquaintance would think she was anything *but* a strong, confident woman.

If she needed a day or two, it was going to be something bad.

“...stay with us...you know, that right?”

Dina’s voice yanked me out of my thoughts, and I focused on the conversation.

“I’ll let you know, okay?” Tina rubbed her sister’s back.

“You know you’re welcome anytime, Tina.” Ned smiled at her, but his gaze shifted to me, brow cocked.

“Tina has a place to stay,” I said, moving to take her free hand. Kissing the back of it, I looked at Dina. “She’s spent the past few days at my place, so she has clothes and toiletries there. That will tide her over tonight and I’ll make sure she gets more tomorrow.”

Dina studied me, but there was no judgment in her gaze this time. Rather, it was the piercing look of a woman measuring up someone who wanted to take care of her little sister.

“I’ll be fine, Dina. Tonight, at least, I’ll stay with James. Assuming I can get any sleep.” Tina sighed, then, with a smile, she shoulder-bumped Dina. “I’ll be fine, Dina. Although I’ll probably haul you into helping me buy clothes sometime soon. You know me...I’d rather live in jeans and t-shirts.”

“Heaven help me.” Dina’s words were light, but seemed a little forced.

“Big sister duties.” Tina gave her sister a one-armed hug.

“*Ugh*. Okay.” Dina returned the hug, but her eyes were on me. “You better take care of her.”

“Don’t worry. I will.”

Tina squeezed my hand as we watched Dina walk away. She turned into my arms and pressed her face against my chest. “This is all a nightmare.”

“Baby, I know.” Kissing her temple, I smoothed a hand gently over her spine. Trying to make her smile, I said, “Do you give me brownie points for not hauling you to my car, and taking you home so I can lock you up where I know you’re safe?”

“Maybe one brownie point.” She took a deep breath, blew it out, and some of the tension seemed to melt away. “I saw you grit your teeth every time someone rushed up with nosy questions. Thank you for letting me handle it.”

“I definitely deserve brownie points for that.” I gave a half-grin.

She laughed softly. “I guess.” Then, with a sigh, she turned in the circle of my arms and rested against me. The fire was now mostly embers and smoke. Several fire trucks had departed, while a couple of new vehicles, including two with *Fire Marshal* emblazoned on the side, had arrived.

One of the fire marshals had already taken Tina’s information, promising to contact her later.

I noticed as he talked with other officers he’d shoot Tina a subtle glance every once in a while. I didn’t like the way he was looking at Tina and I’d braced myself for him to come over, but he hadn’t.

I wanted her out of here before anyone turned her thoughts in the direction mine had already gone.

An officer started in our direction, a fire marshal at his side. We hadn’t met this marshal. She was older, maybe mid-forties, and her mere presence made my tension level soar.

“Ms. Siegler.” The officer addressed Tina, but nodded to both of us. “This is Beth Creedy. She’s with the Houston Fire Department and she wanted to say hello.”

As the officer left my dread crept higher. Tina offered her hand to the woman. Beth Creedy clasped Tina’s hand in both of hers, and in a soothing, calm voice, said, “I’m so sorry about your home.”

“Thank you.” Tina’s lip quivered, but she firmed it.

“I know you have a lot on your mind with all of this, so unless there’s anything you think I should know, I’ll leave my card for now.” She paused, and her reaction was so seamless, the brief hesitation wasn’t awkward. “I’ve already gotten your information from the officers on the scene, and I’ll contact you shortly so we can talk. Will that be okay?”

“Of course.” Tina nodded.

“Good. Now...I know the Red Cross has already come by and left information...”

Tina looked around as if searching for something.

“Don’t worry, I have it,” I patted my pocket where I’d tucked the brochure. “You dropped it earlier when you were talking with Dina.”

Beth glanced at me with a nod. “Keep hold of that pamphlet. Look at it when you have time. It has information on things you’ll need to do, but don’t feel obligated to do anything tonight. Just get some rest. We won’t know anything for a while.”

I clasped Tina’s hand, hoping this would be our cue to leave. “So it would be okay if we took off now?”

“Yes, Mr. Maximus.” She nodded at me. “The officers mentioned that Ms. Siegler will stay with you tonight?”

“Yes.” I didn’t offer anything else or ask why it mattered.

“Good.”

Beth Creedy had one hell of a poker face. Probably useful in her line of work.

Still, I had a vague sense she wasn’t asking merely out of politeness.

“It’s probably best if you have somebody with you,” she added, still holding Tina’s hand. “The shock of this alone...most people find comfort in being with someone after such an event.”

“Can’t imagine why.” Tina’s attempt at humor fell flat. She tugged her hand from Beth’s and turned to me. “I don’t want to be here anymore.”

FORTY-EIGHT

TINA

THE ACRID SCENT OF SMOKE STILL CLUNG TO MY NASAL PASSAGES.

Or at least the memory of it remained.

I'd showered three times since James had taken me to his place last night. But that oily, dirty stink felt like it had stained me all the way through.

James nearly bumped into me as I paused in the doorway of my small office, dressed in a new pantsuit. I'd let James buy it for me—*after* he'd agreed to let me pay him back once I dealt with the insurance shit. My eyes darted around.

"I don't even know why I'm here. If somebody comes in, I'll probably fall apart." I threw a hand up in the air and mimicked what I would say to a customer. "*Thanks for calling. Did you know my home burned to the ground last night? What kind of design needs are you shopping for?*"

James nudged me farther into the office before locking the door behind us.

"Easy solution. Just stay closed for business today," he said.

I gave him a deflated look.

"I'm serious. You just went through a harrowing event. Would *you* expect someone you used for services to open their business after a similar situation?"

“Well, no.” Huffing out a sigh, I said, “Fine. But I need to put up a note or something on the door—and call the lady next door, see if she’ll take any deliveries.”

Fifteen minutes later, James and I stood in the small space I’d set aside for a break area.

“You want to go back to my place?” he asked, his hand cradling my cheek. “Or if you like, we can pick up some more clothes for you. Lingerie, perhaps...?”

The question came out purely innocent, but I saw the hint of a smile. He was trying to distract me.

There were better ways to do that.

I rose onto my toes and nipped at his jaw, pressing my hands to his chest before kissing my way up to his ear.

“Maybe later. But for now...I think I’ll let you decide how we spend the next hour. Master.”

Sexual awareness sparked around us, James’ body going taut.

As he eased back, he skimmed a hand up my side, the palm brushing over the curve of my breast. My nipples were already tight and his light caress made them ache.

“Are you suggesting I fuck you here in your office, Tina?” He closed his hand around my throat, thumb resting in the hollow there, right above the collar.

Desire filled my body as he said those words, his tone lowered and cool, his face turning remote.

“Well?” He shifted his grip so he could press his thumb under my chin and tip my head back to look in my eyes. “Is that what you want?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, *what*, Tina?” He lowered his head, lips a bare breath from mine, and I tried to close the distance, to kiss him.

He wouldn't let me.

"Yes, Master."

"Hmmm..." His thumb moved to my lips, covering them. "I was thinking about punishing you because you tried to kiss me without my permission. But you made such a sweet request. Maybe I'll see how well you please me before I decide if you need punishing. Are you going to please me, Tina?"

"Yes."

He cocked a brow.

"Yes, Master," I said, the words slightly muffled against the pressure of his thumb.

His gaze dropped, lingered on my lips. "I think you want to be punished. You beg so pretty, but then you act so bad. It makes me think I should spank you, then make you suck my cock until I come."

I wanted to answer. Heat exploding in my core, like fireworks on the Fourth of July, only so much sweeter, so much more devastating. But when my mouth opened, he applied pressure with his thumb.

I opened my mouth and licked him slowly, circling with my tongue before sucking, just like I would if I had something more...substantial in my mouth.

James watched the entire time with a hooded gaze.

He tugged, and I let go with a soft *pop*, smiling with all the innocent sweetness I could.

"Is that how you'd like me to suck your cock, Master?"

"Yes...and that's exactly how you *will* suck my cock, Tina. Later."

"Later?" I poked out my lip without thinking about it.

He cupped my hips, then turned me with my back to his chest. "Later. Look around, pet. There's not much to work with here in this space. No carpet on the floor. That sorry excuse for a table isn't any place I could sit. I can't have you kneel on this tile and bruise your knees." He caught my hair and tugged it up, skimming his lips down my neck. "We'll have to buy more sturdy

furniture for your break room, darling. Later.”

“The counter...” The words shuddered out as he bit me, the pressure light enough to feel his teeth but not leave a mark. His hands skimmed my sides, and he cupped my breasts through my clothes. His fingers moved to the buttons of the sleeveless vest-styled top I wore. The vest could be worn with or without a blouse or camisole under it.

James had told me he liked it without the camisole. Now I know why.

He opened each button. “I’ll decide how I want you to suck my cock, pet,” he said, nipping my earlobe. His fingers dipped inside the top and skimmed over one lace-covered breast. “Right now, I want you out of these clothes so I can look at your delicious tits. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

The last buttons slid free under his nimble fingers and I shivered, the cool air kissing my flesh as he pulled the garment off. I went to turn, and he gripped my arm. “I haven’t said you can turn around, Tina.”

“Master, may I turn?”

“No.”

I felt him pulling away, the loss of his nearness a keen ache.

“Take off your pants, Tina.”

I went to look behind me, only to stop as he said, “You aren’t allowed to look at me, pet. Do what I said. And the panties.”

“Yes, sir.” I stepped out of the heels he’d bought me before the sleek, pale, gray pants could come off. But once I was naked, I eyed the baby-pink shoes, and smiled. “Should I put my shoes back on, Master?”

“Yes. Good girl.”

As I stepped into the shoes, I heard him coming up behind me.

He said nothing for a moment and then spoke.

“I love your ass, pet.” He palmed my ass cheek with one hand and stroked it, then moved to my hips. He reached around me and cupped my breast, pulling me back against his hard, lean form as he stroked, touched, and teased.

From one breath to the next, my mind spun and hunger took on a darker, more desperate slant. My heart rate accelerated. The air in my lungs seemed to burn. I shivered and trembled all over.

He tugged on my nipple and I whimpered, desperate for more.

“What’s wrong, pet?”

“I...” A growing need twisted through me and I shook my head, arching into his hand.

“Tina.”

Without thinking, I reached up and cupped the hand he had at my breast, tightening my grip.

“*More,*” I whispered.

He paused, skimming his fingers lower, soothing the soft, sensitive underside of my breast as he nuzzled my neck.

“How much more, Tina?”

I couldn’t find words. So I showed him, tugging on my nipple with my fingers, twisting, and pinching with more pressure than I’d ever used, until the line between pleasure and pain was so blurred, I yearned for both.

“Would you like me to hurt you, baby?”

There was no judgment in the words.

In fact, there was gentleness...*understanding.*

“*Please...*” My cheeks burned with embarrassment. I ducked, turning my face against his chest and behind the curtain of my hair.

“Don’t hide from me.” He tangled his fingers in my hair, forcing me to meet his eyes, my neck twisted so our gazes locked as he spoke. “Whatever you need from me, you tell me. I’m your Dom now and it’s my job to take care of

you, to give you what you need...and if your world goes colliding off track and you need pain with the pleasure to find your center, then you tell me.”

He dipped his head and kissed me, but it wasn't gentle. It was a hard, male demand.

I was panting when he ended it and my face was still flushed, but no longer from embarrassment.

“Now...” He gave my lower lip one last nip before lifting his head. “Tell me what you need.”

“Yes, sir.” My knees trembled and I was already so wet. “Fuck me, sir. Please. I need you to fuck me hard and rough. Make me forget everything.”

“Very good.” He tugged on my nipple, harder this time. “And you want me to hurt you a little?”

I whimpered as he increased the pressure of his fingers. “Yes...puh...please.”

“Very good...” He caught me against him once more and spun.

Then his hand was on my neck and he had me bent over. I didn't know what it was beneath me, the hard surface covered with a smooth, fine fabric that smelled of James—his suit coat. My cheek pressed against the fabric, and I breathed in a lungful of that heady scent as he brought his hand down on my ass.

I cried out.

He used more force than normal and my skin was on fire.

As my brain scrambled to process it, he thrust into me, his cock thick and full, driving all the way in. “Close your legs, pet. I want that pussy so tight around my dick, I have to fight to make you take me.”

I whimpered as I shifted to obey, grabbing onto the side of whatever he'd found to support us.

He spanked me again, then went to grip my hip, his other hand at my neck. He braced himself with a hand between my shoulder blades, fingers splayed wide.

He withdrew, slowly.

I tightened around him and pushed, trying to hold him inside me longer, but he wouldn't let me. Frustrated, I grabbed the hand on my hip.

“*James!*”

He twisted out of my grip. In an instant, my wrists were pinned at the small of my back, his fingers easily trapping them.

“You wanted to get fucked, Tina,” he said. “Have you changed your mind?”

“No!” I groaned and tugged at his hands. “I...*move*...please, sir! I want to feel you inside me.”

He withdrew instead until only the swollen head of his dick penetrated me.

“James!”

He spanked me with his free hand.

“*Sir, pet.*”

He spanked me again.

“Or *Master.*”

He spanked me again.

“When I'm fucking this body, you call me *Sir* or *Master*,” he ordered, then landed another hard blow to the burning flesh of my rump. “I *own* this body. This pussy. This ass. Your pretty tits and your bratty mouth. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Say it.”

“When you are fucking me, I'm to call you...” my voice broke off into a long, broken keening because he slowly filled me again, letting me feel *all* of him. “I'm to call you *Sir* or *Master.*”

“Why?”

“Because you own my body, Master. My pussy.”

“Good...” He traced the tip of his finger over the burning flesh of my rump, soothing it. “You did so well, I’ll give you a reward. Why don’t you tell me what you want from your Master, pet?”

“Fuck my pussy, Sir.” I was trembling now. Overcome with need and hunger until it pained me. “Please, I’m begging...fuck me hard.”

He slammed into me with enough force I bounced up onto my toes.

The hand on my upper back moved to my shoulder. The fingers around my wrists tightened.

“Hard like that, pet?”

“Yes...but faster...more...please.”

“Tell me, pet. Tell me that my pet wants her Master to fuck her harder and faster.” He withdrew, his voice a low rasp now. He rotated his hips once, and he was locked deep.

“Master, your pet is begging for you to fuck her harder and faster...please, sir.”

He did, thrusting deep and hard. I clenched tight, a moan ripping from my throat as I formed another plea, terrified he might stop and make me ask again.

I didn’t mind begging—but at this point, I was losing the ability to *think*, much less speak.

He rode me hard, his hands gripping tight enough to leave marks—and I didn’t care.

Chills racked me, chased by hot, rapid thrills, like miniature starbursts exploding inside my blood vessels.

It was so good. It was *glorious*. A carnal experience, impossible to describe with mere words.

And when he released my wrists to spank me again, I lost it, slamming straight into orgasm with a broken, ragged cry.

FORTY-NINE

TINA

THE FAINT GLOW OF THE MORNING LIGHT STREAMING THROUGH A GAP IN luxurious curtains should have alerted me to the fact that something wasn't right.

Still half-asleep, I went to roll out of bed, and promptly fell on my ass when the floor ended up being nearly a foot lower than expected.

Stunned and disoriented, I surveyed my surroundings.

Then reality hit. I'd agreed to come to James' place after being in my office for a couple of hours. I must have fallen asleep on his couch last night.

Tears stung my eyes. I dashed them away, telling myself it was from the fall. I am getting better at lying to myself these days.

I huffed out a breath and climbed to my feet. James wasn't in the room. Well, at least he hadn't witnessed my graceless tumble. But the calm feeling disappeared as soon as my eyes landed on the clock.

Shit.

Hissing out a breath, I strode into the bathroom and jumped in the shower.

Damn it.

Why did he let me sleep in? I had calls to make. There were two inspections coming up this week. Deliveries. And I was here sleeping the day away.

What the fuck?

After a quick shower, I towel dried my hair and styled it with the styling cream I had in my toiletry bag. I whipped out the moisturizer and applied it, but there was no time for makeup. The next question was what to wear.

I'd have to go to the Biscayne later today, so jeans would work. But most of the clothes I'd brought from my house for the weekend were t-shirts. I had the pantsuit James had bought me, but I needed something other than a t-shirt.

After tidying up the bathroom, I went into the bedroom and tugged out my clothes. Jeans, panties, and bra—both new and got dressed. Now, a shirt...

My gaze landed on James' closet, which was almost the size of my bedroom—or what my bedroom *used* to be.

“Stop.” I couldn't think about that right now. I had too much to do today, and I was already running behind.

I shook it off and went in search of a shirt in his closet. A flash of blue caught my eyes. A dress shirt, the cotton so fine it felt like silk.

I didn't look at the label. I'd be too scared to wear it if I knew.

I pulled it on, my fingers working the buttons on my way out of the bedroom.

The smell of coffee and bacon greeted me before I made it halfway down the stairs. Belly rumbling, I walked into the kitchen and found James cracking eggs.

“Wow.”

He glanced back at me and smiled, though he didn't look surprised to see me there, showered, dressed...wearing one of his shirts.

“Why didn't you wake me?” I asked. “It's almost ten.”

“I didn't know what time you usually got up.” He shrugged and turned back to the task at hand. “And you were worn out. I figured you needed the rest.”

“Worn out or not, I still have a job to do.”

“Since I'm the one paying for the job, I figure it won't be the end of the world if you take a day to rest and recover.”

He didn't look away from the eggs he was now beating into submission.

I narrowed my eyes at the back of his head. I considered his words, debating my response.

Was I overreacting?

Maybe. I wasn't really sure.

"That's not for you to decide, James."

He stopped beating the eggs and turned off the burner. He faced me again with arms folded over his chest and I realized he was wearing jeans and a t-shirt instead of one of his many tailored suits.

"I'm the one who hired you for the project you're working on," he said bluntly. "Anything that needs to be done at the hotel can wait another day."

I narrowed my gaze at him, hands on hips. "Yes. You hired me. But *I* am in charge of that project because you *chose* me to do it. I decide my hours and when I work, *not* you."

"You need to take a damn day off," he snapped, a vein pulsing near his temple. "I could see through you yesterday. Take the damn day off."

"No."

He shoved off the counter and stormed over to me. "You need to take a break."

"That's not your decision." Leaning in until we were practically nose to nose, I added, "You only get my submission in the bedroom—and only after you earn it. What you're doing now is a step away from crossing the line."

His temper flared in the dark, velvety brown of his eyes. "I'm not crossing the line. I'm taking *care* of you. Or at least I'm trying to."

"You crossed the damn line by making *decisions* for me!" Jabbing him in the chest with my index finger, I added, "If you're going to be like this, then maybe I shouldn't work for you."

"Tina..."

I turned away with a shake of my head.

“Stop,” I said, not looking at him. “Just...stop. I need to get to my office—I have meetings and other things to handle. And if I put them off, the *entire* project will be delayed.”

He said nothing as I left the room.

I WAS STILL BROODING about it later as I parked behind my office building. When we met Friday night, I’d driven my car to the new hotel where we had first met and my car had stayed in valet parking since.

Earlier, I’d stiffly asked James to drop me off so I could get my car and he’d done so without saying more than a few words.

That was fair. I had little to say to him, too.

Maybe later I’d be capable of logical conversation when I was less emotional. But right now was not that time.

Once inside, I checked the blinds to make sure they were closed. I knew I should unlock the front door and remove the note I’d taped up yesterday, but I still wasn’t up to handling people. James had been difficult enough. Strangers, though? Potential clients? The idiot at the real estate office at the end of the complex who kept trying to talk me into coffee, or any suitable beverage, whenever I had the time?

Okay, maybe the idiot would be acceptable because I’d be fine exploding on him and showing him the sharp edge of my temper.

But nobody else.

It would take another day or two before I was ready to talk to a potential client. I’d be fine with the inspections—I knew the people.

Sitting behind my desk, protected by the dim lights and the lowered blinds, I eyed my desk calendar. I selected a colored marker and circled the coming Thursday. Two days. I’d give myself two days to take it easy. I’d had a rough

time, but after that, I'd turn on the lights and roll up the blinds.

Feeling better with that decision, I pulled up my email on the desktop computer and opened the calendar app on my phone.

"Let's get to..."

The knock on the glass door was solid and loud.

"*Shit!*" I nearly jumped out of my seat.

Breathing hard, I stared at the shadow I could barely glimpse through the blinds.

"What the...", I muttered.

"Ms. Siegler? Are you okay there?"

"Well, fuck," I grumbled under my breath as I got up.

There was another knock, harder this time.

"Hold on," I said, raising my voice so the person could hear.

I lifted a slat on the blinds and saw a woman who was vaguely familiar and a man who wasn't.

"Can I help you?" I asked through the glass.

The man held up a badge, then presented me with his ID, identifying him as a Houston police detective.

My heart skipped a beat as I shifted my gaze to the woman.

I knew who she was now.

It was the woman I'd met from the fire department.

Slowly, I let the blinds fall back into place and opened the door. Beth Creedy gave me a gentle smile as she moved forward, taking the lead while the man shifted away.

"Hi, Tina," Beth said.

Her voice was the same, smooth and gentle, with a drawl that suggested

Georgia, or one of the Carolinas, instead of Texas.

“We need to speak with you...we tried calling your cell phone, but didn’t get through and thought we might catch you here. Is it okay if we come in?”

I wanted to tell her no, that I wanted her to wait and let me call James.

James. Not Dina. Not my mom and dad.

James.

Instead, I nodded and stepped aside, gesturing to them to enter. I shut the door behind them and re-engaged the lock. My palms were sweating. Swiping them down the sides of my blue jeans, I cut around them and went to my desk, taking the seat only because it offered some pretense of control.

“Is it okay if I sit?” Beth nodded to one of the two chairs placed in front of my desk.

“Of course. I’m sorry. Where are my manners...”

“Please, Ms. Siegler, it’s fine.” Beth waved a hand. She skimmed a look over the pictures on the walls, taking them in with curious eyes. “Are these designs finished projects?”

“Yes.” She was probably trying to calm me before dumping some shit-bomb in my lap. I was glad for the distraction. Glad for anything that didn’t remind me of the flames and the ruin.

“You’ve got a lot of talent.” She smiled and shifted her attention back to me.

“Thanks.” I gave a short answer, noticing that her partner was staring at me.

“This is Detective Baylor, with the Houston Police Department. We’ll be working together on the case,” she said, crossing her knees and resting her hands on the upper one.

“Case?” I raised my brows.

What had she meant? Was my apartment a case? *Why?*

“Yes.” She leaned in slightly, her posture conveying sympathy, but strength. “Ms. Siegler, your apartment is going to be a total loss. I imagine you figured

that out already.”

“Yes.” My throat was tight, and the word came out a whisper. I cleared my throat and said, “Is that why you’re here?”

I braced myself. I suspected I knew what she would say next.

“No.” She blew out a breath. “I did an initial review of the scene, along with one of my fellow marshals from the fire department. There are multiple parts of origin, which leads us to believe the fire was intentional.”

I stared at nothing, keeping my gaze fixed.

Beth leaned forward and said, “Ms. Siegler. Did you hear me?”

“Yes. Multiple parts of origin,” I said, the words curiously flat. “What does that mean?”

“The point of origin is just that,” Beth said. “Say there was a grease fire in the kitchen. The point of origin would be in the kitchen at the stove. There were four points of origin in your home, Tina, and traces of an accelerant, although that will take time to confirm.”

I straightened abruptly, and said, “Excuse me.”

I threw the phrase at her as I hurtled for the breakroom and my small, private restroom.

I barely made it.

Heaving up the coffee, the only thing I had this morning, my mind was lost in the churning of blood that roared in my ears. That blissful silence lasted only a few seconds, and then I heard myself retching.

“Here, take this.” Beth held a damp paper towel in an outstretched hand.

I don’t know how much time passed, but it was exactly what I needed. I dabbed my burning face and wiped my mouth.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

“Of course. Take a few minutes, then come out and talk with us, okay?”

“Yes.” Eyes closed, I listened to the click of the door shutting behind her. Once I was alone, I stared at my pallid face in the mirror over the sink.

The fire had been intentional.

On purpose.

My stomach twisted again, but I breathed through it.

What the hell was going on? Right now, everything feels wrong.

They were talking quietly by the back door when I came out of the bathroom, squeaky hinges announcing me.

“I keep meaning to oil those,” I said.

“Are you ready to talk or do you need a few minutes?” Beth asked.

“I don’t think I’ll ever be ready. But let’s do this.” I went to the fridge and stared at it stupidly for a moment, memories of James and me flashing through my mind. Maybe I should have listened to him. I should’ve taken the day off with him, like he said. I would have James to help me through this, and not have to face this horrible news alone.

But now it was too late.

I opened the fridge and grabbed a ginger ale, then turned to face my unexpected—and not particularly welcome guests.

“So, it was intentional,” I said. “You mean like...arson.” It was difficult to say the word aloud. Hearing it made it seem more real.

“Yes.”

It was the man who spoke—Detective Baylor. “It looks like arson. The investigation is still ongoing, but considering what Beth already knows about the multiple points of origin, we don’t expect to uncover anything otherwise.”

Nodding, I clutched the green can in my hands. My fingers shook as I popped the tab. I focused on keeping my hand steady as I took one small sip, willing the soda to settle my stomach.

“Um, okay.” I swallowed, trying to process all the information. “So, since it’s arson, that means...” My breathing caught in my chest and the words caught in my throat.

The fire had been set, *intentionally*.

I understood it in theory, but...*how*? It didn’t seem real?

Why? And *who*?

“Ms. Siegler?”

Forcing myself to focus on Beth, I dragged in air to my lungs. A look at her serious expression brought reality crashing down on me.

If the fire was deliberately started, then *why*? I didn’t want to go there, but my mind jumped to a more pertinent question. What was in my apartment that someone wanted to destroy?

FIFTY

MAXIMUS

I IGNORED THE FIRST CALL FROM GIANNI—AND THE FIRST THREE TEXTS.

The fourth text made me want to ignore the call that followed, but I knew if my half-sister said she would hunt me down, well...

“What?” I demanded after taking the call.

“My...aren’t we cheerful this morning,” she said harshly.

“Fuck off.” I checked my watch. “I have a Zoom conference in fifteen minutes.”

“Then you have about thirteen minutes to talk to me. That steel trap brain of yours has every detail you need for the conference already memorized.” Gianni didn’t sound at all concerned. “And regardless, I think you’re going to want to hear what I found out this morning about the fire at Tina’s place.”

Fear grabbed at my throat, but before I could say anything, Gianni continued.

“Is she there?”

“Tina? What? No.” I had a flashback to the argument we’d had. Remembering, frustration jabbed me. “She insisted on going to work. Doesn’t matter one fuck that I’m the one paying her.”

Several seconds passed with Gianni saying nothing.

“Something tells me she cares very much about her own independence, my dear brother.”

I wanted to tell Gianni to mind her own business. She didn't know a damn thing about my relationship with Tina.

"Why are you calling?" I asked, pushing aside my feelings for now.

To her credit, Gianni let me change the subject. "I've got a friend who works with the investigation department out of the Houston Fire Department. It's looking more and more like the fire at Tina's house was intentional."

"Arson?" My hand tightened on the phone, rage settling in, taking root.

"Looks like it."

"I have to go," I said.

"Hey, James...wait."

I hesitated, then said, "Make it fast."

"Listen, I don't want to go offering relationship advice or anything...at least, I normally don't. But usually, you don't do relationships. And I like Tina. You can't treat her like she's a subordinate who works for you."

I bit back the urge to point out that Tina *did* work for me. But that wasn't what she meant—and I knew it. More like, I'd already fucked up.

"She's independent," Gianni said.. "And it seems like she's worked damn hard to get where she is. If you care for her at all, respect her for *that*. If not, you two won't last."

She hung up.

Lowering the phone, I stared at nothing, thinking again of the argument that morning.

Shit.

Had I fucked up or what?

WHEN I ARRIVED at Tina's office, I could see her at her desk through the

open slats of the window blind. I went to open the door, but it was locked. Frustrated, I knocked.

She jumped, swinging her head around to look at me. Several seconds ticked by as our eyes locked, but there was no awareness in them.

A bad feeling settled inside.

I jerked on the doorknob again.

That seemed to pull Tina out of her spell. She hurried to unlock the door. I yanked it open and caught her in my arms, the anger I'd felt earlier forgotten.

She was shaking. Between those fine tremors and her pallor, she suddenly seemed frail. Turning my face into her hair, I nuzzled her. "Are you okay?"

"No," she whispered. "Hold me for a minute, okay?"

"Anytime you want."

We stood there for a long time, bodies close, feeling the mix of our energies until I felt her relax. She nudged my chest gently, and I eased my grip. As she stepped away, her eyes met mine.

Letting out a sigh of relief, she said, "I feel better now. Thank you."

She turned her back to me, and I wrapped her in my arms. I closed my eyes and kissed her head, grateful that we were in a better place than this morning.

Damn it. I could be such an idiot sometimes.

"I'm sorry I was an ass before we left the house," I said.

She glanced at me, a weak smile on her lips. "Yeah, me, too."

That surprised me.

She must have seen it on my face, because she turned to me. She leaned against the desk, crossing her arms over her chest. "Don't take it the wrong way—you can be an overbearing control freak. But you don't have any say in how or when I go to work. *Ever.*" She heaved out a breath. "But...I realize you were trying to take care of me. I'm not used to letting anyone do that."

She looked away, expression tight.

“What is it?”

Blue eyes returning to mine, she said, “A cop from Houston PD and the fire marshal came by earlier. They think it was arson.”

“I know.”

She cocked a brow.

Shoving a hand through my air, I said, “My sister, Gianni. She knows half the cops and firefighters in the city. She got word earlier and called to let me know.”

Tina nodded, gaze falling to the floor. “Somebody deliberately set my home on fire. It’s making me sick.”

Going to her, I lifted her chin until we were eye to eye. “Is there anything I can do?”

“Right now, I just want to work.” After a deep breath, she gestured to a large wall calendar marked with various colors. “There’s a lot going on this week at the Biscayne. I’d rather focus on that, keep my mind busy until I feel ready to face all this...this shit in my personal life about the fire.”

She cocked her head to the side and smiled. “Actually...now that you’re here, there are a few things I need you to approve at the hotel. You up for it?”

She could’ve asked me to take her to Antarctica and I would have said yes.

“I am if you are.”

I KNEW Tina was talented when I hired her for the job, but this was amazing.

We stepped into the lobby, and I surveyed the work. It was nearly complete now, but the cool elegance of the space made one thing clear. I’d underestimated her talent.

“This is perfect,” I murmured, more to myself than her. My mind was already running through ideas to have Miranda look into, perhaps purchase outdated properties in other cities to renovate in a similar fashion.

“You really think so?”

Tina joined me and stood at my side near the hotel check-in counter.

“I do. I love it. You’ve really outdone yourself.”

A relieved smile spread across her face and her eyes lit with satisfaction. “I thought so, but I’m a little biased.”

“You’ve got every reason to be proud.”

Two workers were busy polishing the mahogany wood of the counter to a high gloss shine.

“You have it looking like new,” I murmured.

“That’s not me.” She rocked back on her heels. “I’ve got connections. We could have been done a week sooner if we’d scrapped that old wood and gone with something new, but that would’ve been a crime.”

“I agree.” Walking over to the grand staircase, I eyed the handrail. “This isn’t the same, is it? The original railing was missing on this side.”

“Yeah.” Tina waved a hand at the far railing. “The other had dry rot. The entire staircase had to be redone. It’s a little lavish, but it fits with the overall design scheme.”

“It sure does. It fits perfectly.” I looked upward to

On the landing, halfway to the mezzanine, there was a table placed exactly under an elaborate crystal chandelier. A tall vase, filled with roses, was centered on the table, completing the look and tying it together with the rich mahogany of the railing and check-in counter.

“The roses and table might be a bit much.” Tina wrinkled her nose. “But I wanted to see how it would look.”

“I’m glad you did it.” Turning to face her, I said, “I want you to sign on to complete the job.”

She blinked. “Complete the...wait, you mean the entire hotel? *That* job?”

“Yes. Are you interested?”

“Interested?” She gaped. “You mean the job *here*?”

“Yes.” I couldn’t stop smiling. Her excitement was contagious. “That is if you want it.”

She laughed, the sound high and nervous. Turning away, she shoved a hand through her hair. “I’ve never done *anything* like this.”

“That’s not true. You did this lobby. The hotel is just on a larger scale.”

“Ha, ha.” Turning back, she locked her gaze with mine. “Are you doing this because I’m your girlfriend?”

Girlfriend.

“Hmm, girlfriend,” I murmured, but now my mind was on something other than the Biscayne project.

Girlfriend, It was the first time I’d ever had someone to call a girlfriend. I liked it.

“James?” Tina eyed me warily.

“Oh, sorry. I got hung up on the word girlfriend.”

She smiled, her cheeks flushing a bit.

“Come here.” I held out a hand, and she came to me. “But to answer your question, no. I hired you because I knew you’d do a great job. And... I’m offering you the chance to do the rest of the hotel because I know you’ll do more than just a great job. Our relationship has nothing to do with it.”

She smiled and said, “Then I accept.”

I rested my hands on her waist. “Excellent.”

Delight danced in her eyes as she rose onto her toes. “I can’t wait to tell my boyfriend about my new job. We’ll have to celebrate.”

Dipping my head, I covered that smiling mouth with my own.

FIFTY-ONE

TINA

“YOU LOOK EXHAUSTED.”

James came in behind me and nudged me farther into the foyer of the house so he could shut the door.

I stumbled into the spacious living room and fell, face down, on the sofa. “Emmphh.”

My response was probably not an actual word. I had no idea what it sounded like to James.

The cushions gave way as he sat down on the end and he stroked a hand down my hair.

“You okay?”

I turned my face, so he’d hear something besides unintelligible mumbling, and said, “Tired.”

“How did it go with your parents?”

Sighing, I wiggled farther up onto the couch and turned so I could rest my head on his thigh. “Hell has no fury like a mother scared. And *ignored*.”

“But you called her the night of the fire.”

“James, James, James. The night of the fire barely counts,” I said. “For all she knows, I could have suffered some weird panic-related malaise after I went to work on Monday.”

“She didn’t really say that.”

I snickered. “How do you know? You’ve never met her.”

“True.” He kept finger-combing my hair. “But I’m just not seeing it.”

I laughed and rolled onto my back so I could smile at him. “You’re right. She might mumble it to my dad but she wouldn’t say it to me.” Then my guilt returned. “I should’ve gone over there this morning. I just...I don’t want to *think* about it and with people hovering, that’s all I’d do.”

“They worry about you.” James cupped my cheek, his thumb stroking my lower lip. “Well, at least you’ve got that.”

“Yeah. I know.” I covered his hand with mine. “It could be worse. At least it’s just me, my sister, and my parents. You’ve got enough family members your dad could form his own militia. If they started worrying...”

He blanched at my remark. “Bite your tongue.”

“I’d rather you do it.”

His hand tightened on my chin. “Hmmm.”

But instead of doing anything beyond that, he dipped his head and kissed my brow. “Go shower. I’ve got food on the way. You need something in you.”

“I need *you* in me.”

His lids drooped, eyes going heavy...hungry.

Then he pushed me off his lap. Saving me from flopping onto the floor—barely—he hauled me against him and bit my lower lip.

“Ow.” I glared at him.

“Serves you right. Brat.” He caught my hips and pulled me against him.

My breath got tangled in my throat, a whimper barely squeezing through.

“Shower, now,” he murmured against my lips. He kissed me softly. “Then... maybe...” He pulled me even closer, the thick length of his erection a brand against me. “I’ll see about giving you what you want. After you give me what

I want.”

He touched a finger to my lips.

“Fine,” I huffed. Leaning in, I kissed him once more. “You know, my mom and dad have a room for me. I don’t have to be subjected to sexual torture like this.”

He flashed a grin as I pulled away. “But you like sexual torture, Tina. Maybe if you’re really good, I’ll bend you over and spank you, and remind you how much you like it.”

My knees went weak.

Not wanting to lose out on that reminder, I headed upstairs.

“DINA CALLED while you were in the shower.” James put a plate in front of me, eyes lingering on the deep vee of the silk nightie I wore.

My nipples were tight from the look he’d given me when I’d walked in wearing the slip-styled nightgown, the color a deep blue, cut high on the thigh, with a plunging back.

Before James, I would have felt too self-conscious to wear it, even alone.

But under the warmth of his gaze, I felt like Aphrodite.

“Does she want me to call her back?” I asked, reaching for the wine he’d poured.

He sat in the chair next to mine and enjoyed his wine. “She asked if you were staying here. I told her I thought you might be, but it was up to you.”

Smiling, I put the wine down. “I already told her I’d probably stay here with you.”

Blowing him a kiss, I picked up my fork and knife, then cut into the chicken.

“I’m going to enjoy my food and then I’m going to do something bratty just so you’ll *have* to punish me.”

James paused his wine glass in mid-air and studied me over the rim. “How bratty?”

I took a bite, considering the question.

James leaned back in his chair, that knowing glint in his eye. I was jerking his chain.

“Hmm...let’s see.” I touched a finger to my temple. “Am I in the mood for a spanking and hard fuck...or you bend me over the table...” I wiggled my brows.

“I’m the one who decides the punishment, Tina.”

“Oh, I know.” Still smiling, I continued, “I’m just thinking out loud. If I’m a *little* bratty, I’ll probably get a spanking, first. But if I’m *really* bratty...you’ll drag it out.”

His eyes had gone so dark they were almost black.

“But...” I heaved out a sigh. “I’ve had a shitty few days and maybe what I need is for you to spank me, then tie me up and fuck me, forget the punishment.”

He blew out a hard breath. “Finish your food, pet.”

I shivered. I recognized that tone.

“Yes, sir.”

THE LATE EVENING air felt warm against my body, and I shivered.

“Cold?”

“No.” I shivered again as I stood naked on the deck.

There wasn't a house for miles, but there was something deliciously *wicked* about being here, like this, with James.

He stood behind me, and I felt the smooth cotton of his dress shirt as he stroked his hands down my hips. I wanted to touch him, but he'd told me no—twice already. My butt stung from the spanking I'd gotten after the second one. That wasn't a deterrent, but he'd warned me if I kept distracting him, he might have to take me inside.

I didn't do that.

“Get down on your knees,” James said.

I knelt. The heavily cushioned pad he'd laid down minutes earlier felt soft under my knees.

He stood before me.

My breath caught as his eyes skimmed my naked body, lingering on my breasts before going lower to the shadowed vee between my thighs.

“Are you wet for me, Tina?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Show me.”

I went to touch myself, but he shook his head.

“No. Lay down. Spread your thighs, open yourself. I want to see how wet you are.”

My face flamed. It was such an...intimate request.

Slowly going to my back, I brought my knees up.

“Not good enough.”

I inched my legs a little farther apart.

Heat flared in his gaze, and he sank to his haunches in front of me and placed his hands against the inside of my knees, roughly shoving my thighs wide.

“Show me that pussy, Tina. I want to see what belongs to me.”

I whimpered, heat suffusing my entire body.

“Use your fingers, spread yourself...yes, that’s it...” His voice was rougher, deeper. “Do you want to touch yourself?”

I shook my head.

“No? Why not?”

“I want you to do it, master.”

His teeth flashed white, the coming twilight hiding much of his features.

“Stroke yourself, Tina.”

I whimpered at the first glide of my fingers, my hips jerking at the contact. I was so ready for him, even that light touch was torture.

“Are you wet?”

“Yes, sir,” I said, eyes fluttering closed. “So wet for you.”

“For what? My hands? My mouth? My cock?”

“All of it. Any of it. Everything. Anything.”

He thrust two fingers into my pussy suddenly, with no warning.

I jolted and arched up with a cry, the unexpected whiplash of pleasure tearing a sob from my throat.

“Any of it?” He thrust his fingers inside me before flipping me over onto my knees. “My fingers, Tina? Or my cock?”

He thrust against me rudely, clarifying that he wanted a real answer, a definitive one.

“Your cock, sir. Please.” I whimpered and rubbed against him. “I want your cock.”

He spanked me, hard, five times, the flesh on my buttocks stinging when he stopped. But he wasn’t done. He twisted my hair around his fingers and pulled me upright on my knees. “When I ask my sub what she wants from me, I want her to tell me, Tina. If you want my mouth on you, say it. If you

want my cock, tell me. What do you want, Tina?”

“I want your cock.”

He pressed his free hand to my belly, holding me still as he thrust against me. “Where? In your cunt? Do you want my cock in your cunt? Or do you want me to fuck your ass?”

My mind turned off.

James bit my earlobe and asked again.

“I don’t know!” I cried. “Both. I need you, James.”

“Sir.” He nuzzled my neck, voice softening. “Or master. How much do you need me, pet?”

“So much. Too much. I hurt with it.”

He stood again. “Turn around.”

I did.

“Unzip me.”

My hands trembled through the task. When I went to tug his pants and boxers down, he stopped me with a tug on my hair. “I didn’t say you could do that yet. Ask.”

“Please, sir. Can I take your cock out?”

“Yes, you can. Then you can suck on it. I’m going to fuck your mouth while you decide if you want me fucking your cunt or your ass. If you’re lucky, I might do both.”

I’d finished unzipping his pants and when to reach for him. He pushed my hands away. “You don’t get to touch me. You’ve been a bad girl. Open wide and take me deep. Show me you like cock, Tina.”

Longing panged inside me as I obeyed, my lips stretching wide to accommodate him. The head of his cock butted up against the back of my throat. He withdrew, and I groaned, but before I could follow him, he tightened his hand in my hair.

“My way, Tina.” He thrust again, slowly, carefully.

Rolling my eyes up to glare at him, I used the edge of my teeth on the underside of his cock, just enough.

He growled at me.

I did it again.

He pushed both hands into my hair. “You really are feeling bratty, aren’t you, baby? Fine...show me how deep you can take it.”

He thrust back in, harder, faster.

A harsh curse tore out of him.

I grabbed his hips, ignoring his command not to touch. Then next time he went to the back of my throat, I swallowed and tightened my grip on him. James shuddered and the knowledge I’d made his control so shaky was the sweetest aphrodisiac ever.

I didn’t have long to enjoy the power.

He pulled away, too quick, and spun me around, one hand going to my neck, he forced me down to the padded cushion.

Then he was inside me, hitching my hips up and driving in—hard and fast.

I cried out, the sound muffled against the padded cushion beneath us.

James swatted my right cheek.

He filled me, again, so thick and huge and rough, it should hurt, but it was delicious and perfect.

I came with a ragged cry too soon.

James didn’t. He went still, panting, his cock pulsing, thick inside me.

I wanted to melt into the cushion, my muscles lax.

But he wasn’t done.

“You were being *very* bratty earlier, Tina...and you just made it worse, pet.”

He stroked me between the cheeks of my ass, fingers slick and cold.

By the time he'd finished preparing me with the lubricant, I was shaking all over, and as ready as I'd been before he made me come so hard.

"Reach back," James said. "Hold yourself open for me. I want to watch, Tina."

Panting, I did as he'd ordered, feeling exposed and vulnerable.

He stroked his finger into me, then added a second.

My face flamed at the thought of him watching, the flush spreading until my entire body was burning.

"Are you blushing, Tina?"

"Yes," I whispered.

"Hmmm. Blushing because I'm fucking your ass with my fingers...and watching?"

I nodded.

"You're hot, though, too. Aren't you? You like watching me do dirty things to you. Don't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell me what you want next. Be dirty...very dirty, my pet."

Closing my eyes, I said, "I want you to fuck me, sir. With your cock."

He nudged me. "Like this?"

I nodded.

"Why? You aren't touching your clit. Don't stroke yourself unless I say." He slid his free hand low to stroke my swollen, aching clitoris. "Oh, you're so swollen, baby. Are you sure you don't want me to find another way to fuck you?"

"No!"

He chuckled and *finally* stopped toying with me. “Press your thighs together...like that. Tight. And keep spreading yourself open. Now tell me you want my cock inside your ass.”

“Please, sir...” I nearly sobbed. “I want your cock in my ass. Please, please, *please...*”

And then he was pushing into me.

I whimpered, my fingers digging into the flesh of my buttocks. My clit pulsed, and I squeezed my thighs.

“That’s it,” James murmured, pulling out slowly, only to surge back in, deeper, harder, faster.

I tightened my thighs as much as possible and felt the hot jolt of pleasure.

Instinctively, I let go of my buttocks and slammed my hands down on the cushion. James followed me down, grabbing my wrists and yanking them overhead. I screamed, the line between pleasure and pain shattering at the full, deep penetration. The weight of him pinned me down. I didn’t care. He found my clit, strumming it with such skill it was like I’d been tuned to respond to this. For him.

I came again.

This time, he was right behind me, his cock swelling inside me until I wasn’t sure I could take it.

And I didn’t care because the pleasure threw me so high, I wasn’t sure I’d ever come down.

FIFTY-TWO

MAXIMUS

“YOU’RE SMILING.” MIRANDA COCKED HER HEAD AT ME.

I reclined in my office chair, pausing from the notes I was reading.

“Am I?”

She removed her glasses and studied me. “You were definitely smiling. Not so much now. But you have been, almost all morning.” She frowned. “It’s not natural. Especially for you.”

Her droll commentary made me laugh.

“Okay, now I’m scared. Smiling *and* laughing.” She made the sign of the cross. But she was grinning. “This woman you’re seeing...she’s good for you.”

“She sure is.” My eyes darted up and to the right. The thought of Tina had me smiling yet again.

Miranda inclined her head, her smile softening. “I remember a time when you would have turned into Mr. Ice if someone so much as suggested an interest in your personal life. Even if it was just friendly concern, say, from your devoted personal assistant who has become fond of you and worries, you’ll work yourself into an early grave.”

“Thank you, Miranda.” There was a time I would’ve suspected my assistant of trying to butter me up, either for a raise, or some other ulterior motive. However, something about being with Tina reminded me not who I *had* been,

but who I *could* have been. Maybe I could still be that man.

Miranda nodded. “I need these signed. Immediately.”

She shoved several contracts onto the desk and pulled out her phone.

“I’ve got several PDFs you need to look over. We’re already receiving calls about the Biscayne.” A brow lifted, she asked, “Any idea when it will be ready to open?”

“I just asked Tina if she wants to finish the job—the opening is still some ways out. You can call her and go over contract details.”

“Noted.” The light of her phone reflected off the lenses of her glasses as she read. “Gianni and Zoey want to come by for lunch. Is that a yes or no?”

I almost said no out of habit, but stopped. “Hell, why not?”

Miranda lowered the phone and eyed me over her glasses. “Huh.”

“What?” I raised my brows. “I can be amiable. I’m in a good mood.”

“I was ninety percent certain you’d say no. I was going through my mental file of excuses.”

“They never buy your excuses. I hate to break it to you.” I grinned.

A bright laugh escaped her, and she said, “Now, let’s get this work done. Then we can discuss what sort of lunch you want to have prepared for you and your sisters. Unless you want to get really wild and go out to eat.”

“I TOLD you he’d have the menu planned ahead of time,” Gianni said to Zoey as she stepped into the dining suite next to my office. “I win.”

“Hello...I’m sitting right here,” I said.

“Nobody likes a know-it-all, Gin.” Zoey passed over a folded bill.

I stood to greet my sisters.

“James, this isn’t like you,” Gianni said. “I’m shocked you agreed to have lunch. But we could’ve just met at a cafe down the street. It’d be easier.”

“I have a five-star restaurant on the ground floor of this hotel.” I pursed my lips. “What’s the point of going out into the muggy heat to eat average food at a noisy café when I can have excellent food here where it’s quiet?”

“You’re so dull.” Zoey hugged me and kissed my cheek. “But I love you, anyway.”

As she cut around me, I hugged Gianni.

She gave me a startled look. “We hug now? Are you okay?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I be?”

Gianni gave me a narrow-eyed look but shook her head. “Nothing. Never mind.”

I scowled. Was I that transparent?

“It’s nothing. Really.” She beamed and followed Zoey’s lead, going to the table to inspect the food that had been delivered. “How’s Tina holding up?”

“Um...well, she’s doing okay.” The one dark spot in my life—frustration over the fire—had me turning away from my sisters.

I took my seat at the table and reached for my water glass. I stared out the floor-to-ceiling windows at the sprawling view of Houston. Aware of the dead silence, I said, “There’s still no actual news beyond what we learned yesterday.”

In a hesitant voice, Zoey said, “Gianni told me about the fire. That’s awful. I can’t imagine how she must be feeling.”

“Well, it is what it is.” I took another sip of water and placed it on the table. “But I’m here for her and I will make sure she gets through this.”

“I wanted to call her later,” Zoey started. “Ask if she’d like to come to my shop and see if she sees anything she likes.”

Turning, I met Zoey’s gaze. “Your shop?”

“Yeah.” Zoey shrugged. “Besides designer clothes, I have ready-to-wear pieces, too.”

“You should definitely call her,” I said. The smile in my sister’s eyes spoke volumes. “I’ll text you Tina’s number.” After a brief hesitation, I added, “She’ll want to take care of the clothing. I have learned in no uncertain terms that she is an independent woman and she will want to be in charge of buying her clothes, not me.”

“Isn’t insurance doing that?” Zoey asked, eyes wide.

Gianni rolled her eyes. “You have to itemize shit, price it. It’s a nightmare. It can take a while.” She dropped into the chair in front of the salad plate she’d been raiding.

Arching a brow at that, I joined my sisters.

Zoey puckered her lips and turned to me. “She wouldn’t have been pissed at you if she was the sort who’d mooch off strangers, now would she?”

“Okay, you got me there.” It was the first time I’d enjoyed such a relaxed lunch with my sisters.

Grabbing a roll from the basket, Gianni said, “I’m *starving*.”

“You’re always starving,” I shot back. “Or chasing down some dead-beat dad. You should stop and eat once in a while.”

Cutting her roll in half, she slathered it with butter. “And here I was thinking how nice it is to see you looking all happy.”

“It *is* nice.” Zoey propped her chin in her hand, giving me a sappy smile. “You’re like...totally spinning out on this girl.”

“Tina’s hardly a girl.”

Zoey waved a hand. “You know what I mean. I’ve never seen you like this, James. It’s awesome.”

I wanted to make my usual flippant remark, but it felt out of place.

“Actually, I’m feeling pretty happy these days,” I finally said.

My sisters smiled.

Zoey popped out of her chair and came around to hug me. I sighed, pretending to suffer through it, but she could tell I enjoyed it.

A sharp ring cut me off as I was about to tease my younger sister. We broke apart to see Gianni rising from the table, swearing under her breath.

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

Gianni nodded, eyes on the phone. “I’m going to step out into the hall really quick, to take this. You two, go ahead and eat. You know how my job can be.”

FIFTY-THREE

TINA

THE BLINDS WERE CLOSED ON THE FRONT WINDOWS AND DOOR OF MY business. My favorite song playlist streamed through Bluetooth speakers on my desk, keeping me motivated as I worked at the twenty-seven-inch computer monitor at my drafting table. My imagination was running a million miles a minute, various ideas popping up, some saved, others rejected.

This was how I worked best, like an ice sculptor, cutting away everything that wasn't a masterpiece.

The drafting software was busying running the specs, but there were still important things I needed to do. Estimates, crews to hire—who was available. It was a jumble of happy chaos.

I'd printed a few pictures to show James, so he'd have a feel for the look I had in mind. I knew which one I preferred, but I enjoyed giving clients options.

Clients.

I pushed back from the drafting table as that word echoed through my mind.

It was strange, thinking of James as a client.

There was a great deal more between us now.

I believed him when he said he wouldn't have hired me for the entire job if he wasn't thrilled with my finished work on the hotel lobby. I had faith in

him.

Even so, it was strange to think about a contract between us that had to do with money and deadlines.

My fingers traced the outline of the stylized lock hanging from my collar. Most people assumed it was a necklace. But it had a deeper meaning to it. Perhaps even more than a wedding ring, in some ways. There were women who'd never trust their husbands to do the things to them that I let James do to me. Things I *craved*.

The computer pinged, letting me know it was ready for the next step on the blueprints I was building.

I trusted James, and that was what mattered. Tucking that thought aside, I hunkered down in front of the monitor and got to work.

BACK ACHING, I lifted my head from the computer screen. Something didn't feel right.

I'd been so focused on the rough specs I'd lost track of time. Groaning, I rubbed my lower back as I straightened to stand, feeling the pain. To relieve the stiffness, I bent forward to stretch those muscles.

After touching my toes, I interlaced my fingers and stretched my arms high overhead.

I was about to fold forward in the classic yoga pose when it hit me. Something was missing.

My music had stopped playing.

With a frown, I looked around for my phone.

Where had I put it?

"Alright," I said, blowing out a breath. I checked my desk, my pockets, my purse, before starting a search of the office. My work office wasn't that big, so it couldn't be far.

I'd been so...distracted by James the night before, I'd forgotten to charge it. There was only twenty percent battery when I got here, so I'd plugged it in.

My skin prickled, roughening with goosebumps as I walked over to the large stand-up worktable. The cord for the cell phone was right there, secured to the table by a plastic clip that kept it from falling.

The phone, however, was not.

A shadow fell across the floor, and I heard a rustling sound in the darkened hallway that led to the breakroom and private rear exit.

The office was supposed to be empty.

I heard the scuff of a shoe brushing the floor. I froze. My heart pounded, and I forced myself not to gasp.

I swallowed.

Slowly, I raised my head to meet a familiar gaze.

FIFTY-FOUR

MAXIMUS

LUNCH WITH MY SISTERS WAS GOING BETTER THAN I'D THOUGHT. ZOEY AND I were laughing over her recap of one of her latest escapades when Gianni returned from taking a phone call in the hall.

“James.”

The sound of Gianni's voice had me on my feet, instincts going on red alert even before I saw her face.

She strode into the room, her eyes sharp. “You know this guy?”

She shoved the phone into my hand.

I frowned at the blurry image on the screen. I zoomed in to study the vaguely familiar features.

It was grainy, but I recognized this fucker.

With a scowl, I returned the phone to her.

“Yeah. Guy's a dick. Used to date Tina when she lived in San Francisco,” I said. “His name is Cecil...um, I don't know. I never got the last name.”

Her eyes widened, then her mouth flattened into a tight, firm line. Turning her back to me, she spoke into the phone. “Damn it, I knew he looked familiar. Cecil Golden. He worked with Tina in California—yes, I'm positive. I'll send you a link to the images I've got once I'm off the phone. No...no, fuck off. I'm telling him. I'll call you back soon.”

When she spun to face me, the bottom of my stomach dropped out, leaving me with a sick feeling.

“What?” I jumped to my feet.

“The fire marshals and HPD detectives working Tina’s case pulled camera footage off a neighbor’s doorbell system—you know what I’m talking about, right?”

“What the fuck...” That sick knot in my gut intensified. This was not going in a direction I liked.

“They have a photo of him going into Tina’s yard. He disappears into the hedges, then comes out fifteen minutes later. Timing fits with how the fire played out.”

“Fuck.” I pushed past Gianni and headed to my office to retrieve my phone. I had to call Tina.

“Wait...” Gianni spun and followed behind me. “There’s more.”

A dark cloud moved in on me and it felt like I was running through water. I couldn’t move fast enough to get to my phone and call Tina.

Gianni spoke as she trotted along beside me. “Another house in the neighborhood had footage of a car parked down the block. He got out from the passenger side. It looks like he had a gas can.”

I shoved open the door to my office and stopped. “The passenger side?”

Gianni nodded. “They have the plates, and have been putting together a timeline using traffic cams...” Her words trailed off.

My eyes narrowed. “Who was driving the car, Gianni?” I demanded.

A hard breath escaped her. “Simone. James, I’m sorry. The car belongs to Simone. There’s a traffic cam that caught her in the driver’s seat—an intersection near Tina’s place. Golden too. Both are easily identifiable in the image.”

“*Fu-u-ck.*” I snatched up my cell from the desk and patted my pants pocket for the car keys. “Simone and Cecil. Together.” I talked to Gianni as I

brought up Tina's number on my phone.

"Yeah." Gianni lifted a hand toward me when I was about to connect the call to Tina and I paused.

"And the cops are concerned you could be a target, too."

"Good. I'm gonna kill that motherfucker." I hit the green call button. While it rang, I grabbed Gianni by the arm and pulled her out the door. "Come on. You're coming with me."

As we entered the hall, Zoey bumped into us full of questions.

"What's going on? Is everything okay?"

Gianni answered for me. "We gotta go. I'll text you later."

I gritted my teeth as we hustled to get to my car.

Damn it.

The call went to voicemail.

"JAMES, SLOW DOWN."

I ignored my sister.

"Call her again," I ordered. Tires squealing, I rounded the corner. My emergency flashers were blinking, but only because Gianni had turned them on. She was on the phone with a cop friend. But I didn't care. I grabbed my phone from the cup holder and dumped it in her lap. "*Call her again.*"

"Hey, I gotta go. Later." She ended the call and used my phone to call Tina's number. The ringing was loud enough that I heard it. But Tina didn't answer.

By the time it went to voicemail, I was close enough to see the turn for the street to Tina's office.

Time seemed to melt into slow motion. It took forever to get to Tina's office.

Tina would be fine.

I tried to console myself. She was smart and strong. And Cecil was a dumb fuck. No way could he deal with her.

It's not just Cecil. It's Simone, too.

That was another reason I was speeding. I slammed on the brakes so hard, the car behind had to lock theirs to keep from hitting me. I didn't care. I parked in front of Tina's office, and jumped out, the keys still in the ignition, and ran to the door.

I pounded on the door.

"Tina!"

The blinds were closed. But she'd told me she planned on doing that to focus on the new project.

I pounded harder.

"Tina!"

But the only sounds were behind me, a car's engine going quiet. Car doors slamming. Gianni's voice.

None of that mattered.

I hit the door again and shouted her name louder. "*Tina!*"

"Excuse me!"

I whipped my head around to see an older woman glaring at me from the office next door.

"Sir, that's unnecessary—"

"Do you have a key to Tina's office?" I demanded.

She withdrew. Either the look on my face or the sound of my voice cutting through her irritation.

"Ma'am," Gianni said, her voice softer. "Tina and James are dating. We have some...unnerving information, and Tina's not answering her phone. I'm a

private investigator—the police are on their way if that helps.”

“Oh. Oh, my. Hold on.” She glanced at me, clearly still uneasy, but she disappeared into her office and returned a moment later, holding out a key with a plastic clip attached, Tina’s name printed on it. “She’s a sweetie. I hope everything is okay.”

I left Gianni to handle the office neighbor and went back to the door. It took two tries to unlock it, adrenaline making me unsteady. Finally, it clicked, and I yanked open the door, calling her name.

“Ti...na.” It caught in my throat on the second syllable as I took in the small space, usually neat as a pin.

The high-top work table was turned on its side and the large monitor was on the floor.

The office desk had a drink spilled all over it, the monitor face down in the liquid. Moving farther inside, I scanned the room.

“Don’t touch anything, James,” Gianni said from behind me.

Mutely, I nodded as I moved, still searching, though it was obvious she wasn’t here.

The darkened hall caught my eye, and I moved closer until I could give it a quick glance. Pictures were on the floor, glass shattered. The back door was partially opened, something blocking it from shutting all the way.

“Someone came in the back way,” I said, my voice sounding strangely hollow.

“James. Come on.” She took my hand. “One of my friends from the department is here. Talk to him. So we can all work to find her faster, okay?”

I couldn’t find any words to respond, so I just nodded.

Somebody had taken Tina. If she was hurt...

No. I refused to go down that path. I’d find her. Because that was the only acceptable outcome.

I wasn’t losing her.

FIFTY-FIVE

MAXIMUS

“HOW MANY TIMES DO I HAVE TO ANSWER THE SAME QUESTIONS?” MY VOICE, sharp and edgy, had the officer in front of me putting his pen down.

His friendly smile was meant to put me at ease. It failed. All that too white, too broad smile did was piss me off.

“Mr. Ryson,” he said. “I know this must seem repetitive and—”

“I’ve been through this five times now. Twice with you, once with the officer on the scene, and twice with the sergeant you chased out of here.”

Lieutenant Dawson’s brows dropped. “I’m just trying to do my job, Mr. Ryson.”

I wanted to throttle him. I didn’t like cops. Dawson was a man I wouldn’t like, even if he didn’t carry a badge. The too-affable smarmy charm was something I’d dealt with before and in most situations, I’d boot his ass to the curb. There were people who chased clout in every damn occupational field. But Tina’s life was in danger, and the sooner I got past this asshole, the sooner I could do something about it.

“Explain to me how many times I have to go through what happened before it’s *enough*, Lieutenant Dawson,” I said. “My patience is about gone. I’m exhausted. My girlfriend is missing. The last thing I need is to explain this to you—for the third fucking time.”

Deep lines furrowed his brow as he picked up his pen. When he spoke, it was with a cooler voice. “How long have you and Ms. Siegler been dating?”

“Just under a month and a half.” Hooking my ankle over my knee, I forced myself to remain still. I wanted to get up, pace, do something about all the energy inside.

“And your...relationship, it’s a good one? Healthy?”

His tone made me scowl. I want to punch him, but that would not get me out of this place faster. “Yes. But, as I just pointed out, we’ve only been together six weeks.”

He picked up his phone and checked something on the screen.

When he looked at me, the glint in his eye made me pitch forward.

“If you’re about to bring up stories alluding to my sex life, let me warn you now...*don’t*,” I said, clinging to the last shreds of my control. “Some people only fuck with the lights out. Some people get turned on by wearing furry animal costumes. I like bondage. It’s none of your business and doesn’t have shit to do with the fact that my girlfriend is missing—and I suggest you focus on *those* facts instead of digging around for details about my sex life.”

His cheeks went red, fine lines fanning out from his eyes. To give him credit, his voice was level as he said, “It’s my job to check every avenue, Mr. Ryson.”

“And what avenue could this one lead to?” Lifting a brow, I waited. “If you have actual questions, then ask them. Otherwise, stop fucking around and do your job.”

The door opened.

I recognized the tall woman who entered, although her name escaped me. Gianni was with her, as was the woman who’d introduced herself to me the night of the fire.

Seeing the fire marshal and the detective made my skin crawl.

“Detective Dawson, this case has been reassigned,” the tall woman said, offering a polite smile.

Gianni ignored him as she approached me, one hand coming to rest on my shoulder. “Are you okay?”

“No,” I bit off. “But I’ll manage. Please tell me I will not be here for another three hours, answering questions.”

She gave a minute shake of her head, lips pressed tightly together. Her gaze slid to the two cops facing off, then back to me, the message in her eyes loud and clear.

Be quiet.

“Detective Joyner.” Dawson rose, giving the tall woman a hard look before glancing toward the fire marshal. “Why are you taking over this case?”

“It’s connected to the one we’re working with Beth Creedy from the Houston Fire Department.” Joyner smiled politely. “That’s all I’m able to share right now. If you don’t mind shutting the door on your way out, I’d appreciate it.”

Dawson heard the silent *fuck you* in the sweetly voiced command.

He hated it as much as I enjoyed it.

The door slammed shut behind, hard.

“I think you might have upset him, Cindy.”

The female detective pursed her lips as she studied the door. “Yes. I think I have done just that. What a pity.” She was smiling as she took the chair across from me. “Mr. Ryson—” She paused and looked around, then patted her pockets, pulling out a phone. She tapped the screen, peered at something on it before looking at me once more. “Ryson is your legal name, correct? You use Maximus, your father’s name, for business purposes, but that’s not your legal name?”

“Correct. I don’t care what you call me. What are you doing to find Tina?”

Putting the phone down, she clasped her hands in front of her. “I’m getting to that. First, let me introduce myself. I’m not sure if you met my partner, Detective Hank Baylor. My partner and I handle arson cases that require interdepartmental cooperation. So Beth and I work well together.”

“Fine.” I didn’t give a fuck if they worked with the entire cast of the Muppets. I wanted answers to my questions.

Judging by the faint quirk of her lips, I suspected she knew how I felt.

“Mr. Ryson, I understand you’re frustrated. You’ve probably done this a dozen times now, but I do need your cooperation once more.”

“For fuck’s sake.” Looking away, I glared at the dull, relentless gray of the wall. “Let me guess, you want me to tell you what happened when I got to Tina’s office. Why I went there. What I had for breakfast and if anyone can corroborate my whereabouts.”

“Your whereabouts have already been corroborated.” She nodded to Gianni. “Gianni tells me you were having lunch with her and one of your other sisters when she received a call from a connection she has with the HPD.”

“Yes.” I breathed easier. She wasn’t going to make me recount every step I took since climbing out of bed that morning.

“Alright. You saw Tina this morning?” When I nodded, she pulled a stylus from her pocket and started making notes on her phone. “Alright, run through from the time you last saw her until you arrived at her office.”

After a muttered curse, I did just that.

When I finished, Joyner had made several notes, clarified a couple of points, then looked at Creedy.

Creedy sat next to Joyner in the spare seat.

“We could confirm two individuals who might have been involved in the fire at Ms. Siegler’s place,” Creedy said. She nodded toward Gianni. My sister was leaning against the wall. “I understand Gianni’s already shared some of that information with you.”

“Yes.” A knot settled in my throat. Tina was in this mess because of me. “A woman I used to...see was at her place along with somebody who Tina once dated.”

Creedy nodded. “Cecil Golden. I’ve talked to a few of his acquaintances, have a line in to talk to a few more. Did Ms. Siegler talk about her relationship with him much?”

“No.” With a restless shrug, I stared at the wall. In my mind, I saw Tina’s office, as it looked less than two hours earlier. “He’s a prick from what little she told me. Tina was doing well at the architectural firm where she worked—she was becoming one of their shining stars. He didn’t like that she was getting bigger jobs, better-paying clients. When he started chipping away at her self-confidence. She dumped him.”

“Smart woman.”

I nodded. “He showed up out here. Tina said he was looking for work. She told him she would think about it, but then he tried to put the moves on her. When she shot him down, he took offense. She punched him. After that, I don’t think she saw him again.”

“Would she tell you?”

I considered it. “More than likely, but if it was just a blip in her day, it might have slipped her mind. He didn’t matter to her. And she’d already proven she could handle him.”

“Cocky guy like that would take offense to a woman giving him the brush-off,” Joyner said.

“Taking offense and setting a fire—there’s a big difference between those two things. Then to add kidnapping in?” I thought of the self-absorbed prick I’d met. I wouldn’t have pegged him for trying either—the arson *or* the kidnapping. At least not on his own.

“What about Simone Eastman?”

The question came from Beth Creedy. Slanting her a look, I took a deep breath, let it out. “She could be...clingy.”

“Clingy as in, she was high maintenance?” Beth’s brows arched. “Or clingy as in she might go stalker on you...or a girlfriend?”

“I think the answer’s obvious.” My stomach churned. “A few days ago, I wouldn’t have thought she’d go this route, but I was wrong.”

Fuck, if she got hurt...

Gianni came over and rested a hand on my shoulder, squeezed gently. I covered her hand and squeezed back as I stared into space.

If Tina got hurt...

FIFTY-SIX

TINA

THE DULL THROB AT THE BASE OF MY SKULL WOKE ME.

I groaned, trying to shift around, thoughts clouded by both heavy exhaustion and pain. The fog cleared fast when I realized I couldn't move and a nearby voice made me freeze, every instinct screaming to be quiet, be still.

"...*heard* her, okay?"

"I'm sick and tired of how every guy I know goes running around every time she bleats," a female voice snapped, the tone shrill with petty bitchiness.

Was she talking about *me*? *Bleating*?

"See?" The woman's voice was closer now. "I told you. She's still asleep."

"That's the problem," the other person said. He sounded familiar. "You hit her so fucking hard with that gun, I'm worried she might have a brain bleed or whatever the fuck happens when somebody gets hit in the head—hard. With a fucking gun."

"Awww...is Cecil feeling sorry for his girlfriend?"

Cecil...

Shit.

"Simone, shut the fuck up," he said.

I opened my eyes a slit as a shadow fell over my lap. Quickly, I closed them again, feigning unconsciousness as he grabbed my head by the hair and pulled back. I had the urge to kick up, hard. But I didn't have a chance of getting free right now—and he'd mentioned a gun. I needed to know where that was before I tried to get loose.

I also needed to know what the hell was going on.

“Tina?”

It wasn't hard to fake a weak groan.

He tapped my cheek. When I didn't respond, he slapped my face lightly. It was harder to ignore that, but he let go when I didn't respond. “I would have thought *that* would get her attention considering what you've told me about this Maximus prick.”

“You're a pig.” She sniffed, sounding irate that he'd insulted James.

If the entire scenario wasn't so insane—and if there were no gun mentioned, I would have laughed.

The sharp clatter of heels on the floor alerted me that Simone was coming my way.

Heels.

She'd helped my ex kidnap me in *heels*?

“Wake up,” Simone half-shouted. She grabbed my hair and wrenched my head back with a ferocious strength.

I wouldn't be able to fake this unconscious bit much longer if I didn't want to get beaten by this crazy bitch. I made a feeble noise, and it wasn't entirely feigned. My head *hurt*.

“Stop it.” Cecil's voice was much closer now.

She let go of me.

I dropped my head to the side, my hair falling to shield my face. Through slitted lids, I saw her glaring at Cecil, hands fisted at her sides. “What the fuck is your problem? You said you didn't care what happened to her as long

as we got the money!”

Of course.

“Yeah, the money, but if she’s seriously fucked up, the cops will spend a hell of a lot more time looking for us, Simone.” Cecil sounded annoyed, like he couldn’t believe he had to explain this.

They stood facing each other in front of a window partially obscured by broken blinds and grime.

Where the hell were we?

It was still daylight—the sun filtering in through the broken slats on the blinds was viciously bright, adding to the pain in my head. It was hot and stuffy wherever we were, but the heat wasn’t smothering yet, so it couldn’t be late in the day.

“Did we *have* to bring her *here*?” Simone whined. “It’s fucking disgusting. I need to pee. And don’t you *dare* tell me to go outside again. We don’t all have *dicks*, you know.”

“Go to the gas station and piss. Get us some drinks while you’re there.” Cecil paused, then added, “And a bottle of water for her. It’s always so fucking hot here. I don’t want her too dehydrated to talk when we call Maximus.”

“She doesn’t need jack shit.”

My parched mouth said otherwise, but I wasn’t about to offer an opinion on the subject.

“Get a bottle of water,” Cecil said again. “We need her in good shape until we’re done with her.” He paused. “You *do* still want to go through with this, right?”

“Fine,” Simone muttered under her breath as she left. The creaking of a door’s hinges swallowed most of the complaint.

The silence stretched tight with every second thundering in my ears.

It did not surprise me when Cecil spoke. It seemed he’s waited for Simone to leave. And then waited a little longer, just in case. His voice was inches

away.

“You’re faking it, baby. Go ahead. Open your eyes. She’s gone, it’s just you and me.”

Slowly, I straightened my head and met his gaze, wondering what in the hell I’d ever seen in him. “You’re probably used to having women fake it.”

His features tightened only to smooth a second later.

“Don’t bother trying to play mind games, Tina.” He crouched in front of me, resting his hands on my knees as he offered a charming smile.

Once, that smile would have made my heart flutter.

But I wasn’t that woman anymore.

“Relax, Cecil.” The small, tight smile was all I could manage with my head pounding. “I have no desire to do anything with you—not even share the same air. Can I go now?”

“No.” He extended a hand toward my head.

I jerked away to avoid his touch and immediately regretted it. The room began swirling while my stomach threatened to climb up my throat. I gagged, fighting the instinctive urge to puke—that would *not* help my headache.

Through the roar of blood in my ears and thundering pain in my skull, I heard Cecil swearing. “Damn it, the stupid bitch knocked you hard. Be still, okay?”

He tangled a hand in my hair, not giving me any choice but to comply. The only thing I could do was be grateful he *wasn’t* anywhere near the area where the pain seemed to be centered.

But then he started probing around and I groaned. I cursed and gagged. Then I kicked at him in self-defense.

My foot connected with him, but it was a glancing blow and didn’t appear to have any effect.

“You might as well stop,” Cecil said, batting my leg aside. “You will not do any damage, the shape you’re in. Keep this up, and I won’t stop Simone the next time she talks about beating on you.”

He rose as he spoke, thankfully releasing my hair.

I squeezed my eyes shut, bright pinwheels of painful color exploding against the backs of my lids.

“You...” I clamped my mouth shut and breathed shallowly through my nose until the urge to puke subsided. “You’re a pig, Cecil.”

“And you’re an ungrateful bitch. Without me around, Simone would pound on you until you looked like a leftover hamburger.” He circled around, coming to a stop at my back.

I flinched when he put his hands on my shoulders. “But I hear your new boyfriend is *loaded*, sugar. Loaded, and crazy about you, it seems.”

“I’m going to puke,” I muttered.

He squeezed hard, fingers digging into muscle and bone like he wanted to leave an imprint of his hands. “Go ahead. But you’ll wear it. I’m a nice guy...but not *that* nice.”

Nice guy. Sure.

But I stayed quiet, grateful he let go.

The throbbing in my head hadn’t stopped, but if I kept my eyes closed and took in slow breaths, it didn’t hurt *that* much. Okay, it did. But I’d take what I could get.

No more pissing him off.

I couldn’t afford it.

I needed my head clear so I could get out of here.

SIMONE’S RUN to the gas station took longer than expected. I had no idea what time it was, but sweat had collected on my brow, and my bladder started panging. I wasn’t the only restless one. Cecil lost interest in the strategy game on his phone and rose to pace before the windows.

The room became darker as the shadows stretched across the floor. I said, “Maybe she ditched you.”

“Not likely. She’s smart enough, but she has attention span issues—can’t hold it together for something like this without somebody to help.” He smiled sardonically. “Guess that’s why she’s so pissed at you. You stole her man, and she’s up a shit creek without somebody to tell her what to do.”

He slid me a look. “I’m surprised *you* put up with that shit.”

“Stop,” I said with a sigh. “I’m not explaining or justifying my relationship to *you*.”

Something ugly flashed through his eyes and the hair on the back of my neck stood on end.

The sound of a car approaching caught his attention, though.

The muscles in my belly relaxed just a fraction as he turned away. “Damn, Tina. And just when I thought you and I could have a nice little chat.”

Yeah, sure. A chat.

Watching as he moved to peer out the window, I squirmed and jerked the bindings on my wrists. I’d been unconscious when they dumped me in this hard chair and when they’d restrained me, but I was almost positive the thin bands securing my wrists were plastic zip-ties.

A million blog posts and articles online explained how to break out of them. I’d even taken a survival course with a friend in California and had practiced the maneuvers. Slowly, I shifted on the chair.

Cecil’s eyes slammed into me. “Be still.”

“I have to pee,” I said bluntly.

“Fuck,” he muttered, dragging a hand down his face. Lights from a car outside splashed over the window, highlighting the planes and hollows of his face as he jerked out of sight from anyone watching.

“Better hope that’s your girl, Friday.” I gave him a saccharine smile.

“Shut the fuck up!” Tension in every line of his body, he peered out the window. A deep sigh blasted out of him as he relaxed. “The dumb bitch, flashing her brights like that. The fuck’s she thinking?”

“Give her a break. She’s probably never kidnapped anyone before.”

“I *said shut the fuck up.*” He spun around and strode to me, faster than I’d ever seen.

I flinched as he grabbed the arms of the chair and shoved, rocking the wobbly, old piece of furniture back on two legs. He bent until we were nose to nose and glared at me.

“I’m trying to be nice, Tina. We used to have something. Keep it up and I’ll start thinking about how you threw me away like trash for a perverted fuck.”

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from screaming at him, and I lowered my eyes.

“That’s better.” The chair settled in place and then patted me on the cheek. The third time, he dropped the pretense of gentleness and outright slapped me, the force of it knocking my head to the side. My ears rang, the pain echoing through my skull like a gong. “I could get used to this, though. You are all quiet and meek while I...”

He slid a hand down my chest.

This time when I bit my cheek, I tasted blood. I wanted to scream, wrench around until he took his grubby hands off me. But I didn’t.

I was going to get out of here. I was determined. I’d call the cops and make certain Cecil Golden paid *dearly* for every damn thing he’d done.

The door flew open. “Oh, honey...I’m back!”

Cecil turned to Simone.

“What took you so long?” he demanded.

She sighed. “Why are you so grouchy?”

“You’ve been gone *three fucking hours*—son of a *bitch*—did you get takeout?”

“We have to *eat*.” Simone waved a hand toward the open door. “I also swung by the store. We need a place to sit and these floors are *filthy*. I picked up a couple of folding chairs for us—oh, *and* a couple of camping cots in case we have to spend a night or so here. James can be stubborn, you know.”

Cecil glared at her as she chattered on, completely oblivious.

“You went shopping?” he said as she finally wound down.

The hard edge to his voice caught her attention, and she looked up. “No. *Shopping* is something I do for fun and I spent all day doing it. This was a *chore*—a necessity. We needed chairs, cots, blankets, water, and food. So I *got* them.” With a sniff, she looked around. “If you’d found a better location for us to hide, maybe *I* wouldn’t have had to take care of those necessities.”

“Are you trying to advertise where we are?” he half-shouted.

“Relax.” She waved a hand. “Nobody is looking for us. Why would they? We haven’t even made the ransom demand.”

Cecil’s gaze bounced from me to Simone. He shook his head in disbelief.

“Tina had *security cameras* at her office, Simone!”

Simone looked at me now, her eyes widening. “What? *Why?*”

“Maybe in case a couple of psychos broke in to kidnap me.” The words came out before I could stop them.

Oh shit.

Simone’s mouth fell open in shock. Then, with an audible *click*, she snapped it shut before slowly, *oh* so slowly, advancing on me.

“You stupid little whore.”

FIFTY-SEVEN

MAXIMUS

“WHY THE FUCK HAVEN’T WE HEARD SOMETHING?”

Gianni leaned against her desk as I paced. The detective, Gayle Joyner, sat at a small workstation with two open laptops and several other tech devices I didn’t recognize. The detective, Gianni informed me, was there to record any incoming calls I might get—and hopefully track them via an app installed on both Cecil and Simone’s cell phones.

The problem was, the phones had to be turned *on* in order to be tracked.

From what Joyner had said, neither phones were on. At least one kidnapper had a brain, and I was betting on Cecil because if Simone had any sense, she wouldn’t have done this.

“We’ll hear something when we hear it, Jamie,” Gianni said.

Her level, neutral tone pissed me off, but I bit back the snarl before I could unleash my rage on her. She wasn’t to blame. She was here to help.

“And how long is *that* going to take?” I demanded, coming to a stop in front of the window, then turning to glare at my sister. “I mean, what the hell? Simone used her credit card at a sporting goods store *two* hours ago. But nobody can figure out where the hell she went from there?”

The phone rang—I tensed automatically, grabbing mine from my pocket, only to stop as I realized it was Gianni’s landline, not my cell. Staring at the screen, stubbornly devoid of notifications, I clenched my free hand into an empty fist.

The battery indicator warned me it was low. Swearing, I went to the chair by the window and grabbed the charging cord I'd used earlier for all of fifteen minutes. After it was connected, I checked to make sure the ringer was as loud as possible and all notifications were on. If somebody called, I'd know.

As I worked, I caught bits and pieces of Gianni's conversation. It faded as I stared at the screen on my phone.

Why the hell didn't *my* fucking phone ring?

Why hadn't we heard anything?

Simone had to have a reason behind this—just grabbing Tina to...what? My blood ran cold as my imagination filled in the blanks. Guilt turned my gut sour, and bile rushed to my throat. I never thought Simone would do something like this. She was crazy—she *had* to be. Sane people didn't kidnap someone, out of jealousy or whatever was motivating Simone.

I braced a hand on the window, the sun powerful enough to warm the glass despite the triple panes to help ease the swelter of long, hot Texas summers.

We were having another heatwave. If the power grid couldn't handle all those air conditioners running twenty-four-seven, there'd be rolling blackouts. The thought of Tina without relief from the heat and sun made my head spin.

Would Cecil or Simone be concerned?

“James.”

Swiping a hand down my face, I turned to my sister.

She saw the discouragement on my face and wrapped her arms around me. I grabbed onto her and held tight.

“I will not stop searching for her, Jamie,” she said, her words muffled against my chest.

I didn't respond. I didn't know what to say. And thinking about it was too fucking scary.

Despite the knot in my throat, I forced out a question. “Who called?”

“My contact with the police department.” She eased away, studying me closely.

I needed her comfort right now. Gianni was one of my best friends.

“Thanks, Gian. For being here, for being...you.”

I stepped away, heading toward the beverage service on the far wall so I wouldn't have to see her looking at me. Bad enough I *felt* it.

“Since you have some very real crap to deal with, I'll refrain from asking if you're okay. But don't say shit like that until after we've got this taken care of and Tina is safe.” She made a face at me. “You'll weird me out.”

It felt good to laugh, even if it was strained and sounded like rocks scraping my throat.

A familiar electronic chirp came from my phone. Dread filled me as I lurched toward my phone.

“Want me to get it?” Joyner asked.

“No.” I picked up the phone.

A text alert lit up the screen and I unlocked the device.

The number was listed as *private*, and there was no name. But one look at the text and I knew who had sent it.

Are you alone?

Gianni and Detective Joyner had covered this.

“They want to know if I'm alone.”

“Remember what we discussed,” Joyner said, coming out from behind the desk. She had one laptop in hand, eyes flicking from my face to the screen. “I've already got an alert on one phone,” she said. “It's Cecil's. The cell company is running the data as we speak, looking for the nearest cell tower to narrow the location.”

“I'll tell him I'm with my sister, in case he has somebody watching.”

Joyner nodded. Her jeans and beat-up tennis shoes made her look more like one of Gianni's investigators than a cop.

"We're pretty sure they're working alone, but just in case." Gianni gave me a reassuring smile.

I typed the text.

No. I'm with my sister. Do you have my girlfriend?

For the time being, it was safer to act like we hadn't figured out who took Tina. *I ask the questions, Maximus.*

"Prick," I muttered.

I waited for another text. Time seemed suspended as I watched the digital time in the upper corner of the phone click to nearly a full minute.

We have your girlfriend.

I bit off a savage curse and fought the urge to hurl the phone to the ground.

"Stupid fuck," I muttered.

If you hurt her, I will kill you.

It felt like an eternity before another response came through.

Pissing me off isn't the best choice here, lover boy. But if you want to play that way, go ahead. Piss me off and I'll see how much fun it is to rip off a fingernail with pliers. I've seen it in movies. Think it's painful?

Blood roaring in my ears, I closed my eyes and sucked in a desperate breath.

You don't need to hurt her. Tell me what you want.

The fucker sent a smiling emoji.

Creepy fuck. I wanted to shove the phone down his throat.

I want a trade. I get what I want, and you get your girlfriend unharmed. But if you go to the cops, all bets are off. Listen for my call. Two hours.

"Two hours?" Unbelievable. I jabbed at the screen, fumbling to open it.

Gianni covered my hands with hers. “No. We have to play his game. We need more information, more time. Two hours might be enough to track him down to whatever hole he’s hiding in.”

Swearing, I shoved a hand through my hair.

I gave Joyner a stiff nod and put the phone down before I gave in to the urge to break it.

I returned to my post at the window and closed my eyes.

Stay safe, Tina.

THE TWO HOURS Cecil had demanded crept by at a snail’s pace.

Fifteen minutes before the call would come, I unplugged my phone from the charger and resumed my post near the window.

I’d long since shed my coat and tie. The food Gianni had ordered sat mostly untouched.

Gianni found a bottle of Kentucky bourbon in her filing cabinet. She was modest with the pour, but that was probably for the best.

“Come on over here and sit down, Mr. Ryson,” Detective Joyner said as the five-minute mark neared.

Joyner took the phone from me, placed it on the table, and tapped a few keys on the laptop nearest to her.

Two minutes.

A nervous cough tickled the back of my throat, and I gulped some water.

One minute.

Clearing my throat, I reached for the water again.

The phone rang.

Joyner caught my wrist before I could grab it, giving me a spearing look before using her free hand to accept the call.

“Yeah.” The harsh sound of my voice wasn’t even recognizable.

“Maximus.”

“Where’s Tina?” I demanded.

“We’ll get to that.”

The voice sounded strange—echoing, like in a tunnel.

Joyner shoved a notepad in front of me. *Voice distorter.*

I nodded, irritated that I wouldn’t be able to recognize either voice, but not really surprised.

“Let me talk to Tina.”

The distorted laugh was unsettling. “Yeah, sure.”

I gave Joyner an uneasy look, and she nodded, tapping the notebook in front of me.

Proof of life, Mr. Ryson.

“Look, if you don’t put Tina on the phone so I know she’s alive, I’ll hang up now and I won’t be answering again tonight.”

“That’s not wise, Mr. Maximus. Remember what I said about pissing me off?”

“Either put her on the phone or I’ll hang up.”

Static in the background prevented me from clearly hearing what was said, but then I heard Tina’s voice.

“James. I’m...I’m fine. Listen, I don’t want you—ow!”

“I told you she was fine.” The distorted voice was back.

I snarled. Surging upright, I paced to the window. “What the fuck do you want?”

“Five hundred thousand dollars. Unmarked bills. Put it in a black bag and meet us at the address I’m gonna send. Expect it in the morning. I’ll tell you where to go when I contact you—I’ll call at ten. The drop will be at noon.” My phone vibrated, signaling in an incoming text. “I’ve sent the location. You’ll get the final address once you’re on the road. And remember...*no cops.*”

The line went dead.

I shot a look at Gianni, then Joyner. “Do we know where he is?”

“He?” Gianni asked.

“That wasn’t Simone.” I shook my head. “I know her speech, her...rhythm and that wasn’t it.”

“Not an exact location, but a manageable grid. We can use Gianni’s team to help,” Joyner said. “Together with the officers I requested as back-up, we should be good.”

Good? Fuck no. We wouldn’t be *good* until this was over, and Tina was safe next to me.

FIFTY-EIGHT

TINA

I WATCHED CECIL PACE AS HE MADE THE RANSOM CALL TO JAMES, MY GUT A mix of hope and terror. I was confident James was looking for me and he wouldn't stop until he found me.

I tried to remain optimistic, but my gut was sending red alerts and the sly glint in Cecil's eyes unnerved me.

He had a strange expression, even now, as he ended the call and shoved the phone into his pocket. Simone was pacing in front of him, her cropped top falling off her left shoulder, her hair in a high, tight ponytail.

"Why did you let him *talk* to her?" Simone demanded, glaring at Cecil.

"Expediency, sweetheart." Cecil flashed her too bright, too-wide smile. "We need for him to know our demands and the best way to shut up a person like that is to let him *think* you're giving in."

Simone sniffed. "You didn't ask for enough money. Five hundred grand is nothing to him. Once we dump her, we're going to have to run, and fast. It'd be smarter to ask for more."

I couldn't help it. I snorted out a laugh, my lips and tongue so parched, the noises were reed-thin.

But they both heard.

Simone spun around and glared, her hands clenched into fists. "Shut up, bitch!" She stomped over to me and shoved her face into mine. "Otherwise,

I'll do what I've wanted to do since the day James let you take *my* place."

Her breath reeked of alcohol.

"You took my place," she said. She blinked slowly, then shook her head as if to clear it. "Who do you think you are taking *my* place? And why the fuck does James care so much?"

She shoved back, using enough force that the wobbly chair swayed. I thought I might topple over for a few seconds, but the chair steadied and held. Simone began pacing again. "He was *mine*," she said, her voice cracking. "He wanted *me*. All the time, he wanted *me*. Then you showed up."

I braced myself as she spun with her hands up like she wanted to claw my eyes out. Jerking my feet, I managed to kick her in the midsection. She doubled over and fell.

So did I, the chair finally losing the battle as two legs broke. I hit hard, swallowing my groan as I scrambled backward.

Cecil helped Simone to her feet, but his eyes were on me, lips curved in amusement—as though he'd enjoyed the violence.

"Get...off," Simone snapped, brushing her hands once she was steady on her feet.

Cecil obeyed amicably and moved over to the wall, arms crossing over his chest as he watched us.

I had to wiggle and roll free of the chair's broken frame, the remnants of it between us.

With awkward movements, I maneuvered into a sitting position and pushed my body to the rear until my back was to the wall. While Cecil and Simone were arguing, I tested the strength of the ties around my wrists.

I had more room to move my arms, but I couldn't free myself without doing something that would call attention to me.

I forced myself to be still and quiet as Simone hunkered down in front of me.

“You really are a dumb bitch, Tina,” Simone said. “We’d planned on leaving you somewhere near the drop site, where people would find you. But you’re so...arrogant. And stealing James...I can’t forgive that.”

I bit back the words on my tongue. *He was never yours.*

Simone’s lip curled, rage turning her face into a twisted mask.

Her hand flew out. I couldn’t do anything to block it, my hands still secured behind my back.

The impact of the blow stung.

As she rose, she kicked me again, this time in my right knee. “You’re a useless, miserable waste of space, Tina. And I’m going to help James by removing you from his life.”

My blood went cold as she said those words, dispassionately as if she were taking out the trash.

Turning to Cecil, she inclined her head. “Let’s go over the plan again—I want to go through everything, one step at a time, and then we’re making one final adjustment.” With a cool smile in my direction, she added, “We’ll do the drop-off, but I want you to be the first thing James sees when he walks in. Don’t worry about looking like a mess, though. Since you’ll be a corpse, it will not matter that you look like shit.”

I suppressed a shudder. “Sure thing, Simone.”

Cecil caught her by the arm as she was about to lunge at me.

“Easy there, honey,” he said. “You’ve got time for all of that later. Come on, we’ll go over the final details.”

Neither bothered to check the zip ties on my wrist.

I barely breathed as the two of them retreated from the small room. I’d been here since I woke up.

Once I could no longer see or hear them, I waited a full five minutes, counting it in my head. Only then did I begin to shift, wiggling around until I could get to my knees, then ease into a standing position.

I couldn't wait for James to find me.

I was going to have to get out of this mess on my own.

FIFTY-NINE

MAXIMUS

JOYNER RETURNED TO GIANNI'S OFFICE, WHERE WE WERE GATHERED WITH MY sister's best agents, a cup of coffee in hand. She pursed her lips, looked at the table where a map was spread out, then back at Gianni and me.

"Do I need to remind you that neither of you are cops, and none of your Team Wonder kids are cops? Leave this to us."

Gianni winked at me.

I faked a smile and turned my attention to the map, sectioned into a grid.

"Gayle, you knew we would not sit on the sidelines," Gianni said. She moved closer to me and tapped at a point on the map. "I want to pull this up on Google maps. I think it's close to where the last signal was. There are a few areas that might be a good place to hide."

A frustrated sigh came from the other side of the room. "I don't know why I even bother. Gianni never listens. I don't know why I thought her brother might."

I looked up at that. "If it was somebody you loved?"

Joyner smiled and shook her head. "That's not the point."

Somebody you loved.

Why had it taken until now to figure that out?

I loved Tina.

Of course. I loved her.

I'd probably started falling for her that first night when she gave me the brush-off.

"James?"

Gianni touched my arm, and I saw the understanding. "Just now figuring it out, huh?" she asked.

"Yeah." Shaking my head, I returned my gaze to the map, but I didn't see it, not really. I saw Tina, smiling at me, laughing with me. I felt her in my arms, her lips on mine. I loved her.

"Fuck," I muttered. "We have to find her."

"YOU REALIZE it's possible we're making plans for the wrong place," Gus Haynes leaned against Gianni's desk, his eyes on the map now projected onto an oversized screen, big enough for the entire team to view.

"Yep." Gianni had her hands on her hips, lips twisted and pulled to the side as she studied the map, then looked at the tablet she held, contemplating the screen.

"There're two buildings that could serve as a place to hide, but they're on the outer edge of the search perimeter." Gayle sipped her coffee and gave a thoughtful nod. "This is the most likely target. The motel was abandoned over five years ago after the last attempt to sell it fell through. The owner died with no surviving relatives." She grimaced and added, "So it just sits there—occasionally attracting drug dealers and the homeless. A logical place to hold a kidnapping victim."

The factual recital didn't make me feel any more secure about the building or the location.

Gianni said, "Once we get proof that Tina's there, the other units will move to join us. Our primary objective is to retrieve the victim."

I wanted to snarl each time Gianni referred to Tina as *the victim*. Tina would probably snarl some herself, but right now, none of that mattered.

Gianni looked at me and said, “You understand your part in this, James?”

“Yes.” Angling my chin to the Kevlar vests, I asked, “You’ll be wearing one, too, right?”

“Of course.” She tapped her fist lightly on the case Joyner had provided. “We will pick up the money in the morning. We have a modified dye pack similar to what banks use in robberies.”

As long as I could save Tina, I didn’t care.

“Regardless, they will not get far,” Joyner said, eyes on the map. “Even if they get away clean, every cop in Texas will be looking for them. They can’t use a commercial airplane, or cross into Mexico, without being seen by law enforcement. Once Tina’s safe, their faces will be blasted all over the media, along with the reward you’re putting, Mr. Ryson. They’ll be caught within days, if not hours.”

“Yeah.” I nodded, but Cecil and Simone were at the bottom of my *give a fuck* list. Until Tina was safe and with me, nothing else mattered. I’d deal with the rest.

Once I had her back with me, I could tell her I loved her.

A hollow ache settled in my chest. I turned and walked to the window.

Night had fallen, a velvety blanket across Houston, the lights from the streets and buildings, a million little jewels scattered across the darkness.

Was she safe?

Had they given her anything to drink? Anything to eat?

Was she hurt?

Had *they* hurt her?

I spread my fingers out across the glass as if I could reach through and bridge the distance between us. I closed my eyes.

I'd find her.

The night would end, the bank would open, Cecil would call and we'd make the exchange. And Tina would be safe.

She had to be because I couldn't bear to think about the other options.

SIXTY

TINA

HALF THE WATER IN THE BOTTLE SPILLED DOWN THE FRONT OF MY SHIRT, giving me little relief despite how hot I was. It felt like I was dying of thirst, the tepid water Cecil had offered, sweet as ambrosia.

He pulled it away before I'd gotten enough, but my belly lurched, so it was probably best I didn't drink more.

Blinking the sweat out of my eyes, I watched as he recapped the bottle and headed to the doorway, turning back to me with a snide smile. "It's too bad you had to be such a bitch to me, baby."

In the other room, Simone's voice rose to an ear-shattering pitch. "...*fix it!*"

"Yeah, I'm a bitch." I said, curling my lip in disgust. "I can see why that would push you into being with a psycho who's talking about killing me."

He waved a hand, clearly not disturbed by the idea. "She's high strung and can't make up her mind. Don't worry, I'll talk her out of this."

He waggled the bottle once more. "Want more?"

Huffing out a breath, I looked away.

"See, there's that bitchiness being a problem again." Cecil made a *tsking* sound under his breath.

"Cecil!"

I winced. "She must be part banshee."

Simone appeared in the doorway, her eyes zooming straight to the bottle Cecil held. “Are you kidding me? Cecil, get out here and stop talking to her.”

With an expansive sigh and roll of his eyes, he started for the door.

“At least I never tried to make you *my* bitch,” I said, smirking at him. “I’ll give Simone credit, Cecil. She didn’t waste time to get you hopping to the beat of her drum.”

A red flush washed over his cheeks. He paused, eyes still on me.

“Woof, woof.”

“Cecil!”

He spun on her with a furious snarl. “Would you shut up, you stupid bitch?”

She recoiled in shock, eyes wide.

“Here we go,” I muttered.

Both of them swung around to glare at me, but Cecil caught her arm when Simone tried to push past him.

“Let it go,” he said, voice hard. “We have to go through everything for the exchange and we’re running out of time.”

Once they were gone, I blew out a breath and told my heart to start beating again.

Cecil and Simone weren’t the only ones making plans.

I had to get out of here. The look in her eyes freaked me the hell out. Cecil might not be ready to kill for money or whatever was driving him.

Simone was.

THE AIR IN THE SMALL, closed-up room was suffocating. Sweat drenched me, and not just from the heat.

Cecil and Simone had remained in the other room talking. When the heat got worse, they moved outside.

The door was propped open. I could hear the occasional car in the distance but doubted screaming would help.

A weak breeze circulated through the adjoining rooms but did little to cool me down.

I could hear them talking, the low hum of their voices coming from just beyond the door.

I felt drained. I blamed the heat and dehydration.

Cecil had looked in on me once more, ignoring Simone as he gave me another drink of water from the half-empty bottle.

Wiggling and straining, I managed to get my bound hands down, then worked my legs until I had the zip tie in front of me. Time to see if those YouTube videos actually worked.

I almost whooped with victory when I freed myself. My wrists were raw from being scraped by the plastic, a minor price if it meant getting the hell away from here.

I tossed the ties into a corner where they wouldn't be seen, then waited and listened.

Cecil and Simone were still outside. Okay. Easing to my hands and knees, I stood slowly, a dull headache at the base of my skull. Another sign of dehydration.

Spying the water in the bottle, I started for it, moving slowly at first, then rushing once they showed no signs of hearing me.

I downed the rest of the water, then looked around.

I needed a weapon.

My right foot bumped something, and I looked down.

That would be perfect. I grabbed it, still holding the empty water bottle. Just inside the door, I held a leg from the broken chair and listened as their voices

grew louder.

I froze, not even wanting to breathe.

“Why are you being such a whiny *bitch*?”

Simone’s voice had a tendency to rise in pitch when she was annoyed, so if anybody sounded like a whiny bitch, it was her.

“Simone, if you don’t stop *your* whining...” Cecil let the rest of the threat drop off.

My pulse leaped at the nearness of his voice and I glanced at the floor, searching for his shadow as an indicator of his position.

“I can’t *wait* for this to be over with,” Simone said in a huff. “I had to be crazy thinking you’d be a good partner on this.”

“Crazy sounds about right,” he muttered.

The front edge of his shoe came into view. I tossed the water bottle to the opposite side of the room, hoping he’d move farther in to investigate the sound.

He did, his head turning toward the far wall instead of where I stood.

That brief delay gave me a chance to wind up and slam the wooden chair leg into his face. It shattered. So did his nose. He swayed, then went to his knees, crashing hard.

I doubled my fists and swung at his head.

If he saw the blow coming, he was too dazed to move, because I drilled the blow straight into his face—right into a nose that I knew was broken.

He fell straight forward, not making a sound.

Flat on his face and not moving, I saw the gun he’d tucked into the back of his pants. I grabbed it. The weight of it in my hands was awkward, but I didn’t plan to shoot unless it was needed.

I checked the safety, my dad’s instructions ingrained in my memory from when he gave me my first shooting lesson. Safety engaged. Okay, is it

loaded...?

“Dumb ass,” I muttered. He’d been carrying a loaded gun in his pants, with the safety off, like some idiot from a bad TV show. I used the butt of the gun to wack Cecil in the back of the head, just to be safe.

Simone yelped when Cecil collapsed, but her surprise hadn’t lasted long.

She screeched, “You stupid *idiot*. What’s the matter *now*?”

What did she think happened? This room connected to the other by an open doorway, the door itself long gone. Cecil had stumbled forward when I hit him. Facedown and still, most of his body was in this room with me, leaving only his lower legs in the other room.

It was a gamble, but maybe Simone didn’t realize I was free.

“Cecil!” she snapped.

I made a noise low in my chest and kicked some of the debris on the floor, hoping she’d think it was her partner.

“Get *up*.” Her voice was closer now, closer...closer. “If I have to look at the bitch’s face a *minute* longer than necessary, I’ll...”

I stepped into the doorway, one foot on Cecil’s upper back and his gun in my hands, a bead drawn at her skanky forehead.

Simone’s eyes widened, her mouth falling open in a stunned gasp.

“Back up,” I warned. “I’d just as soon not use this, but I will if I have to.”

She tried to speak, and nothing came out but a few stuttering noises.

“Guess it’s not so much fun to threaten me with a gun aimed at your head, huh?” I smiled. “Just so you know, it *is* loaded. And...” I paused. “Now the safety is off. I grew up an Army brat with a dad who taught me how to shoot. So... with this gun and at this range...I can blow a hole in you so big, a bowling ball would fit through it.”

“You wouldn’t.” She backed up a step but froze as I lifted Cecil’s gun.

It was a Desert Eagle and the only good thing I could say about it was that it caught attention. “Oh, I would.”

Her eyes widened, tears suddenly filling them. “I...please...it was...”

“Stop,” I said, cutting her off. I spied extra zip ties on the table with the remains of their meal. “Get those and tie his hands behind his back.” She hesitated. “Now.”

Luckily, Cecil remained knocked out until she finished, although I’d heard a groan or two.

“Now what?” Simone demanded, in a sulking tone.

“Turn around.” When she didn’t obey, I sighed and lifted the heavy-ass gun once more. “You’re pissing me off, Simone.”

She actually *growled* as she turned and shoved her hands behind her back.

After putting the safety on, I clubbed her over her head. She dropped. I didn’t hit her as hard as I’d hit Cecil. I nudged her with my toe to make sure she wasn’t faking—and to make sure she was breathing. Then I jerked her hands to the small of her back and secured them with a zip tie. And maybe I jerked it a little harder than necessary.

I made up for it, though. I rolled them onto their sides and made sure both were breathing.

I nabbed Cecil’s cell phone and stood, bracing a hand against the wall, when my head began to spin. Tightening my hand on the phone, I started for the door.

Simone moaned, and I paused to look back. As her lashes fluttered open, I remembered something.

“What?” she hissed as her eyes locked on me.

“Oh sweetie,” I said. “I forgot to mention this earlier, but if anybody sounds like a whiny bitch...it’s you.”

SIXTY-ONE

MAXIMUS

“YOU GET THAT?” JOYNER LOOKED ME OVER.

“Yes.” Flicking a look at Gianni, I tapped the earpiece.

She gave Joyner a confident nod.. A few seconds later, we were alone.

“You’re all set. You can do this,” she said.

“Yeah, fucking right.” I would do anything for Tina’s safety.

“Okay, just make sure to breathe.”

“Shit, Gianni. I can’t stand thinking about Tina and that asshole.”

“Don’t worry,” she said confidently. “This will be over soon. You’ll have cops all around you. Plus me and my team. Now, let’s run through everything one more time.”

“Yeah, okay. We get to the truck stop located at the address they gave me. I wait by the concrete picnic table.” I ran over the plan that had been drilled into my head. “I wait for them to approach. Hold on to the money.”

Blowing out a hard breath, I finished.

“What if they bring Tina?” That was yet another variable outside our control, and my brain threatened to shut down every time I thought of her being hurt.

“We’ve already walked through this, James.”

I shoved a hand through my hair and turned away. “It’s not the *plan* I’m worried about. It’s my girlfriend.”

“I know.” Eyes solemn, she said, “Trust me, James. Joyner’s a great cop. She’s got good people under her. And I’ll be there.”

“JAMIE, STOP LOOKING OVER HERE.”

The flat words came through the discreet, cordless earpiece Gianni had pushed on me earlier.

The spot Simone had picked for the drop-off wasn’t off the beaten path, but the truck-stop outside of Houston wasn’t a place where plainclothes cops could easily blend in, either.

I couldn’t remember ever being this scared in my life.

Maybe the day my mother died, but other than that, nothing came close.

“Breathe, Jamie.”

I scowled and rubbed the back of my neck, looking at the ground. “Stop bitching in my ear, Gianni. The chattering isn’t helping.”

“Okay. But stop looking over here.”

Biting back the urge to snarl, I turned away from where Gianni and her team were watching. There were other cops around, but I didn’t know where—maybe the two guys working on their truck’s engine. Or the woman picking up litter and dumping it in the bag she carried.

The skin on the back of my neck prickled, but I didn’t turn and look for Gianni or her team. Moving to the picnic table a foot away, I leaned against it, tracking an old red sedan as it neared the turnoff for the truck stop.

Is that them?

I stayed by the concrete table, curling my free hand around the edge while gripping the briefcase with the other. A turning signal came on. My chest was

tight, but I didn't understand why until Gianni spoke again, her voice soft and steady.

“James, *breathe.*”

A hard, rapid breath exploded from me.

A *whoop-whoop* sound caught my attention, and I jerked my head to the left. A black and white cruiser of a Dallas County sheriff pulled up behind the red car.

“Gianni?”

“It's okay, James,” she said. “We're running the car's plates...my guy is close enough to see the driver. It's not Cecil or Simone—what? Okay, okay...got it, Rubens. James, that was my tech guy. He ran the plate...”

Her words jumbled together as I stared at the car and caught sight of the driver. I could see a grizzled face and a dark baseball cap.

It wasn't Cecil. But the sheriff's cruiser could scare Cecil and Simone away.

“If you stare at that sheriff any harder, people are going to notice.”

That wasn't from Gianni.

The woman wearing a faded t-shirt and jeans was a far cry from the detective I'd met the past day, but the quick look she sent me was pure cop.

Taking the hint, I looked away.

“That's better.” She stabbed a discarded paper cup with the tool she carried and moved on. Over her shoulder, she said, “Hold it together.”

I gritted my teeth.

Just how relaxed should I look when my girlfriend was fucking missing? With a snarl, I let go of the briefcase and jerked at my tie. It didn't make breathing any easier.

Minutes ticked by. Cars pulled into the old truck stop's parking lot. Others left. A station wagon turned into the lot, belching smoke as it came to a stuttering stop. The driver climbed out, swearing. He slammed the driver's

side door as I averted my eyes.

Kids clambered out, along with a big, shaggy dog who made a beeline for the grassy patch a few yards from where I stood.

A kid came rushing up, calling for the dog.

The canine pricked up his ears as he finished his business.

Once the kid and dog returned to the car, I went back to scanning the area. No more new cars.

The sheriff's car was long gone, as was the red sedan.

And still no fucking sign of Cecil, Simone, or Tina.

"How fucking long have we been waiting?" Grabbing my phone, I checked the time.

A pounding settled in the base of my skull, the numbers glaring up at me.

"They're late," I growled.

"I know," Gianni said.

Gianni's voice came over the earpiece, but the words were muffled as if speaking to somebody else. Other voices joined in, but I couldn't distinguish one from the other.

Behind me, I heard Joyner talking.

Abruptly, the conversation went quiet.

The back doors of a plain, dirty-looking van burst open and Gianni appeared, glancing over her shoulder with a wide grin on her face before turning to me.

I pushed off the table and started toward her. With my heart pounding, I met Gianni on the crumbling edge of the pavement, where the parking lot gave way to spotty grass.

"What?" I demanded.

"We just got a call. Tina's fine."

Tightening my grip on the briefcase, I stepped back from Gianni. “What do you mean, *fine*? They haven’t shown up. Tina isn’t here.”

“Tina’s in the hospital.” She grabbed my shoulders and shook lightly. “She escaped. She flagged down a trucker and got a ride. She’s safe.”

The blood drained from my head so fast I felt dizzy.

That’s my girl!

“She’s...safe.” The words caught in my throat. The roof of my mouth was dry, my tongue felt thick, and my entire body felt like Jell-O. I coughed to clear my throat and tried again. “You said she’s safe.”

“Yes!”

SIXTY-TWO

TINA

“OKAY, MA’AM. NOW FOLLOW THE LIGHT...”

The throbbing pain of my headache had eased with the painkiller they’d given me earlier. The IV fluids feeding into my arm probably helped as well.

But this was the third resident to come in and do their neurological workup—or whatever—with their damn penlights.

“Ms. Siegler?”

Grimacing, I shook my head. “I’ve had enough of the penlights.”

“Oh, is your head still bothering you?”

“Yeah.” It was hard to refrain from snapping at her. Her perky voice and solicitous smile didn’t help either. “My head is still bothering me. I guess the being kicked, beaten, dehydrated has made this a bit of a headache kind of day.”

“Well, yes, you’ve had a rather stressful day.” She glanced at her penlight before giving me a quick smile. “This won’t take long—”

“No!” I threw my hands in front of my face. “No more lights in my eyes.”

“Dr. Burton.”

The cheery blonde turned to see a nurse in the doorway. She beckoned her over, and they spoke. The doctor left, taking her vile penlight with her and the nurse slipped inside.

She gave me a tired smile. “The residents can be tiring, huh?”

“If they’d keep their damn penlights out of my eyes.” Movement beyond her drew my attention. It was a uniformed officer they’d posted outside my small room. He stuck his head in and his eyes slid over me, then he stepped out of sight.

Had they called James?

“...better?” She was speaking, but I hadn’t been listening.

I shook my head with an apologetic smile. “Sorry. My mind isn’t exactly... on this right now.”

“Understandable. Do you have anyone you want to call?”

Again, the open doorway caught my eye. There was a lot of commotion out there, the noise of buzzers, voices over the intercom. I kept watching for James.

“Yes...I mean, no.” My mouth was so *dry*. I picked up the cup the nurse had given me earlier and gulped the water. “Somebody notified the cops handling my case. My boyfriend...”

“Do you want me to call him?”

“I’d rather talk to him myself.” I lifted the cup and drained it. “Is there a phone I can use?”

. With a sympathetic smile, she pulled her phone from her pocket. “I’ll step outside while you make your call.”

She left the door ajar. Once alone, I opened the phone app and stared at the numbers. They blurred and moved, swimming in and out of focus. Swearing, I put down the phone and rubbed my eyes. That’s when the burn of tears started.

“No,” I muttered. I would not break down and cry here.

A horrible ache settled in my chest. The more I fought the tears, the bigger that ache grew.

A soft sound at the door had me stiffening. I lurched off the miserably hard gurney and turned away, as several tears spilled free.

“Give me a few minutes,” I said, wiping my face with the back of my hand.

“I don’t think so.”

I spun around and saw James through a blur of tears.

He reached for me and then I was in his arms, my face pressed to his chest. I wrapped both arms around him, clinging in desperation. His forearm was a solid brace against my lower back as he cradled the back of my head in his free hand.

The flood gate had opened and a hard sob ripped free, then another.

James kissed my temple and murmured—the words too low to hear. It didn’t matter. The warm, soothing rumble of his voice, his firm chest, was what I needed. He was *here*. I was here. I’d gotten away, and I was safe.

At some point, he swept me into his arms. Cuddling closer, I clung to him.

Minutes passed and still, I cried. Nothing mattered but his arms around me.

Eventually, the storm of tears faded and the words he was speaking made sense.

“It’s okay now,” he whispered against my temple. “It’s okay. I’m here, Tina. It’s okay.”

“I...I don’t nuh-know why I kuh-keep crying.” My voice was hoarse, thick with tears that wouldn’t stop. “I’m okay.”

“Damn straight.”

I sensed he was smiling.

“I’m fine.” Chest tight, I dragged in an unsteady breath.

“Of course you are,” James murmured. “You’re more than fine, from what I hear. You’re a justifiable badass. Saved your own ass and put both Simone and Golden on theirs.”

The sound that tore out of me was a mix of laughter and sob. I finally felt steady enough to pull back. His eyes were dark and intense, his hand comforting as he stroked the hair from my face.

“Trust me,” I said. “It’s not really that impressive. Neither of them are criminal masterminds.”

“Good thing.” Hand cradling my chin, he leaned in until his brow was pressed to mine. “The past day...Tina, I’ve never been so fucking scared in my entire life.”

The raw emotion in his voice hit me square in the chest. “I’m sorry.”

His hand was suddenly in my hair and his mouth on mine, the kiss desperate and deep. His hunger sparked my own. Curling my arms around his neck, I pressed closer, but he pulled back. I gave him a questioning look.

“Easy, baby,” he said. “There’s plenty of time for that. Plus, you just had a harrowing experience.”

Giggling, I slowly let go of his neck. I didn’t pull away, though. I cupped his face in my hands.

“You’re right. And I need a shower.” I wrinkled my nose. “I probably stink. I was so damn hot and sweating like a pig...and so damn thirsty...”

“I don’t think pigs really sweat.” James rubbed my lower lip. “Fuck, Tina, when I found out what happened...”

Closing my hand around his wrist, I squeezed gently, his pulse rapid under my fingers. “I’m okay. I’m here.”

His lashes dropped low over his eyes, a breath shuddering out of him.

A knock on the door behind us made me jump and his arm tightened. “James...”

He let go reluctantly, and I slid off his lap onto the spare chair next to him just as the door opened.

The nurse entered the room with the doctor at her back.

She smiled as the doctor sank down onto the wheeled stool. “I hear you’re not a fan of the residents popping in with their penlights.”

“The penlights wouldn’t be a problem if they’d keep them in their pockets.” I laced my fingers with James. “I haven’t been hit in the head. If I didn’t show any neurological signs the first two or three times, I will not show any now.”

The doctor, a woman who seemed willing to take a joke, smiled in amusement. She shook her head. “I’m sorry, Ms. Siegler. I’ll be honest. I think a few of them stopped in here just to get a look at you. Escaping from kidnappers is very impressive.”

“Great.” With a weak smile, I dropped my head onto James’ shoulder. “Well, impressive or not, I’d rather not list *that* experience on my resume.”

She nodded at James before rolling closer to me. “Open your mouth, Ms. Siegler.”

With a sigh, I straightened and allowed her to do the examination.

A few minutes later, as she made notes, I accepted a fresh cup of ice water from the nurse, and the doctor told me I was ready to leave.

“You need to make sure you rest for a day or two and drink plenty of fluids.” She glanced at the bandage covering the fragile skin in the crook of my elbow. “The IV was a good start, but you need to make sure you stay hydrated.”

“I’ll make sure of it,” James said, skimming a hand along my back.

The doctor led the way and showed us to the patient's exit.

My legs were wobbly, but James’ sturdy arm was around my waist.

Outside, a black town car waited at the curb, the driver climbing out the minute we came through the doors. I didn’t recognize this driver, a middle-aged man, but James waved at him. “I’ve got it, George.” And he opened the door for me.

Once he was settled next to me, I leaned into him. “I was getting ready to call you when you showed up. I didn’t have my phone, but the nurse let me borrow hers. I was sitting there, staring at it. The numbers were getting

blurry...”

My voice shook.

“You’re safe now.” James tugged me closer.

“I know.” Closing my eyes, I snuggled into the curve of his arm. “It’s just a reaction.”

James pressed his lips to mine, the kiss gentle at first. Then the heat from earlier began to rise.

He slid a hand to my thigh and squeezed.

“We have to stop,” he muttered against my lips.

I ended the kiss, splaying my fingers against his chest “I don’t want to.”

“Neither do I.” He traced a finger along my cheek and cupped my face. “Tina, I need to tell you something.”

His gaze searched mine.

I pulled out from under his arm a little to get a better look at the expression on his face. “What is it?”

“I love you.”

I nearly choked. Staring at him, I opened my mouth, but no words came.

“I figured it out at the worst possible time.” He offered a weak smile. “You were missing, and I didn’t know if I’d ever see you again. I told myself that once you were safe, I’d tell you.”

“You...” I wet my lips, trying to think despite the static in my head. “You love me?”

James laughed softly, the smile on his face widening. He nodded. “Yes. I love you. I think it started the night we met when you all but brushed me off.”

“I didn’t brush you off...okay, I guess I did.” I was smiling so widely it almost hurt. “But you were used to people giving you exactly what you

wanted whenever you asked.”

“Brat.” He pushed my hair back from my face. “I’ve never been so scared in my life.”

“I’m fine. I’m safe.” Echoing the words he’d used earlier, I leaned in to kiss him. “James?”

“Hmmm?”

“I love you, too.”

SIXTY-THREE

MAXIMUS

“JAMES.” DINA STOOD IN THE DOORWAY AND SMILED. WITH A LOOK OVER HER shoulder, she waved me in. “Mom is still fussing over Tina. It might take another hour to get her out of here.”

“I can understand why.” Shutting the door behind me, I hesitated, studying Dina. “How are you? Your parents? Are you all okay?”

“We’re better now than we were a couple of days ago.” She grimaced. “I’m so glad your sister thought to call me and have me come over before telling my parents what happened. We were a mess, but at least we were a mess together.”

“Family.” The word slipped out, but I thought about how much Gianni had steadied me. “Having them around helps.”

“Yes.”

She moved closer.

I stiffened when she kissed my cheek. I felt my face turn red, and it was clear Dina saw my discomfort.

“And considering you asked Tina to move in with you, and not just because of the fire, but on a permanent level, you’re more and or less part of *our* family.” She squeezed my arm before turning away. “Come on. We’re all out on the back deck. I came in for more ice, otherwise I wouldn’t have heard you knocking.”

“I called Tina to let her know I might get here earlier than planned but she didn’t answer.” Hearing the excited chatter of kids, I said, “I didn’t realize I was interrupting something.”

“You’re not.” She patted my arm. “You want a drink? We’ve got cold beers in the fridge, margaritas on the porch.”

“Some ice water, maybe.”

After a brief pause in the kitchen, Dina led me to the back deck.

Tina was crouching in front of a child, her face bright with a wide smile.

Seeing her was a punch in the chest. I stopped, taking a second to get my breath. I loved that woman. I’d gone most of my life thinking love was just a con that some guys used to get a girl in bed, and now here I was head over heels in love with a woman I met just this summer.

“If I could go back in time and tape my mouth shut, I’d do it in a heartbeat.”

Confused, I looked at Dina.

She studied me with an amused look—and if I wasn’t mistaken, there was something almost...sister-like in her eyes. I had a lot of sisters, so I was familiar with that look.

“You’ve got a hook in your mouth, James.” She reached out and squeezed my arm. “Just seeing the way you look at Tina...you’re crazy in love with her, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” My face heated. I wasn’t comfortable discussing my emotions. I doubted I’d ever be. But I would never lie or hide my feelings for Tina.

“Good.” Dina looked over at her sister. “She deserves somebody who is absolutely crazy for her.”

“MY PARENTS SEEM to accept you pretty well.”

Slowing for the stoplight, I looked over at Tina. It was the first time she'd spoken since we'd started the drive to my place outside Houston, the quiet between us easy and comfortable.

"That's a good thing since I'm not going anywhere." Curving my hand around her nape, I stroked my thumb along the smooth, soft skin of her neck.

Her breath caught.

Just like that, I was ready for her, the need to touch and taste flooding me.

When I removed my hand to grip the wheel, she made a disappointed sound low in her throat.

"Stop, Tina. We're still twenty minutes away."

She reached over and put her hand on my thigh. "We could have gone to the hotel. It was closer."

"But not as private." I covered her hand with mine to stop the soft, teasing strokes of her fingers. "Stop or I'll have to figure out a way to pay you back once we get home."

"That's not exactly a persuasive argument." Her voice was warm with laughter. But she turned her hand over and twined our fingers.

The rest of the drive passed with relative ease, although Tina kept trying to tug her hand free so she could go back to torturing me.

The driveway that led to my place unfurled in front of us, a slick ribbon of gray with pavers bordering both sides and shrubs that tolerate the heat of Texas summers.

I stopped the car in front of the house. "Behave. I've got a surprise for you."

"A surprise? Is that what you call it?"

Snorting with laughter, I climbed from the car.

She did the same and met me on her side, rising on her toes to kiss me. The scorching sun beating down on us was intense, though, and I ended the kiss quickly. "Come on. It's nice and cool in the house."

Once inside, I slipped my hands into my pockets. “You’ll have to find your surprise.”

“Find it?” Sputtering out a laugh, she eyed the foyer. “Do I get a hint? This place is *enormous*.”

“Hmm...” I feigned thinking. “Well, it’s not just *one* thing—there are several of them. And they are hard to miss. So keep an eye out.”

Tina threw a suspicious look over her shoulder and proceeded.

Each room held at least one item that had been chosen for her, so she’d feel at home here.

She saw the first one almost immediately, coming to a stop inside the wide arched entryway that led to the sitting room I rarely used. The armchair by the windows had been moved to make room for another. This one wide and round, nearly three feet across and perfect for snuggling with a book.

“Is that for me?” She shot me a broad smile as she rushed to try it out. “Ooohhh... this is nice.”

I leaned against the wall inside the room and smiled.

She relaxed into the chair and gave me a look from under her lashes before crooking a finger at me.

“I think I’ll stay here,” I told her. “Otherwise, I might get distracted before you find the other surprises.”

She bounced up and looked around. “Anything else in here?”

“No.”

“Okay. I’ll be back,” she said, patting the chair before heading for me.

“Were you just talking to your chair?”

“If I was?”

I held up my hands.

A smile twitched at her lips.

I wanted to kiss those lips. Kiss everything. Clearing my throat, I pushed off the wall and stepped back into the foyer. “Where are you going to look now?”

Watching her discover the pieces I’d bought for her filled the aching emptiness inside me, in a way that made me more content than I’d ever been.

In the kitchen, there was a blender and a book filled with cocktail recipes.

I’d also bought a new set of cookware after asking her sister for advice.

My personal gym had an upgraded version of the treadmill I’d seen in her house, as well as a punching bag.

There was another chair for her in the living room, as well as a chaise tucked near the window with a view of the sprawling lawn.

The master bathroom’s vanity was outfitted with her brand of facial products, hair products, and other toiletries. I’d asked Dina for help with those.

There was a soft, feminine robe for her hanging next to mine.

Shelves had been cleared out and rearranged in the master bedroom closet for her clothing. Several pieces already waited there for her—items that Zoey had donated after hearing about the fire.

The walk-in closet had been half-empty for as long as I’d lived here. I never had the desire to fill all the shelves or drawers. Those drawers now held luxurious lingerie—and not just sexy pieces for her to wear for my pleasure, but pretty, feminine bras and panties to replace the items that had been lost in the fire.

But the room I was most excited—and nervous—about was the one I’d saved for last.

It had been a guest bedroom on the first floor with windows facing northwest and a sliding glass door that opened onto the patio, the blue-green water of the pool sparkling a few yards away.

The bed and dresser had been removed and replaced with office furniture, including a desk and a stand-up workstation similar to the one at her office. A new, top-of-the-line computer sat on the desk, booted up and ready to go.

Framed photos of the Biscayne hotel were mounted on the walls.

“James...” Her voice thickened as she walked around, touching a picture frame on the shelf behind the desk, smiling in delight as she saw it held an image of her niece and nephew. “Dina helped you with this.”

“Dina. And your mom.” Relief had the knots in my neck loosening and I moved to stand in front of her. “So, what do you think of your surprise?”

“*Surprises,*” she said, laughing. “Everything’s wonderful. You didn’t have to do so much, though.”

“Yes, I did. This is your home.” Taking her hands, I lifted them to my lips. “I wanted you to have everything you needed to feel comfortable here, to feel at home.”

There was more I wanted to say, but I couldn’t find the right way to put those emotions into words.

She cupped my face.

“I’m home whenever I’m with you.” She rose onto her toes and kissed me. And I think she knew what I couldn’t say. Now that she’d spent time with her parents and Dina, it was my turn to have her all to myself. I could barely withhold the demanding need to touch Tina, taste her, imprint the feel of her skin on my memory again, to reassure myself that she was safe.

Simone and Cecil were in jail. Tina was safe in front of me, and the house was quiet save for the ragged sound of our breathing. I couldn’t hold back another moment.

Shoving my hands into her hair, I backed her against the wall.

She smoothed her hands down my chest and tugged my shirt up, her nails raking over my chest.

I raised her dress and found her naked underneath, save for the silky scrap of a pair of panties with so little cloth, it was a joke to consider them clothing. I cupped her through the panel, running between her legs, shuddering when I found her already wet.

“James...” she gasped as I tugged the fabric aside and stroked a fingertip through her slick heat.

Her head fell back against the wall, mouth parting, her whole body soft with surrender. Need had me ravenous. Yanking the panties away, I wound my hand in the material of her skirt while she fumbled with my belt, then the button on my jeans.

I groaned as she eased the zipper over my hard cock, but that sensation was fleeting, soon replaced by urgency, the raw need to feel her wet and tight around me.

She worked my jeans and boxers down, then closed her hand around me, and squeezed.

I groaned, thrusting into her touch several times before gripping her wrist, trying to tug her away. “Stop.”

“Why?” Her tongue flicked against my lips.

“Because I’m a heartbeat away from coming and I want to do it inside you, not all over your hand.”

I felt her smile against my lips. She was debating. I caught her wrist, pulling until she let go, then guided both hands over her head, pinning them there as I eased back.

“Don’t tease me, James,” she said, her voice unexpectedly solemn. “Not this time. I need to feel you.”

Because I knew what she meant, I just nodded.

Boosting her up, I held her gaze. “Wrap your legs around me.”

I thrust into her, driving deep, the hot, slick feel of her cunt making me shudder. She cried out, her nails digging into my shoulders through my shirt. She was wet, but not quite ready for me and I yanked the bone-numbing need under control—barely.

Panting, I pressed my brow to hers, and forced myself to ask, “Am I hurting you?”

“A little,” she breathed out, her blue eyes fogged with desire. “But I don’t care. I need you. Need this.”

As I withdrew, the feel of her clenching around me was heaven.

But the pinch of discomfort I saw in her eyes was enough to give me more control. I tugged her ankles from behind my back, then hooked my arms under her knees.

“Look at us, Tina.”

Her breath hitched as she obeyed, a flush painting delicate color across her cheeks.

She was stretched tight around me as I withdrew.

“I can smell how much you want me.”

“James...” Her voice hitched on my name, an audible sign of her need.

I felt her need in the way her pussy had grown wetter, in the tension of her limbs, in the way my cock gleamed as I withdrew, the evidence of her desire coating me.

“Please...” she begged.

“Please what?” Leaning in, I nuzzled her neck.

“I...” Her voice broke over that single word and whatever else she wanted to say faded to soft, needy moans.

“Is this what you want?” I asked, thrusting home, flexing my hips in an attempt to go deeper.

“Yes!” Her neck arched, the delicate blue lines of her veins stark against soft skin. “More...*harder.*”

She emphasized her demand with her nails, digging them deeper into my shoulders through my shirt.

I needed nothing else.

I thrust again, harder this time, faster, and she cried out in pleasure, in relief, in demand for more—perhaps all three, and that made sense. *I* needed all three. The pleasure, the relief of her wet and tight around me, and more of it.

The slap of flesh against flesh and ragged breaths and broken moans filled the air, our bodies growing slick with a fine sheen of sweat. The need to come bit at me with sharp teeth, but I held back until I felt a familiar tension in her, her muscles going taut, her moans going silent as if all of her energy was now focused on that one thing—climax.

Then she was coming, and my already shaky control was obliterated.

I fucked her harder, my fingers digging into soft flesh as I hammered into her.

My spine locked and my knees threatened to buckle as the orgasm slammed into me, so vicious and powerful, it felt like the top of my cock had blown off.

Tina fisted one hand into my hair and hauled my mouth to hers.

I bit her lower lip, drove my tongue past her lips as the climax raged, draining me, filling me as her love surrounded me.

When it finally ended, we were both gasping for air, and I felt a little dazed.

Turning my face into her neck, I kissed her.

She hugged me tighter, her whisper ragged when she said, “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” Words I thought I’d never say, but now I couldn’t imagine a life without those words, and the emotion behind them.

SIXTY-FOUR

TINA

CHRISTMAS EVE,

'I'm dreaming of a white Christmas...'

The familiar lyrics drifted from the sound system. I carried my wine into the living room, smiling at the sight of James huddled near the bottom of the tree.

It had become a familiar sight over the past few weeks, seeing him tuck a present into the growing pile, or rearranging the gifts to his liking.

I couldn't make sense of his system, but I loved watching him do it.

I settled on the edge of the seat closest to him and took a sip of wine. "Are you going to let me open these yet?"

James slid me a stern look. But the smile twitching his lips gave him away. "I should make you wait another day."

"Nope." I swallowed my wine and placed the glass on the end table before shifting more comfortably into the seat of the overstuffed chair. "We had a deal for Christmas Eve. Since we have two places to visit tomorrow, it's only fair we open our gifts to each other *tonight*."

The idea had actually been his, but no way was he backing out now.

James trailed a hand up my calf and squeezed. "I don't know. I heard Santa has you on his bad girl list."

I pursed my lips and pretended to consider the comment. “If anyone is on the bad list, it’s going to be you. You totally and completely corrupted me.”

“You loved every second of it.”

“Damn straight.”

As he returned to his chore, I trailed my foot over the hard curve of his excellent ass. “Mom is expecting everybody by noon. Are we still good with that?”

“Fine with me.” He leaned forward, no longer in reach of my questing foot.

I sighed with disappointment. I would just have to be satisfied admiring the way his broad shoulders stretched the lightweight black sweater.

“And your dad?”

He shot me a look over his shoulder. “You’re the one coordinating schedules. Why are you asking me?”

“It’s your family.” With a prime sniff, I crossed my legs. “It’s only fair that you be as aware of this as I am. Besides, you’re driving.”

“This relationship stuff...” James muttered. “I keep thinking I’ve got things figured out and you toss something new at me.”

Swallowing a laugh at his faux irritation, I asked, “Just what have I thrown at you now?”

He shoved backward and sat cross-legged. “You made me go *Christmas* shopping, Tina. You dragged me out of the house and took me to the mall—the week of Christmas, the busiest time, I might add.”

“Oh, no...” Holding up a hand, I shook my head. “You’ve only got yourself to blame for that one, pal. I told you I’d take care of it but you insisted.”

“That’s not how it works.” Color flushing his cheeks, he looked away. “You told me your niece and nephew picked out presents for me. That means I had to do the same. It’s only fair.”

Fair. He’d made that comment a couple of times and when I finally asked him about it, he’d admitted it was a thing he’d learned from his mom. She’d

told him, if you were going to give somebody a gift, you needed to be the one to buy the gift. It didn't matter how big or small the gift was, either. Picking it out yourself was as important as the gift.

He told me that for years he'd all but ignored Christmas. He said that although the relationship with his dad eventually improved, he never really got into the holidays.

This year was different.

We chose to have a living Christmas tree because his mom liked the idea of planting the tree after Christmas, although she couldn't afford a living tree. So this year, we'd picked a gorgeous one, so big it barely fit in the house.

After the holidays, it would be planted in James' yard, a memory from our holiday together.

We had to buy ornaments because James had never put up a Christmas tree and my decorations were lost in the fire.

We'd made cookies and drank eggnog and made a general mess before getting everything sorted. James had told me about the Christmas he'd done chores for neighbors to earn money to buy his mom an angel pendant. I told him about the year I'd come downstairs to find a real rifle under the tree—my mom wasn't amused, but it was one of my favorite gifts.

I swirled my wine in the glass and looked at the table near the wall, laden with gifts for my niece and nephew, my parents and sister. The gifts for his family were loaded into the SUV in the garage to save us the trips—multiple trips because there were a ton of presents. He'd told me he might cause a couple of heart attacks, showing up with presents this year.

He'd also warned me it might be late—*very* late before we could escape his father's house.

That was why we'd decided to open our gifts to each other tonight.

Spying the glint in his eyes, I tipped my wineglass to my lips and emptied it.

"You know, I *am* kind of tired." I studied the wrapped boxes under the tree. "Maybe we should call it quits for the night. If we don't have time to open

them tomorrow—”

“Not so fast.” He gripped my ankle as I went to stand. With a light squeeze, he added, “Sit.”

Stifling a laugh, I meekly said, “Yes, sir.”

The second my ass was on the chair, he pushed a present into my hands. “Open.”

“You pick out one first.”

He rolled his eyes.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I leveled him with my gaze. “Do it.”

He grumbled but agreed, selecting a brightly colored box. Once he had it in his lap, I grinned and said, “Now we can open them.”

Wrapping paper went flying.

I laughed, giddy happiness filling me as I tore open the heavy box. Gasping in delight, I admired the framed prints of the Biscayne Hotel, professional photographs I hadn’t seen before, all matching the ones I had in my office. “These are gorgeous!”

He was quiet, but when I looked at his face, his features were stark with naked emotion. He held a picture of the two of us dancing. I’d asked the hostess at the Black Star to have a few taken without his knowledge.

He felt my gaze and looked up to meet my eyes. The love I saw staring back at me made my chest tight. I wanted to go to him and kiss him, but if I did, I’d forget about the gifts and everything but him.

So I slid to the carpet and reached for another gift.

“YOU FORGOT ONE.”

Sitting amid crumpled pieces of gift wrap and torn ribbons, I looked around. “I could be sitting on an elephant and never notice. Where is it?”

James sank down and sat in front of me, a small box in his palm. “Here.”

My heart lurched, and I jerked my head up to his gaze.

“What...” My throat was too dry for the rest of the question. I cleared my throat, and tried again. “What is it?”

“If I tell you, I’ll ruin the surprise.” A smile softened his face. He flipped open the top of the velvet box, the lid hiding the object inside from view. “How about I show you?”

I nodded. Speech was impossible.

“Close your eyes,” James said.

I did, my breathing erratic and heart hammering.

He took my hand, and I gasped as I felt him slide something onto my ring finger—my left ring finger.

My eyes flew open, and I sucked in a breath.

“Tina, I never imagined someone as wonderful as you existed and would want someone like me. Now I can’t imagine life without you. Will you marry me?”

My eyes met his, and I tried to choke out some words. “James...”

He kissed me, a soft kiss, so sweet and full of love, my chest ached from it.

“You don’t have to answer now. Just say you’ll think about it.”

Tears burned my eyes. The answer was on the tip of my tongue as I admired the sparkling, square-cut diamond, set in a filigree of delicately worked gold.

“Yes,” I whispered, still staring at the ring.

“Tina?”

I lifted my head and smiled. “The answer is yes.”

James blinked, then shook his head, like he couldn't believe it was true.

"James..." I cupped his face in my hands and leaned in, pressing my mouth to his. "Yes, I'll marry you."

He caught me in his arms and hauled me close, half-falling off balance, then rolled with me until I was under him, on my back.

"When?" he asked, his mouth on mine.

"Whenever you want." A giddy laugh escaped me. "Today. Tomorrow. Yesterday, if we can make it happen. Whenever you want."

He was smiling as he lowered his head to kiss me, his eyes echoing the emotion I saw on his face.

Curling my arms around his neck, I opened for him, yielding to his kiss, and to the warmth of his touch and his love.

His love filled me, sinking into warm places I hadn't known were cold.

The weight of the ring on my finger was barely noticeable, yet it anchored me in ways I couldn't imagine.

This wonderful man wanted to marry *me*.

I would never feel alone again.

–THE END–

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